2018

Jesus is my guru: why and how Christians should practice yoga for spiritual formation

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JESUS IS MY GURU: WHY AND HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD PRACTICE YOGA FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Religion and Philosophy Division

Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Cecily Breeding

April 2018

This thesis, written by

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under the guidance of a faculty committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

April 2018

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For my students.

Because of my teachers.

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JESUS IS MY GURU: WHY AND HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD PRACTICE YOGA FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that yoga is a suitable practice to meet the goals of Christian spiritual formation. Yoga is a popular fitness phenomenon, practiced by 16 million Americans every year. As a holistic exercise that combines the elements of posture, breath, and mindfulness, yoga offers significant psychophysiological benefits. This has led to the implementation of yoga as a therapeutic intervention for individuals suffering from a variety of conditions, including depression and chronic pain. The broad appeal and consistent effectiveness of yoga have made it a common practice in the contemporary West.

Despite its benefits, many Christians object to Christians practicing yoga, claiming that yoga is incompatible with Christian faith. Two major objections must be addressed for Christians to practice yoga as a spiritual discipline. The first objection is the widespread opinion that yoga as it is practiced in the West today is a Hindu spiritual practice and is therefore at odds with Christian spirituality. This objection is addressed by surveying the history and practice of yoga as it evolved from ancient classical yoga to the form practiced in the West today, Modern Postural Yoga (MPY). The survey establishes that yoga is not equivalent to Hinduism and that it offers significant psychophysiological benefits to the general population. The second objection is Christian resistance to incorporating the body in spiritual practice. The roots of this objection can be found in mind-body dualism and more recently Christian fundamentalism. This is addressed by providing a biblical theology of the body and a holistic view of Christian spiritual formation and spiritual practices, concluding that MPY can be practiced with the intention of deepening Christian spiritual maturity. An appendix offers practical suggestions for implementing yoga as a Christian spiritual discipline.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Practicing Christian Yoga

I teach a weekly yoga class called Sacred Yoga. Over the course of a standard gathering, I lead attendees through various prayer practices, including breath prayer and recitation of the Lord's Prayer, read passages of scripture, such as the Psalms or Jesus' parables, and instruct a postural yoga sequence of my own design. Using the basic characteristics of a vinyasa yoga class—connecting breath to stretching and strengthening posture sequences—I draw the yogis' (people who practice yoga) attention to various aspects of the practice. I ask questions, like "Where can you soften?," to direct the students' awareness to present sensations and offer plenty of alignment cues, such as "Press all four corners of each foot into the mat. Inhale, arms overhead; exhale, forward fold," to bring attention to the challenges and precision of postural yoga practice. Like most 200-hour certified yoga teachers, I teach many standard yoga postures—Sun Salutations, Warrior I, II, and III, Crescent Lunge, Side Plank, Child's Pose, Half Moon—and also make up endless variations of my own, based on my additional CrossFit coach training, twelve years of yoga practice, and lifetime of athletics. I intentionally select music playlists full of popular, contemporary Christian worship music to continually orient the yogis' minds toward their faith, even when I am not expressly mentioning it. A typical class gathering opens or closes (or both) with a period of mindful meditation on a particular scripture, prayer, or gratitude practice, during which

attendees silently cultivate their thoughts on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil 3:8).[1]

Because the class is unique from a typical yoga class that is taught in most public studios, I receive feedback about it on a regular basis. One common refrain is, "I've been practicing yoga for years and I never thought to connect it with worship! It's brilliant and I don't think I can just practice yoga ever again." Or a similar version is, "I've been practicing yoga for years, and I always just use the quiet moments of class to pray silently in my head, but it's so refreshing to have that as part of the instruction, too!" Not all the feedback I receive is positive. I also receive the occasional question of how I rationalize teaching an Eastern Hindu practice that makes Christians vulnerable to spiritual oppression or demonic possession. The questioner usually includes the point that meditation requires "emptying the mind," and that an empty mind is not filled by the Holy Spirit and is a vacuum for demonic forces to slip in. It is this mix of positive and negative feedback that caused me to research and write this thesis. I wanted to research the question of whether yoga is problematic for a Christian to practice for fitness or as part of a fulfilling spiritual life.

The research and arguments presented in this thesis conclude that Modern Postural Yoga is a suitable practice to meet the goals of Christian spiritual formation.

Research Method and Literature Review

In order to establish that yoga is compatible with Christian spirituality, many questions arise that are central to this research: Why do Christians object to yoga? Did yoga start out Hindu? Is yoga, as the contemporary West knows it, Hindu? How does the

[1] All biblical citations are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

yoga that is practiced in the West today compare with the original yoga that was practiced centuries ago in ancient India?

After establishing that yoga is compatible with Christian spiritual practices, another set of questions arises: How should Christians approach the human body? What is the relationship between embodied existence and faith? What purposes—if any—of Christian spiritual formation does yoga accomplish? Can yoga be considered a Christian spiritual discipline? What are some example features of a Christian yoga practice?

This thesis explores these questions through the interdisciplinary methods of practical theology. First, historical study, cultural observation, and religious studies provide a description of yoga's history, relationship to Hinduism, and contemporary practice in the American context. News, popular media, and editorial articles set the stage for common Christian attitudes toward yoga. Medical and psychological research substantiates the benefits of yoga for the general population. Biblical theology informs a theology and spirituality of the body. Both contemporary and ancient sources inform the method of practical theology to apply scriptural truths and theological scholarship to the cultural issue of Christians practicing yoga. The following scholars provide an ecumenical and interdisciplinary foundation for the arguments of this thesis.

Andrea Jain is a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University. Jain coined the term Christian "yogaphobia" to describe Evangelical distrust towards yoga. She concludes that yogaphobia is the result of a misguided understanding of yoga as a monolithic religious structure that has remained unchanged since its beginning.

Elizabeth De Michelis is a former faculty member at Cambridge (Divinity) and Oxford Universities (Theology). Her work, *A History of Modern Yoga*, describes how yoga has changed over the centuries and through its migration from the East to the West. De Michelis coined the term "Modern Postural Yoga," or MPY, as distinct from ancient classical yoga. The intention and usage of yoga as a method of cultivating meditation practice, and not specifically as a Hindu spiritual discipline, is central to the argument that MPY—called simply "yoga" in the West—is not Hindu and is compatible with Christian spiritual practice.

George Marsden is a professor emeritus in the Department of History at the University of Notre Dame. His area of research includes American religion and culture, particularly the development of evangelicalism. His 2006 work, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, informed this thesis' conclusion that some Christians are wary of embodied practices like yoga because of a fundamentalist understanding of the Christian faith: to save souls only.

Thomas Ryan is a Paulist Father whose speaking, teaching, and writing has provided guidance to Christians practicing yoga since the early 1990s. His book, *Prayer of Heart and Body,* and his edited collection of essays, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality*, offer plentiful illustrations of the impact of embodied practices—particularly MPY—on Christian spirituality. Fr. Ryan's work, in addition to psychophysiological studies on the connection between the mind and the body, provides much of the rationale for incorporating the body in Christian spiritual practices.

Theologian Simon Chan's understanding of the connection between spirituality and all of creation, which he lays out in *Spiritual Theology*, informs the Christian theology of the body set forth in chapter five. Philosopher and spiritual theologian Dallas Willard's work, *Renovation of the Heart*, provides a model for the vision, intention, and means of Christian spiritual formation. Author and teacher Janet Hagberg and New Testament scholar Robert Guelich's work, *The Critical Journey*, sets forth a model for the stages of faith in the Christian spiritual walk, and provides a framework to compare and contrast this with the spiritual formation that occurs in the practice of yoga.

These and many other scholars and yogis contribute their voices to the development of the arguments that follow.

Establishing a Historical and Theological Path to Christian Yoga

Chapter Two of this thesis examines current examples of various Christian attitudes toward the practice of yoga. Many Christian individuals embrace it, as do some church communities, such as Saddleback Church, which incorporates a yoga-like fitness class called Stretch and Pray as part of its array of "sports and fitness" ministries. Another example is Holy Yoga, a nonprofit organization that trains Christians to lead a style of yoga that is considered "physical worship" of Jesus Christ, through prayer, breath work, and movement.[2] I am a personal witness to the fact that there are many Christians who practice yoga and even some who view it as an important spiritual discipline.

While there are plenty of examples of Christians who practice yoga, there are also many examples of influential Christians who have adamantly opposed the Christian practice of yoga. This includes individuals such as Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the

[2] Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga* (New York: FaithWords, 2007), xi.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Mark Driscoll, former pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, and Laurette Willis, founder of the "Christian Alternative to Yoga" fitness program, PraiseMoves.[3] Publications like *Relevant Magazine*[4] and *Christianity Today*[5] have published articles discussing the controversy surrounding Christians practicing yoga. The general consensus of these objections is that yoga is unfit for Christians to practice because it is historically associated with a non-Christian religious tradition, specifically Hinduism, or in the words of Mark Driscoll, "absolute paganism."[6]

The concern that Christians cannot faithfully practice yoga, due to its historical connection to Hinduism, is based on the assumption that participation in a yoga practice, including in yoga studios in the United States, is to participate in a Hindu religious practice. This idea stems from the understanding of yoga as a monolithic, homogenous system that is inherently religious and has remained unchanged since its origin thousands of years ago. This assumption is an objection that must be addressed before Christians can faithfully practice yoga.

Chapter Three covers the history of yoga, starting with its ancient beginnings on the Indian subcontinent, how it relates with ancient Hinduism, and a description of the array of practices referred to as ancient classical yoga. Instructed by Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, which were recorded around the third or fourth century of the Common Era (CE),

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[3] Andrea R. Jain, "Is Downward Dog the Path to Hell? Evangelicals and Fundamentalist Hindus Come Together in Their Denunciation of Yoga's Popularity in the U.S." *Religion Dispatches* (October 27, 2010).
[4] "Is It Okay for Christians to Do Yoga?" *Relevant Magazine* (October 25, 2010).
[5] Matthew Lee Anderson, "God Has a Wonderful Plan for Your Body," *Christianity Today* 55.8 (August 2011): 34-38.
[6] Jain, "Is Downward Dog."

ancient classical yoga prescribes a system for developing an advanced meditation practice for the purpose of uniting "the individual soul (*atman*) with the universal spirit or God (*Brahman*)."[7] Though many Hindus practiced yoga to cultivate their personal spirituality, so did Buddhists, Jains, and Muslims. These religious systems influenced and were influenced by the development of ancient classical yoga.[8] Though Hindus practiced yoga as a spiritual discipline, yoga does not belong to Hinduism or to any other religion. Furthermore, Modern Postural Yoga bears little resemblance to the ancient classical yoga of the fourth century.

Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) is what most Americans are referring to when they say they are "going to a yoga class." MPY is a Western fitness phenomenon practiced by 16 million Americans every year.[9] Though MPY classes are by no means standardized, most 60- to 90-minute class sessions include distinct strengthening and stretching postures, breath control, relaxation techniques, and the cultivation of awareness and mindfulness.[10] Chapter Three covers the high points of the history of ancient classical yoga, its use as a spiritual discipline, and its relationship with Hinduism. The chapter then discusses the benefits of MPY for the general population. As research corroborates, the psychophysiological benefits of MPY are well-documented. Studies have shown that physical exertion is linked with psychological well-being,[11] and that physically exerting

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[7] Tracey C. Greenwood and Teresa Delgado, "A Journey Toward Wholeness, a Journey to God: Physical Fitness as Embodied Spirituality," *Journal of Religion & Health* 52 (September 2013): 950.
[8] Vasudha Naranayan, "Hinduism," in *Worldmark Enyclopedia of Religious Practices*, ed. Thomas Riggs (Detroit: Gale, 2006), 302.
[9] David Gordon White, *Yoga in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1.
[10] Arndt Büssing, et al., "Development of Specific Aspects of Spirituality during a 6-Month Intensive Yoga Practice," *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2012 (2012): 1.
[11] S. J. H. Biddle, K. R. Fox, and S. H. Boutcher, *Physical Activity and Psychological Well-Being* (London: Routledge, 2000), 152-153.

oneself while verbally stating goals and expressing gratitude for one's body correlates with improved confidence and increased cohesion between the mind, body, and spirit.[12] One study observed a correlation between aspects of spirituality such as mindfulness and compassion and participation in a 6-month intensive yoga practice.[13]

After clearing the first objection, establishing that MPY is not a Hindu practice that compromises Christian religious commitments, and showing the benefits of yoga, the fourth chapter addresses a second objection to Christians practicing yoga: resistance to incorporating the body in spiritual practice. This section provides a theological framework for yoga, or any fitness activity, to be practiced with the intention of deepening one's spiritual maturity. This section will address the mind-body dualism that is prevalent in many contemporary Christians' view of the human body,[14] and the fundamentalist perspective that the purpose of Christian faith is to save souls, not to be concerned with the health and well-being of the human body.[15]

To make the claim that yoga can be practiced intentionally for spiritual formation, it is necessary to counter dualism and fundamentalism by establishing a scriptural theology of the value of the body as the primary setting for every human experience, including a vibrant spiritual life. The body is more than a finite possession or a shell for the soul. A logical and chronological starting point for this is the beginning, in the book of Genesis, which establishes the biblical principle of *imago Dei*: that all humanity, and

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[12] Greenwood and Delgado, "A Journey," 951.
[13] Büssing, et al., "Development of Specific Aspects," 4.
[14] Nancey Murphy, "Human Nature: Historic, Scientific, and Religious Issues," *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, eds. Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 1.
[15] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 81.

in fact all material creation, reflects the glory of God and therefore demands care and responsible stewardship.[16]

Progressing further through the pages of scripture and through the Christian narrative, one arrives upon the person of Jesus—the incarnation of the infinite God—whose bodily existence demonstrates the value God places on human bodies. In the words of John Calvin, "God's natural Son fashioned for himself a body from our body, flesh from our flesh, bones from our bones, that he might be one with us."[17] Calvin's statement poetically describes the alternative to mind-body dualism: identification with humanity is identification with a body. To be human is to be embodied. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' teaching and ministry repeatedly bestow value on human bodies. His words and actions compel his followers today to do the same.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the Pauline epistles direct Christians to a new understanding of the body and its place in Christian spirituality in a post-ascension world. Much of Pauline teaching is geared toward cultivating the faith of new Christians as individuals and as church communities. Paul's writings to the early Christian communities make frequent mention of embodied terms. Paul's references and instructions on the body can be broken down into two primary themes: (1) practically, the transformation of how the individual believers should behave with their bodies, and (2) metaphorically, the unity of the believers as a collective body of Christ (church

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[16] Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 46.

[17] Bruce A. Demarest, "Incarnation," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2011), 530.

community).[18] These instructions in individual and ecclesial bodily practices helped establish a new identity for the believers, the churches and the Christian faith, which persists to today.

Integrating Yoga with Christian Spiritual Formation

Within the Christian tradition, there is a precedent for involving the body in spirituality through the use of spiritual disciplines. Talbot School of Theology colleagues J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler define a Christian spiritual discipline as, "A repeated bodily practice, done in dependence on the Holy Spirit and under the direction of Jesus and other wise teachers in His way, to enable us to get good at certain things in life that we cannot learn to do by direct effort."[19] A growing American Evangelical curiosity about ancient spiritual disciplines and revival of Protestant spiritual theology marked a late twentieth century pursuit to apply spiritual disciplines to a contemporary context. As individuals and in community, contemporary Christians are observing such disciplines as fasting or living by a rule of life with the intention of cultivating their faith.

Christians can integrate MPY into their faith as a spiritual discipline, because it is a practice that is uniquely designed to cultivate an attitude of contemplative calm, of stilling the restless body and mind in preparation for prayer and awareness of the presence of God.

The Carmelite monk, Brother Lawrence, referred to this as, "practicing the presence of God." One specific tool he used (and recommended to his monastic brethren)

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[18] Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 115.
[19] J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *The Lost Virtue of Happiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress 2006), 46.

was to constantly calm the mind and center awareness on God as often as possible. Chapter Five discusses how MPY provides a ready tool for cultivating this mindfulness.

The conversation about spiritual disciplines is embedded in a broader conversation about Christian spiritual formation: how Christians are formed into the likeness of Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, for the sake of others.[20] Chapter Five discusses how spiritual disciplines such as MPY fit into a Christian model for spiritual formation. One section compares and contrasts the Christian model for spiritual formation with the yogic model for developing a meditation practice. The Christian framework is described by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich in their book, *The Critical Journey.* The yogic model is the Eight-Limbed Path, a model for development of an advanced meditation practice, which includes Modern Postural Yoga in addition to lifestyle and meditation practices. Additionally, the journey of an MPY practitioner, which can be considered a metaphor for the spiritual life, follows many of the same stages as Hagberg and Guelich's Critical Journey.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis with a final case study, a brief summary of the argument for Christians practicing yoga as a spiritual discipline, and a few pages of practical instruction to guide the Christian practice of MPY. This section guides individual practitioners to approach various aspects of their MPY practices—whether alone or in a public studio—as a spiritual discipline with the intention of forming them into the likeness of Christ. Setting the tone with environmental cues, practicing specific breathing meditations, linking posture and movement with mindfulness, and reciting

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[20] Tom Schwanda, "Formation, Spiritual," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2011), 452.

prayers are ways to turn a Modern Postural Yoga practice into a spiritual discipline that cultivates Christian meditation practice, with the intention of orienting the awareness toward the constant presence of God.

CHAPTER 2

Historical and Cultural Sources of Christian Objections to Yoga

The common objections to Christians practicing yoga are founded on historical and cultural developments in contemporary American evangelicalism. First, this chapter describes common Christian attitudes toward yoga, and briefly introduces the two primary objections which must be overcome. The chapter will then provide a critical foundation for addressing these objections, diagnosing sources of a Christian dualistic anthropology from which these objections arise. A non-dualistic, holistic reading of New Testament texts about the body, and a recognition of the importance of the body to spiritual practice emerge through this process.

Christian Attitudes toward Yoga

The existence of Christian yogi communities demonstrates that some Christians have identified the MPY class as an ideal setting for the pursuit of spiritual maturity. Some churches offer MPY classes in their facilities as community programs. Casey Rock writes, "Yoga is one place in the culture where the natural, human thirst for contact with God is being satisfied, even if the participants would never use such language."[21] However, not everyone in the Christian community understands yoga this way.

As yoga has grown in popularity in recent years, a number of Christians have spoken out against Christians practicing yoga. The most common rationale against Christians practicing yoga is due to its Hindu origins. Many Christians argue that what is taught and practiced in Western yoga studios, MPY, is at odds with faith in Jesus.

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[21] Casey Rock, "Voices from the Mat," in *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality,* ed. Thomas Ryan (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 98.

Furthermore, some Christians argue that spiritual formation is something that occurs in the heart and mind, and should not involve the body, which is fallen and temporary. This viewpoint denotes a dualist understanding of the human being (the spiritual life is superior to the material life), which informs the Christian fundamentalist aversion to the Social Gospel and other attempts to apply Jesus' message to the daily physical realities of life.

Support for Christians Practicing Yoga

Christians practice yoga individually and in community. Many individual Christians choose to practice yoga in public studios or develop their own personal practice, which can be carried out at any location or hour. One yoga teacher described the development of her personal practice to Father Thomas Ryan as follows:

> From the very beginning of my yoga practice, it has been a means for quieting and centering my being, for letting go, at least for the time of my practice, of that which is not of the essence. It is in that focused state of being, leaving aside the rush of doing that is otherwise so much a part of my life, that I find myself most in contact with the divine. Over time, and with repeated practice to remind me of what that space feels like, yoga has helped me learn to move more naturally into setting aside all else, however briefly, to experience the presence of God. The Protestant church tradition in which I grew up has so few models of meditation or a contemplative path. Yoga's concept of focused quietness, as a source of energy for world-changing action was quite a revelation to me.[22]

Pat O'Rourke, another Christian who regularly practices yoga, expressed to Ryan his wonder that "something as ordinary as a set of exercises can leave me feeling so peaceful and joyous. Although grace is a gift that no method can manufacture, I feel that

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[22] Thomas Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 181.

yoga disposes me to pray more tranquilly and to be open to whatever gifts God may wish to give me."[23]

Christians also practice yoga in community with one another. One such community, Holy Yoga, is a worldwide network of teachers and classes that feature a style of yoga that is "dedicated to facilitating the worship and celebration of God through movement and meditation."[24] Holy Yoga offers teacher trainings, online class instruction, and resources to support its worldwide community of teachers and students. According to its website, Holy Yoga is an international nonprofit ministry that certifies hundreds of Holy Yoga instructors around the world every year. The 2007 book, *Holy Yoga* by Holy Yoga founder, Brooke Boon, provides a framework for the Christian practice of yoga, responds to some of the common objections, and offers practical instruction in the various types of breath practices and many postures a "holy yogi" might practice. For Christians interested in experiencing Christian yoga, Holy Yoga's website offers a directory of Holy Yoga-certified teachers and links to their teaching schedules.

Woodmen Valley Chapel in Colorado Springs, Colorado, offers weekly "Christ-centered Yoga" classes to its community. The non-denominational church's event page invites attendees to "explore yoga principles through a biblical framework," and that participants will learn to worship with their whole body, balance work and rest, and take time for breathing and listening to God.[25] The website also lists a couple of the broadly accepted benefits of MPY, specifically reduction of stress and muscular tension, alongside a description of the intention of the class, "to deepen your prayer and worship

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[23] Ibid., 183.
[24] Boon, *Holy Yoga*, xiii.
[25] https://www.facebook.com/events/133074827143212/

time."[26] This is in line with the intended outcome of Christian spiritual disciplines, which will be discussed in chapter five.

Another faith community that practices yoga among believers is Saddleback Church, a several-thousand-member congregation in Lake Forest, California. Pastored by Rick Warren, the author of *The Purpose-Driven Life,* Saddleback Church's website invites seekers to get involved in a variety of programs, grouped in categories such as Outreach, Care, Family, and so forth. One category—Sports & Fitness—offers 28 different programs through which one can get involved with Saddleback's community, from Adult Martial Arts to Zumba. One such ministry called "Stretch and Pray" is described as "a Worship Experience class that offers all the physical benefits of the strengthening postures and is done with scripture, prayer, and worship music speaking to a weekly theme. The classes are coed, non-competitive, and a great way to release stress by breathing in God's goodness and breathing out negativity and toxicity." The description of Stretch and Pray goes on to list the benefits of the class: core strengthening, weight loss, lower blood pressure, and better posture.[27] The description of Stretch and Pray matches that of an MPY class, but Saddleback's website does not to use the term "yoga" to describe its program. Though the webpage displays a photo of a Stretch and Pray class full of attendees who are barefoot on yoga mats, in a typical standing yoga pose, and led by an individual instructor, it does not label the class "yoga," presumably to avoid raising issues with Christians who are wary of yoga.

Yogaphobia: Opposition to Christians Practicing Yoga

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[26] https://www.facebook.com/events/133074827143212/

[27] "Stretch and Pray," *Saddleback Church: The Daniel Plan Sports and Fitness Ministries* (2018).

In recent years, many prominent Christian leaders have publicly stated their opinion that Christians should not practice yoga. In 2010, Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, blogged his view that yoga and Christianity are incompatible. "The embrace of yoga is a symptom of our postmodern spiritual confusion, and, to our shame, this confusion reaches into the church."[28] In response to the Christian argument that yoga practice is a means of connecting with or worshipping God through the body, Mohler disagrees, stating, "Yoga begins and ends with an understanding of the body that is, to say the very least, at odds with the Christian understanding. Christians are not called to empty the mind or to see the human body as a means of connecting to and coming to know the divine. Believers are called to meditate upon the Word of God."[29] Mohler acknowledges the angle that yoga is a fitness practice, but also insists that it is more than that: "There is nothing wrong with physical exercise, and yoga positions in themselves are not the main issue. But these positions are teaching postures with a spiritual purpose. Consider this — if you have to meditate intensely in order to achieve or to maintain a physical posture, it is no longer merely a physical posture."[30] Though Mohler is right to acknowledge the spiritual dimension of yoga, he is also assuming that such poses require a mindset that is somehow at odds with Christian faith.

Around the same time that Mohler published his blog article, Mark Driscoll, then-pastor of the several-thousand-member Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, spoke

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[28] Albert Mohler, "The Subtle Body—Should Christians Practice Yoga?" *Albert Mohler: Jesus & the Gospel* (September 20, 2010).
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

out against Christians practicing yoga. "Yoga is demonic…It's absolute paganism," he told a live audience, "Yoga and meditation and Easternism is [sic] all opening to demonism…if you just sign up for a little yoga class, you're signing up for a little demon class. That's what you're doing. And Satan doesn't care if you stretch as long as you go to hell."[31] Without citing sources and without any particular expertise on the subject, Driscoll made the above statements to a live audience. With statements like these entering the mainstream Christian dialogue, it is no surprise there is confusion on the topic of Christian yoga.

Another Christian who opposes yoga is Laurette Willis. Willis tells the story of how her practice of yoga at an impressionable age opened the door to years of pain, New Age involvement, promiscuity, alcoholism, and loneliness. She eventually became a Christian, burned her New Age books, and founded PraiseMoves (tagline: "The Christian Alternative to Yoga"), a successful brand of fitness classes and DVDs. Her classes also sparked a TV show and several offshoots, including a kids' program, called PowerMoves and Mira! (tagline: "Christian Alternative to Zumba!").[32]

An internet query of "Christian opposition to yoga" results in hundreds of thousands of links to articles, blogs, and websites discussing the controversy of Christians practicing yoga. One 2005 article on *Today's Christian Woman*, an online newsblog published by *Christianity Today*, quotes Doug Groothuis, professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary, as he calls proponents of Christian yoga "misled." He goes on to say, "'Christian yoga' is an oxymoron. Yoga is rooted in Hinduism and cannot be separated

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[31] Jain, "Is Downward Dog."
[32] Ibid.

from it. There's nothing wrong with stretching and calming down one's breathing. But yoga isn't really about that; it's aimed at transforming human consciousness to experience the Hindu god, which is a false god."[33] Another result for "Christian opposition to yoga" is a *Relevant Magazine* article, published in 2010, entitled, "Is it Okay for Christians to Do Yoga?" The article lists and responds to many of the common objections to Christians practicing yoga. One of the first objections, citing the same Mark Driscoll statements above, is that yoga is Hindu. The article briefly explains that yoga has changed significantly over its two-thousand-year history, and that "most of what we call yoga in the West is not truly yoga at all—it is only *asana*, the physical postures, and *pranayama*, the breathing exercises."[34] The article goes on to argue, "Lots of things that were once pagan have been co-opted by Christians and used for worship; the most obvious examples being Christmas and Easter," which were formerly pagan feast days. "To say that Christians can't take a practice that was intended for something else and use it to worship God is to ignore not only history, but the transformational power of Christ."[35]

There are many other examples of Christian opposition to yoga. In a 2007 interview on CNN, John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, warned Christians against doing yoga, referring to it as a "false religion." Around the same time, Pat Robertson issued a similar warning, describing some aspects of yoga as "really spooky."[36] Even the Roman Catholic Church, though never explicitly

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[33] Holly Vicente Robaina, "The Truth about Yoga," *Today's Christian Woman* (March 2005).
[34] "Is It Okay"
[35] Ibid.
[36] Jain, "Is Downward Dog."

mentioning the word, "yoga," released a statement in 1989 warning of the "dangers and errors" of fusing Christian and non-Christian meditative methods, and claiming that forms of meditation that involve bodily posture "can degenerate into a cult of the body."[37]

Introduction to the First Hurdle: A Religious Basis for Christian Objections to Yoga

Though some Christians practice yoga, many are opposed to it, citing the connection to Hinduism as incompatible with faith in Jesus. As Andrea Jain describes this position, "Christian opponents of the popularization of yoga maintain that Christians should not embrace yoga, which is Hindu and is consequently in conflict with Christian doctrine and an obstacle on the path to salvation."[38] This rationale comprises the first of two objections to address, or "hurdles" that must be cleared in order for Christians to practice yoga as an expression of Christian spirituality. Jain coined the term "Christian yogaphobia" in 2014, to describe Christian opposition to yoga.[39] Jain explains that this stems from a central assumption that yoga is "a static, homogenous system" that has remained unchanged since its ancient beginning. However, as discussed below, the history of yoga and its migration between continents, through the centuries, and across cultures demonstrate that yoga is anything but static and homogenous:

> This attempt to produce a monolithic vision of yoga ignores the fact that it, like religion itself, is anything but a stable phenomenon. Yoga has a long history whereby adherents of numerous religions, including Hindu, Jain, and New Age traditions, have constructed and reconstructed it anew. Even

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[37] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Alberto Bovone, "Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's Letter on Christian Meditation," *Buddhis-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 128-129.
[38] Andrea R. Jain, "The Malleability of Yoga: A Response to Christian and Hindu Opponents of the Popularization of Yoga," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 25.4 (November 2012): 3-4.
[39] Andrea R. Jain, "Who is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have it All Wrong? On Hindu Origins and Yogaphobia," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82.2 (January 2014): 427.

> Hindu forms of yoga vary widely in ideology and practice. Thus yoga does not belong to Hinduism nor any other monolithic tradition.[40]

Yoga is malleable enough to have been constantly adapted over the years. The notion that modern yoga is a Trojan horse of Hindu doctrine (or any religious doctrine, for that matter) does not stand up to historical scrutiny. This objection is addressed in chapter three.

Introduction to the Second Hurdle: Rejecting Yoga as a Spiritual Practice

Once the first hurdle is cleared and yoga is deemed safe for Christians to practice, a second hurdle must also be cleared. This is the common attitude that Christians might accept yoga as a fitness practice, but reject it as a spiritual practice. This rejection of yoga correlates to the influence of a fundamentalist view that the purpose of Christianity is to save souls only to the exclusion of the body, which is rooted in a mind-body dualism that views human beings as immaterial souls inhabiting material bodies. This objection is addressed in chapter four.

The Basis of Christian Objections to Yoga in Fundamentalism

Of the many objections to the Christian practice of yoga listed above, one stands out as characteristic of fundamentalist mind-body dualism. Mohler's statement that, "Christians are not called to empty the mind or see the human body as a means of connecting to and coming to know the divine," but rather they are called to "meditate upon the Word of God"[41] reveals Mohler's basic assumption that Christian faith and spiritual formation are processes that occur in the conscious mind, not through the actions

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[40] Jain, "Is Downward Dog."
[41] Mohler, "The Subtle Body."

or well-being of the body. This perspective of Christian faith is characteristic of a fundamentalist mindset.

Fundamentalism, described by George Marsden in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, is a form of "militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism."[42] The movement developed in the early twentieth century, when the rapid modernization of society alarmed many Christians. In response, they coalesced around an agreed stance that Christianity was under attack by "modernism in theology," "rationalism in philosophy," and "materialism in life."[43] Fundamentalism was "a loose, diverse, and changing federation of co-belligerents united by their fierce opposition to modernist attempts to bring Christianity into line with modern thought."[44] Fundamentalism was not and is not a Christian denomination, but rather a movement across denominational lines.[45]

Fundamentalist Opposition to Culture

The fundamentalist movement was an attempt by Protestant evangelicals to determine how Christianity should relate to a rapidly changing culture. Marsden described two primary characteristics of fundamentalism, anti-intellectualism and paranoid style, which were "shaped by a desire to strike back at everything modern—the higher criticism, evolutionism, the Social Gospel, rational criticism of any kind."[46]

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[42] Fred Sanders, "Fundamentalist Spirituality," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2011), 468.
[43] Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 160.
[44] Ibid., 4.
[45] Ibid., 3.
[46] Ibid., 199.

Among other things, fundamentalists were committed to the absolute authority of the Bible as the inerrant word of God.[47]

Opposition was a key element of fundamentalism. The fundamentalist approach to the surrounding culture was primarily to find points of contrast and disagreement, rather than cooperation. One example can be found in William Jennings Bryan's comments at the Winona Bible Conference in the summer of 1911. In response to those who claimed that Christianity should change to suit the conditions of the day, he countered, "It is better to raise the temperature than to change the thermometer." According to Bryan, Christians who wanted to adapt Christian spirituality to the surrounding culture rather than change the culture "were infected with the materialist philosophy that had for nineteen centuries challenged the spiritual religion of the Bible."[48] Bryan went on, "In the abundance of our wealth, we have surrounded ourselves with material comforts until the care of the body has absorbed our thought and the saving of the soul has become a secondary matter."[49] Bryan's comments highlight the fundamentalist impulse to reject the surrounding culture—in particular its concern with the comfort and well-being of the body—in order to give priority to spiritual matters.

Fundamentalism's Separation of the Soul from the Social

Christian fundamentalists rejected many aspects of their surrounding culture, but one example in particular relates to later discussion about embodied practices—what Marsden refers to as the "Great Reversal"—in reference to fundamentalist rejection of the Social Gospel. Before the Great Reversal, fundamentalist Christians participated with and

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[47] Sanders, "Fundamentalist Spirituality," 469.
[48] Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 133.
[49] Ibid., 133-134.

supported social programs, but they were always "complementary outgrowths of the regenerating work of Christ which saved souls for all eternity."[50] Proponents of the Social Gospel, however, put more emphasis on meeting the physical needs of the poor and needy, such as rescue missions, orphanage work, labor rights, and medical missions.[51] Between 1900 and 1930, Marsden writes, fundamentalist Christians became suspicious of all progressive social concern, whether political or private. Liberalism became identified with "social Christianity," and the tense political climate of World War I caused conservative evangelicals to reject the Social Gospel entirely.[52] As Baptist pastor, Cortland Myers said, "The church of Christ is not a benevolent institution nor a social institution, but an institution for one purpose—winning lost souls to Christ and being instrumental in redeeming the world." The "practical side," of ministry, though essential, was secondary to this supreme purpose.[53] D. L. Moody argued that even the practical side was a distraction, saying, "One should not carry a loaf of bread in one hand and a Bible in the other lest someone think only of the bread and ignore the word."[54]

Fundamentalist understanding of Christ's and the church's relationship with culture was consistently one of rejection of the present in favor of the future: the kingdom of heaven and one's eternal reward. Marsden cites Isaac M. Haldeman, pastor of the First Baptist Church of New York City, who argued in 1912, "Christ's plan rejected the present world and age. Christ himself had not chosen to live in the world during this era. Rather, he was preparing a heavenly destiny for his people, the church. All this settles the

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[50] Ibid., 91.
[51] Ibid., 80.
[52] Ibid., 91.
[53] Ibid., 81.
[54] Ibid.

relation of the church to the present age."[55] Therefore, the church should not be concerned with the present culture. Because Christ promised "to come and take the church out of this world," the focus of the church should be on the age to come.[56]

This is an example of what Simon Chan describes in *Spiritual Theology* as one of the dangers of a too narrowly defined christological spirituality: "the legitimate distinction between the natural world and the supernatural world could widen into an unbridgeable chasm, so that the church's basic identity is defined in opposition to the world rather than as a transforming agent in the world. Thus the church is ghettoized, either in self-complacency . . . or in fear (because the world is hostile to everything that the church holds dear)."[57] Chan's description of the unbridgeable chasm is the unfortunate outcome when dualism is taken too far and the material is separated from the spiritual.

A Fundamentalist Mind-Body Dualism

Fundamentalists rejected the application of Christianity to the well-being of human bodies and passed this tendency into the present day to some evangelicals, such as Albert Mohler, Jr. As demonstrated in the next section, some contemporary Christians reject yoga for the same reasons that Christian fundamentalists rejected the Social Gospel: both find their rationale in a dualist understanding of human existence. When the basic understanding of humanity is diminished to an immaterial soul residing in a material body, it is unsurprising fundamentalist Christians chose to focus on saving souls rather than feeding the hungry and helping the sick. The same dualist approach that

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[55] Ibid., 125-127.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 47.

caused fundamentalists to reject the practical application of the gospel also causes some Christians today to reject MPY and other embodied practices as integral to spiritual formation—physical needs are seen as secondary to or even a distraction from spiritual needs.

Historical Origins of Christian Mind-Body Dualism

Lynn Rudder Baker defines mind-body dualism as, "the thesis that human persons have non-bodily parts—immaterial souls—that can exist independently of any body."[58] Though many Christians do not realize it, today's dominant evangelical understanding of the body comes from the Hellenistic world in which Christianity originally began and spread. Popular Greek thought of the day held a dualist understanding of the body, with the soul trapped in the body like an oyster in a shell.[59] This understanding of the construction of the human person is problematic when it causes people to devalue their bodies or the bodies of others and when it fosters an adversarial relationship between the body and the soul.

Nancey Murphy, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, explains in the book *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* how ancient dualist thought influenced some early Christian thinkers and was passed down to contemporary Christians. A dualist understanding of humanity developed before the time of Christ, when Greek philosophers recognized that human beings are capable of remarkable things, some of which are shared with animals (sensation), and some of which are unique to humankind (doing

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[58] Lynn Rudder Baker, "Need a Christian Be a Mind/Body Dualist?" *Faith and Philosophy* 12.4 (October 1995): 489.

[59] Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 16.

mathematics and philosophy). Since living persons have all these capabilities and corpses do not, philosophers developed the concept of the soul as an explanation for life. Once a person became a corpse, the soul (or life principle) was no longer present.[60] According to Plato (427-348 BCE), and other Greek philosophers, once the mortal body died, the soul was released to live eternally.[61]

A dualist understanding of human existence persists among evangelicals to this day, such that it is very difficult to consider any alternatives: "Many Christians, and believers of other faiths as well, hold (or at least assume) a dualist account. Some Christians believe that body-soul dualism is an essential part of Christian teaching."[62]

Plato's dualism, which most closely resembles the contemporary mind-body dualism of today, "described the person as an immortal soul imprisoned in a mortal body. . . The rational part of the soul pre-exists the body, dwelling in the transcendent realm of the Forms, and returns there at death."[63] Aristotle differed from Plato in that his understanding of the soul was "that aspect of the person that provides the powers or attributes characteristic of the human being. Plants and animals have souls as well—nutritive and sensitive souls, which give them the powers to grow and reproduce and to move and perceive, respectively. . . . Because the soul is a principle of the functioning of the body, it would follow that the soul dies with the body."[64] Early Christian thinkers maintained the dualist perspective but disagreed on whether the immaterial soul was eternal. Tertullian (160-220) taught that the soul was generated with the body. Origen

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[60] Murphy, "Human Nature," 4.
[61] Ibid., 3.
[62] Ibid., 1.
[63] Ibid., 3.
[64] Ibid.

(185-254) agreed with Plato, that the soul is eternal and both pre-existed and outlived the body.[65]

Some argue that the dualist anthropology of the Hellenistic world was shared by New Testament authors. Many scholars have found examples of dualism in the New Testament that affirm a biblical dualistic anthropology. A variety of words are used to refer to the human being, or parts thereof. In Greek, words such as *sarx* (flesh), *soma* (body), *psyche* (soul), *pneuma* (spirit), and *kardia* (heart) refer to the human being or its parts. These are sometimes understood to refer to different parts of the human, separate from one another.[66] For example, Paul writes, "May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 5:23)." This could mean that Paul sees the different parts of the human being as distinct from one another.[67] Paul's frequent use of the word "flesh" (*sarx*) is a point of tension between the old nature and new nature. Statements like, "if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live (Rom 8:13)," are seen as evidence of Paul's dualist perspective.

However, other scholars argue that while dualism is evident in Greek culture and in interpretations of Paul influenced by Platonic dualism, Paul himself does not view human nature dualistically. In answer to a dualistic interpretation of "flesh" as antagonistic to "spirit," scholars hold that Paul is referring to the sinful nature and not to the physical human body.[68] Many scholars see scripture, including Paul's letters, as

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[65] Ibid., 4.
[66] Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, 96.
[67] Ibid., 97.
[68] Ibid.

valuing the human body and its integration in spirituality. This non-dualist interpretation of the Bible is especially sound and practical when considering larger themes of biblical theology regarding the body, discussed in chapter four. While recognizing the complexity of this issue of interpretation, the theological analysis of the value of the body offered in this thesis will rely on scholars who argue that scripture does not present a dualist anthropology.[69]

Contemporary Christianity owes much of its dualistic view to the influence of Enlightenment philosophy. René Descartes (1596-1650) is considered the father of modern anthropological dualism.[70] "It is certain," he wrote in his *Meditations*, "that this I (that is to say, my soul by which I am what I am), is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body, and can exist without it."[71] For Descartes—like the Greek Stoics, some Christian thinkers in the past, and many Christians today—the body and soul are constituted of entirely different substances but are still able to interact with one another. The body is made of matter and delivers sensations from the natural world to the immortal soul, which is the essence of the human. In return, the soul dictates how the body moves and behaves.[72] Despite the distinction between the body and soul, Descartes believed in the unity of the total person: "I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a

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[69] It is certainly possible for someone to hold a dualist understanding of the human and still value the human body, but a holistic spirituality better correlates to a theology of the body grounded in creation and incarnation.

[70] John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 14.

[71] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2012), 156.

[72] Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, 15.

vessel, but that I am very closely united to it, and so to speak so intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole."[73]

Dualism and Yoga

The philosophy of ancient classical yoga, starting with the *Yoga Sutras*, also assumes a dualist model for the human being. The *Yoga Sutras* are the foundational text of ancient classical yoga. Dating back to the third or fourth century CE, the *Yoga Sutras* guide and instruct would-be yogis in the development of meditation practice, which is much broader than stretching and breathing sequences on a mat. The *Yoga Sutras* assert that suffering comes as a result of a misunderstanding of one's relationship with the material world: "Ignorance of the true nature of this relation misleads us into egoistically believing in a unified self and falsely identifying spirit with matter."[74] Part of the purpose of classical yoga's meditation practice, and an indicator of its success, was to liberate the "observing spirit," or *purusha*, from the material world, or *prakrti*, the qualities of which are in contrast with the spirit.[75] One can even see evidence of an adversarial relationship between the body and spirit in ancient yoga philosophy: One practical observance prescribed by the eight limbs of yoga[76] was bodily purification, which ideally resulted in "aversion to one's own body and avoidance of contact with others."[77]

This dualistic approach to the spirit and material world is not a component of MPY today. As explained below, practicing MPY does not mean adopting the philosophy

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[73] Descartes, *Meditations*, 159.
[74] Barbara Stoler Miller, *Yoga, Discipline of Freedom: The* Yoga Sutra *Attributed to Patanjali* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 50.
[75] Ibid., 50-51.
[76] A method of spiritual discipline, which will be explained in detail later.
[77] Ibid., 55.

of ancient classical yoga. It is possible to practice MPY without subscribing to mind-body dualism. In fact, MPY practice is distinct from both Western dualism and classical yoga forms of dualism. Instead, as will be discussed, it coheres with and contributes to a holistic anthropology.

A Holistic Biblical Anthropology

The problem with mind-body dualism is that it unnecessarily pits the material against the non-material. Due to the prevalence of dualist thought in evangelical teaching, there is a tendency to adopt a suspicious or even adversarial relationship with the body, because its sensations and appetites are associated with sin when they gain control. Some present-day readers interpret Pauline teaching as reinforcing a distrust of the body. Karl Sandnes writes, "Being both mortal and weak, the [earthly] body easily becomes a gateway for temptations, according to Paul. Provision for bodily needs might be carried out in a way which allows desires to seize control. The earthly nature of the body then turns out to be highly sinister."[78]

As Christianity evolved through the centuries and changing cultural contexts, the Christian relationship with the body has also evolved. Father Thomas Ryan writes, in his book, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality*,

> In different periods of history, Christians have been variously exhorted to mortify their bodies and punish themselves, to control their bodily appetites perceived as hindrances to spiritual development, and to transcend their bodies so as to live in a purely spiritual way. The challenge before us in a secular culture that idolizes the body is not to overcompensate for centuries of misguided teachings—Paul said, "Glorify God in your body," (1 Cor 6:20) not "Glorify your body"—but to find a

[78] Karl Olav Sandnes, *Belly and Body in the Pauline Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 272-273.

> balance between idolatry and denial, between mortification and glorification.[79]

The task before all Christians is to find a healthy balance between mortification and glorification. Though Christians through the centuries have not always related to the human body in healthy ways, followers of Jesus now have the opportunity to bring the gospel—to be "good news"—to their cultural context. Informed by Jesus' teaching and example, Christians can be agents of change and redemption, bestowing appropriate value on the human body and involving it in embodied spiritual disciplines, such as Modern Postural Yoga.

Christians' Changing Attitudes Toward the Body and Toward Embodied Practices

In recent years there has been a growing movement among some Christians and churches to acknowledge the importance of the body in all of human life and to acknowledge the spiritual dimension that is present in many daily embodied activities, such as fitness. One does not need to look any further than the occurrence of sports and fitness ministries and church-wide wellness programs to see that individual Christians and faith communities are exploring their embodied nature.

In November 2016, *Relevant Magazine* published an article entitled "Physical Fitness is Spiritual Too," in which Jenna Giesow shares with readers several lessons working out has taught her about spiritual life. "Running," Giesow writes, "and routine exercise in general, teaches me about moving forward, not throwing in the towel and keeping my eyes on the prize."[80] Giesow, like so many other Christians, has found a

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[79] Thomas Ryan, "The Body Language of Faith," in *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality,* ed. Thomas Ryan (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 92.
[80] Jenna Giesow, "Physical Fitness is Spiritual Too," *Relevant Magazine* (November 29, 2016).

metaphor for her spiritual life in the discipline of running. When her lungs burn or she is tempted to compare herself to other runners, she remembers how far she has come and determines to enjoy the process. "If we ever want to see a change in our lives," she writes, "it requires us to lay down our pride, to lay down our desires, to lay down our wants, and to press into God's Word. It requires us to practice self-discipline and to train ourselves to seek first the Kingdom."[81] This explanation of the ways running causes Giesow to experience the presence of God is reminiscent of the famous line spoken by Eric Liddell in the film *Chariots of Fire:* "I believe that God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure."[82] If running contributes to Christian spirituality, why not yoga and other forms of exercise?

Thomas Ryan comments on many other fitness activities that connect to spiritual growth. The values one learns through exercise are the same as those required and cultivated in spiritual disciplines, or in Ryan's words, "devotional practices." Values, he writes, such as discipline, dedication, attention, and perseverance. Ryan continues,

> These are the human virtues that get us out of bed before the sun is fully up to meditate or to go for a job. The virtue is the same; only the application is different. Just as strengthening these virtues in devotional practices can make their application easier in fitness activities, so can various forms of exercise cultivate virtues needed for meeting the challenges of the inner life of the spirit. Through skiing, rock climbing, or whitewater canoeing, one learns how to deal with and overcome fear and anxiety. Through running, swimming, or rowing long distances, one develops endurance and willpower and learns to deal with boredom. Through golf, one can practice intense concentration and subtle control. Team sports teach the values of cooperation and interdependence. In general, exercise develops self-awareness and self-control, knowledge of our limits, determination to succeed. It sets in motion and hones faculties

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[81] Ibid.
[82] *Chariots of Fire*, Dir. Hugh Hudson, Perf. Nicholas Farrell, Nigel Havers, Warner Brothers, 1981, DVD.

> critical to the spiritual life: attention, observation, analysis, judgment, evaluation.[83]

Certainly, many more Christians besides Giesow and Ryan have connected their exercise pursuits and their personal spirituality. Earlier in *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality*, Ryan argues, "Christianity finds itself in the awkward position of trying to develop a positive theology of creation without ever having rejoiced in the human body. In theory, we have the highest theology of the body among all world religions. In practice, we are still dualistic and suspicious of anything too earthy and sensual; we live largely in our heads."[84] In highlighting the need for a new Christian relationship with the body, Ryan notes the irony that Eastern religions—which embrace a dualist perspective of the human being and, unlike Christians, hold no doctrine of salvation for the body—bestow greater value and importance on the body in their spiritual practices than Christianity in the West. "Yoga, tai chi, aikido, breathing exercises, and walking meditation all come from Eastern religions . . . Christians, on the other hand, with their high theological evaluation of the body, have little to offer by way of spiritual practices that work with and through the body."[85] Ryan notes the need for a new Christian relationship with the body; one that integrates and values it as part of the spiritual life. There is tremendous potential for Christians to integrate embodied practices with spirituality and experience transformation as a result. Chapter Four provides a foundation for Christians to do so with a theological rationale to value the human body and incorporate it in the spiritual life.

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[83] Ryan, "The Body Language of Faith," 78-79.
[84] Ibid., 34.
[85] Ibid., 39-40.

Summary: Dualism and Fundamentalism Inform Christian Attitudes Toward Yoga

Mind-body dualism is the belief that the immaterial person is contained by and in possession of a material body. According to this viewpoint, personhood, and therefore what makes a person unique and valuable in the eyes of God and humanity, is identified with the soul and not the body. This bifurcated view of the human being comes from Greek philosophers and not scriptural teaching. If taken to an extreme, a dualist perspective can lead to devaluing the body and an adversarial relationship with the body and its needs. Today, mind-body dualism persists when some groups of Christians reject the practical application of the gospel and overemphasize the spiritual aspects of Christian faith. Examples of this are found in the Christian fundamentalists' rejection of the Social Gospel and some contemporary Christians' rejection of the practice of Modern Postural Yoga.

Some Christians recently have begun to acknowledge the connection between embodied activities and spiritual growth. Such activities include fitness practices, including running and yoga. A mind-body dualist might disagree with the impulse to connect the body with the spiritual life. For Christians to practice yoga as a means of spiritual formation, it is necessary to respond to the evangelical rejection of Modern Postural Yoga, the fundamentalist rejection of the Social Gospel (and general wariness of the integration of spirituality with the body), and the mind-body dualism that underlies both perspectives. Chapter Four discusses this scriptural theology of the value of the human body, as demonstrated by *imago Dei*, the incarnation and ministry of Jesus, and the teachings of Paul. Before chapter four sets the foundation to integrate the body with

spirituality, chapter three surveys the history of yoga to respond to the questions posed by the first hurdle: is yoga "safe" for Christians to practice? Is yoga Hindu?

CHAPTER 3

Clearing the First Hurdle: Is Yoga "Safe" for Christians to Practice?

Christian objections to yoga, as described in chapter two, can be summed up by Mark Driscoll's comment, "Yoga is demonic. . . It's absolute paganism."[86] A similar sentiment is Doug Groothuis' statement that "Yoga is rooted in Hinduism and cannot be separated from it."[87] Such statements are typical of Christian objections to yoga that are based on the assumption that the form of yoga practiced today in the West—Modern Postural Yoga—is Hindu and therefore incompatible with Christian belief. Using the chronology set forth in Elizabeth De Michelis' 2004 book, *A History of Modern Yoga*, various publications from Andrea Jain, as well as an article from Andrew J. Nicholson, a professor of Hinduism and Indian Intellectual History as the State University of New York, this chapter argues that while ancient classical yoga can be linked to Hinduism, Hinduism does not own yoga as a spiritual discipline. Modern Postural Yoga (MPY), which is the form practiced in yoga studios in the West, is an areligious fitness activity, safe for Christians to practice, and beneficial to any practitioner.

The following section briefly covers the two-thousand-year history of yoga, starting with its ancient beginnings in the region of the world now known as India, and provides a description of the array of practices referred to as ancient classical yoga. According to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, which were recorded around the fourth century CE, ancient classical yoga included meditation and ascetic lifestyle practices that were the tools for uniting "the individual soul (*atman*) with the universal spirit or God

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[86] Jain, "Is Downward Dog."
[87] Robaina, "The Truth about Yoga."

(*Brahman*)."[88] Ancient classical yoga, informed by Patanjali's text the *Yoga Sutras*, is a system of lifestyle and meditation practices that were widely observed by ancient Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains.

Many who oppose the Christian practice of yoga, citing its Hindu origins, are not aware of how and by whom yoga was practiced or of how much yoga has changed since the fourth century. Modern Postural Yoga bears little resemblance to the ancient classical yoga of the fourth century. Over the last 1500 years, ancient classical yoga has morphed into a Western fitness phenomenon, practiced annually by at least 16 million Americans.[89] Most Christian opposition to MPY stems from a central assumption that it is "a static, homogenous system"[90] that began in the Hindu tradition and has remained unchanged since its ancient beginning. However, as will be discussed, the history of yoga, its original use, the cultural and religious groups who influenced it, and its eventual migration to the West contradict this assumption. As Andrea Jain writes, "Yoga has a long history whereby adherents of numerous religions, including Hindu, Jain, and New Age traditions, have constructed and reconstructed it anew. Even Hindu forms of yoga vary widely in ideology and practice. Thus MPY does not belong to Hinduism nor any other monolithic tradition."[91] In fact, as this chapter will show, MPY is essentially a contemporary Western tradition, designed for use as a non-religious spiritual practice.

Defining Yoga

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[88] Greenwood and Delgado, "A Journey," 950.
[89] White, *Yoga in Practice*, 1.
[90] Jain, "The Malleability of Yoga," 8.
[91] Jain, "Is Downward Dog."

An average Westerner would likely describe yoga as a fitness class filled with flexible practitioners in tight-fitting clothes, adopting graceful and painful-looking body positions. This is an aspect of yoga, but what many people refer to as yoga is only a small portion of the broader family of yoga practices. A lunge stretch, a balancing pose, a breathing exercise, a vegan diet, abstinence from sexual promiscuity, and a therapy session all can be labeled "yoga." That is because classical yoga has a broad range of meanings, many of which are described in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* and are observed by individuals from all walks of life. The broad meaning of the word yoga and its varied practices are discussed below. Before broadening the definition, however, it is beneficial to begin with a narrow definition of yoga; the yoga that many people think about when they hear the word yoga: Modern Postural Yoga.

Modern Postural Yoga

Modern Postural Yoga is undoubtedly a popular fitness trend. "Arguably India's greatest cultural export," writes David Gordon White in his book, *Yoga in Practice*, "Yoga has morphed into a mass culture phenomenon."[92] Many people consider MPY an icon of contemporary American fitness culture. With millions of Americans practicing yoga, an industry has emerged. Someone hoping to start an MPY practice can purchase yoga clothes, yoga mats and accessories, attend yoga retreats, subscribe to yoga magazines and blogs, and pay monthly for memberships to yoga studios where they can practice alongside other yogis under the guidance of a yoga teacher. Eventually yoga practitioners might even consider attending a yoga teacher training and becoming certified to lead yoga classes. Yoga can be experienced in a variety of ways, and in fact

[92] Ibid.

there are a variety of yoga styles, but one form in particular has gained prominence in the latter half of the 20th century, and it is the form most Americans are referring to when they attend a yoga class at a local studio. Modern Postural Yoga "has become a widespread and popular activity. Most people will have heard about 'yoga,' and may even have tried it themselves. Indeed, in colloquial English, 'yoga' has come to mean a session of MPY."[93]

MPY classes are by no means standardized, and studios, classes, and teachers are diverse in style. Basic components of an MPY class include distinct postures, called *asanas*, breath control, known as *pranayama*, relaxation techniques, and the cultivation of awareness and mindfulness.[94] Though there are always exceptions, most MPY classes follow the same basic structure: a 60- to 90-minute class that unfolds in three stages. First is an introductory, quieting time, lasting around ten minutes, during which participants settle in and practice mindfulness, breathing, and body awareness. Next begins the proper MPY practice, during which the teacher instructs participants through a variety of postures and breathing exercises. During the practice, the teacher might offer any combination of visual, auditory, and tactile cues in the form of demonstration, verbal instruction, or physical adjustments. Finally, the MPY practice winds down with a final relaxation stage, during which participants lie down in corpse pose, called *savasana,* for a few minutes before the teacher closes class with a final thought and a salutation of, "*Namaste*."[95] Within this basic structure of an MPY class, there is endless possibility for

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[93] Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 248.
[94] Büssing, et al., "Development of Specific Aspects," 1.
[95] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251.

variation. The setting can be in a gym, community center, yoga studio, teacher's living room, an outdoor park, or any space where yoga mats can be rolled out. Postures depend on the teacher's training, preferences, style of yoga, the purpose of the class, and the target audience. The tone of the class can vary too, from energetic and communal to contemplative and individual.[96]

Terms and Definitions

Before entering into a detailed discussion of the practice of yoga, it is useful to define a few terms. *Namaste* is a Sanskrit word that is literally translated as, "I bow to you."[97] In greeting, it can be used to mean, "hello," "good morning," and "good night." The word is widely used throughout India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.[98] At the end of an MPY session, it is common for a teacher to dismiss the class by bringing his or her hands together in a prayer gesture in front of the heart and saying, "Namaste," to which the practitioners respond in unison, "Namaste."

The word *guru* refers to "a spiritual master or teacher whose gift or skill bears an esoteric dimension."[99] The term derives from the Hindu tradition but today is used to refer to "spiritual masters of other religious traditions, and to masters in other areas of expertise, such as music, dance, and even business."[100] To refer to Jesus as a guru is to acknowledge the Hindu cultural background of the broad practice of yoga and to draw the

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Rita Geno, "The Meaning of 'Namaste,'" *Yoga Journal* (April 21, 2017).
[98] Olivia Miller, "Nepalese Americans," in *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America,* ed. Thomas Riggs, vol. 3, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2014), 279.
[99] Catherine Cornille, "Guru," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 6, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 3712.
[100] Ibid.

analogy between Jesus—the founder and teacher of our faith—and the gurus who guided yogis as they developed in their practice of ancient classical yoga.

The Relationship Between Yoga and Hinduism

Hinduism, which is practiced today by almost a billion people, has "no known origins or beginnings,"[101] but is thought to have originated before 3000 BCE, with the Indo-European people group. [102] For the last two millennia, Hinduism has been associated with the Indian subcontinent, but it was not until the thirteenth or fourteenth century did the term *Hindu* come into use.[103] The word Hindu derives from *sindhu*, the Persian word for the area of land watered by the Indus River.[104] Though the word now refers to a religion, it historically has been used as a cultural or geographical indicator for the people of the Indian subcontinent.

Hinduism is characterized by tremendous diversity of belief, practice, and organizational structure. Even the divine being of Hinduism can be conceived of in diverse ways, "as beyond thought and word; as a supreme power that is immanent in the universe and that also transcends it; as male, female, or simultaneously male and female; as beyond gender; as one, as many; as a local colorful deity; and as abiding in the human soul or even as identical with it."[105] In religious terms, Hinduism can be an umbrella for several systems or can refer to one tradition alone. Hinduism is also a cultural marker that includes—in addition to the religious beliefs and texts—healing and performing arts,

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[101] Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?," 496.
[102] Vasudha Naranayan, "Hinduism," in *Worldmark Enyclopedia of Religious Practices*, ed. Thomas Riggs, vol.1. (Detroit: Gale, 2006), 301.
[103] Ibid.
[104] B. Griffiths and K. R. Sundararajan, "Hinduism," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 840.
[105] Narayanan, "Hinduism," 301.

geomancy, and architecture.[106] There is no central creed of faith or doctrine to which a Hindu must adhere to be considered a Hindu, though the text of Hinduism—the *Vedas*, recorded during the second millennium BCE—are considered absolute truth.[107] There is less agreement about the nature of the deity they serve:

> Hindus may say that they worship one God, even as they recite prayers and sing in devotion to the many deities of the Hindu pantheon. Some Hindus claim that, although there are many deities, only one is supreme. Others say that all gods and goddesses are equal but that one is their favorite or that their family worships a particular deity. Some believe that there is only one god, and all other deities are manifestations of that being.[108]

The wide degree of variation in each individual Hindu's understanding of the divine translates into nearly every area of Hinduism. Many Hindu texts refer to the relationship between the human individual soul (*atman*) and the supreme being (*Brahman*) and the ultimate goal of life is to come to know Brahman.[109] Karma and the cycle of reincarnation (eventually resulting in liberation) are doctrines accepted by Hindus as well as Buddhists and Jains.[110] The *Bhagavad Gita* (a post-*Vedic* but nonetheless important piece of Hindu literature) describes three paths to liberation: the way of action (*karma yoga*), the way of knowledge (*jñana yoga*), and the way of devotion (*bhakti yoga*):

> The way of action (*karma yoga*) entails the path of unselfish action; a person must do his or her duty (*dharma*), but it should not be done either for fear of punishment or for hope of reward. By discarding the fruits of one's action, one attains abiding peace. The second is the way of knowledge (*jñana yoga*). Through attaining scriptural knowledge, a person

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[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., 306.
[108] Ibid., 307.
[109] Ibid., 309.
[110] Ibid.

> may achieve a transforming wisdom that destroys his or her past karma. . . The third way, the way of devotion (*bhakti yoga*), is the most emphasized throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*. Ultimately, Krishna makes his promise. . . If a person surrenders to the Lord, he will forgive the human being all sins.[111]

The word *yoga* describes each path to liberation, because it fundamentally refers to a path, a lifestyle, or a discipline. Surely *karma* (action) *yoga* does not mean working hard at yoga poses on a mat all day every day. Or similarly *jñana* (knowledge) *yoga* does not mean attending yoga teacher trainings and workshops, and reading as many books as possible in an attempt to learn all one can about the particulars of yoga poses. Or finally *bhakti* (worship or devotion) *yoga*, which is the most popular path of liberation among Hindus, surely cannot mean perfecting Downward Facing Dog (a common MPY pose) as a form of worship. This is one example of the range of meanings of the word yoga. In this sense, yoga means a path of lifestyle practices; a discipline.

Ancient Classical Yoga (1500 BCE to 1000 CE)

In order to fully understand the practice known as Modern Postural Yoga, it is important to briefly cover the extensive history of yoga. From its earliest mention in 1500 BCE, and from the founding text of yoga practice, the *Yoga Sutras*, yoga is a discipline that unites the individual person with the divine. However, that is just the first of many understandings of the term *yoga*.

The earliest recorded use of the word *yoga* is in the ancient Indian text, the *Rig Veda* (circa 1500 BCE), in which yoga refers to "the yoke one placed on a draft animal—a bullock or warhorse—to yoke it to a plow or chariot."[112] The word *yoga* is derived from

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[111] Ibid., 310-311.
[112] White, *Yoga in Practice*, 3.

the root *yuj*, which means "to yoke" or "to unite."[113] Thomas Kochumuttom writes in "A Christian Reading of Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra*" that in its ancient context, the term yoga "points to the end result of the yoga practices: union or harmony with God, the fellow human beings and all the creatures, and indeed the whole universe."[114] Though the picture of yoking and union is the most common translation of the word yoga, it is not the only possible translation. In fact, the word yoga does not lend itself to direct translation. In reference to the attempt to define the term yoga David White writes,

> It is here that problems arise. "Yoga" has a wider range of meanings than nearly any other word in the entire Sanskrit lexicon. The act of yoking an animal, as well as the yoke itself, is called yoga. In astronomy, a conjunction of planets or stars, as well as a constellation, is called yoga. When one mixes together various substances, that, too, can be called yoga. The word yoga has also been employed to denote a device, a recipe, a method, a strategy, a charm, an incantation, fraud, a trick, an endeavor, a combination, union, an arrangement, zeal, care, diligence, industriousness, discipline, use, application, contact, a sum total, and the work of alchemists. But this is by no means an exhaustive list.[115]

White goes on to explain that one of the most widely-cited textual sources for ancient classical yoga, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, "virtually ignore postures and breath control. . . devoting a total of fewer than ten verses to these practices."[116] The diverse translations of the word yoga and the neglect of postures in classical texts that refer to yoga raise a few questions: What was ancient classical yoga? How much—if at all—did it resemble the Modern Postural Yoga seen in the West today? And, perhaps most importantly, is yoga Hindu?

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[113] Ibid., 2.
[114] Thomas Kochumuttom, "A Christian Reading of Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra,*" *Journal of Dharma* 35 (2010): 233.
[115] White, *Yoga in Practice*, 2.
[116] Ibid., 3.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

Yoga's classical text, the *Yoga Sutras*, is a collection of 195 statements that were compiled by Patanjali around 200-300 CE.[117] As the only official text of the practice of classical yoga, the *Yoga Sutras* provide an explanation of yoga, as it was practiced during the third and fourth centuries. The word *sutra* means "thread," but in this context, it refers to a short, aphoristic saying, or to a collection of such sayings. As such, the *Yoga Sutras* compiled by Patanjali are comprised of 195 *sutras*.[118] Like the scriptural book of Proverbs, the *Yoga Sutras* are short aphorisms. Unlike Proverbs and the rest of the Bible, the *Sutras* are not considered sacred.[119] Though Patanjali was a Hindu, his *Sutras* lack any mention of Hindu deities.[120] There are many translations of the *Yoga Sutras*, but for the sake of this research, a version of the *Yoga Sutras* translated by Barbara Stoler Miller is used. Barbara Stoler Miller was a leading scholar of Sanskrit literature, and her 1986 translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* helped to popularize Indian literature in the United States. Her translation of the *Yoga Sutras* includes both translation of the aphorisms as well as commentary from Miller. Where appropriate, Miller provides alternative translations of key terms and phrases, in order to communicate the full depth of the original meaning.

Part One: Cessation of Thought and Contemplative Calm

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[117] Miller, *Yoga*, ix.
[118] Ludo Rocher, "Sutra Literature," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 13, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8883.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?" 492.

Sutra 1.2 offers a definition of the practice of yoga: "to suspend the modifications (or fluctuations) of the mind."[121] This definition has also been translated to mean "the control of mental activities," or "the cessation of the turnings of thought."[122] The primary goal of classical yoga practice, then, is to achieve mastery over the mind. This bears similarity to the purpose of MPY; as Father Thomas Ryan notes, "Transforming the environment of the bodymind and priming it for meditation is the primary reason for the development of the yoga postures and breathing exercises."[123]

After *Sutras 1.1-1.4* define the practice of yoga, *Sutras 1.5-1.11* go on to describe the turnings of thought, of which there are five: valid judgment, error, conceptualization, sleep, and memory.[124] The next ten *sutras* reinforce that to cease the turnings of thought takes practice and effort.[125] *Sutras 1.23-1.28* offer introduction and characteristics of the "Lord of Yoga," also referred to in other translations as Supreme Being, Lord, or simply God.[126] *Sutras 1.29-1.32* list the obstacles to an effective yoga practice: disease, apathy, doubt, carelessness, indolence, dissipation, false vision, failure to attain a firm basis in yoga, and restlessness.[127] *Sutras 1.33-1.40* offer more ways to achieve tranquility of thought, including cultivating friendship, compassion, joy, impartiality, breath control, mindfulness, luminous thoughts, sense control, dreaming, sleeping, or meditation.[128] The next eleven *sutras* describe the characteristics of "contemplative poise," such as being

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[121] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 178.
[122] Miller, *Yoga*, 29.
[123] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart*, 236.
[124] Miller, *Yoga*, 31.
[125] Ibid., 32-34.
[126] Ibid., 35-36.
[127] Ibid., 37.
[128] Ibid., 38.

free from conjecture, identity, inference, and impression, as contrasted with education, which leads to more thought.[129]

Part Two: The Eight-Limbed Path, a Model for the Practice of Yoga

In part two of the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali provides readers with a straightforward description of the components of a yoga practice: "The active performance of yoga involves ascetic practice, study of sacred lore, and dedication to the Lord of Yoga." The purpose of the practice of yoga is to cultivate pure contemplation and stave off the forces of corruption, which are listed as ignorance, egoism, passion, hatred, and the will to live (*Sutras 2.1-2.3*).[130] *Sutras 2.4-2.9* provide detailed definitions of these forces of corruption. *Sutras 2.10-2.16* explain that the forces of corruption should be avoided because they lead to suffering.[131] The next ten *sutras* go on to explain that the cause of suffering is humanity's relationship with the material world (*prakrti*), which is comprised of energy that is in contrast with the individual spirit (*purusha*).[132]

After all this, Patanjali introduces, for the first time in the *Yoga Sutras*, the eight limbs of yoga. Also referred to as the Eight-Limbed Path, the limbs are organized in order from broad, external practices to subtle, internal practices. One progresses through the limbs as one climbs a tree: one limb at a time. In brief, the eight limbs guide a practitioner through discipline of action, discipline of body, discipline of breath, and discipline of the mind. The eight limbs do not contain religious doctrine but rather are a model for developing ascetic practice, and they should be understood as a tool for

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[129] Ibid., 40-42.
[130] Ibid., 44.
[131] Ibid., 47.
[132] Ibid., 49-51.

spiritual formation. The illustration found in Fig. 1, though not original to the *Yoga Sutras*, is a typical artistic representation of the model of the eight limbs, as limbs on a tree or vine.

The eight limbs of yoga are: moral principles, observances, posture, breath control, withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation. The first limb (*Sutras 2.31 and 2.33*), which is also referred to as abstinences (*yama*) is comprised of moral principles: nonviolence, truthfulness, abjuration of stealing, celibacy, and absence of greed. These moral principles are intended to guide one's action in the world, and are called "the great vow of yoga."[133] The second of the eight limbs (*Sutra 2:32*) is comprised of observances (*niyama*): bodily purification, contentment, ascetic practice, study of sacred lore, and dedication to the Lord of Yoga.[134] These are intended to guide one's personal growth. *Sutras 2.35-2.39* list the outcomes of following the moral principles, such as when one abjures stealing, "jewels shower down."[135] *Sutras 2.40-2.45* list the outcomes of following the observances, such as, "Perfect happiness is attained through contentment."[136]

The next three *sutras* are the only statements in the *Yoga Sutras* that discuss physical postures (*asana*), or the third limb of yoga. They are: "The posture of yoga is steady and easy. It is realized by relaxing one's effort and resting like the cosmic serpent on the waters of infinity. Then one is unconstrained by opposing dualities" (*2.46-48*). The "posture of yoga" in *Sutra 2.46* is understood to mean the lotus pose, which is the

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[133] Ibid., 52-53.
[134] Ibid., 53.
[135] Ibid., 54.
[136] Ibid., 55.

traditional posture of seated meditation. Even though these three *sutras* are the only mention of posture, Patanjali is still regarded as the authoritative classical teaching on yoga.[137]

The eight limbs of yoga are organized from external to internal; therefore the lotus pose, the *asana* referred to in *Sutra 2:46*, is the state in which one cultivates the last five limbs. *Sutras 2.49-2.53* explain the practice of breath control (*pranayama*), the fourth limb of yoga, which includes inhalations, exhalations, and retentions.[138] *Pranayama* enables the practitioner to achieve mastery over the breath (*prana*), which is considered to be one's life force.

The next two *sutras* explain sense withdrawal (*pratyahara*), the fifth limb of yoga, which is the mental severing of contact between the sense organ and its objects, resulting in control of the senses.[139] *Pratyahara* is "a necessary pre-requisite of concentration and meditation" because it activates the parasympathetic nervous response, also called the "relaxation response." This allows the practitioner to focus on meditation without distraction from his or her environment through the senses.[140] In practice, *pratyahara* involves ignoring sensory input as an external stimulus and acknowledging that all sensations occur in the mind, and are therefore not reality.

Part Three: Perfect Discipline and Extraordinary Powers

The first *sutras* of part three define the final three of the eight limbs of yoga. "Concentration is binding thought in one place. Meditation is focusing on a single

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[137] Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?" 492.
[138] Miller, *Yoga*, 58.
[139] Ibid., 59.
[140] Elisabeth Mary Wilson, "Mantra and Meanings," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 12.8 (1997): 521.

conceptual flow. Pure contemplation is meditation that illumines the object alone, as if the subject were devoid of intrinsic form"*(3.1-3)* These three practices constitute "perfect discipline."[141] Once pure contemplation is achieved, "The observer, transcending all awareness of a separate personal identity, takes the form of the object contemplated, attains complete control over it, and is absorbed in it—obliterating the artificial, conceptual separation between the observer and object."[142] *Sutras 9-15* explain the "imperceptible sequence of transformations that leads to the cessation of thought."[143] In *Sutras 16-34*, Patanjali describes extraordinary powers that result from perfect discipline in the final three limbs. Such powers include: reading others' minds, knowledge of past births (incarnations), becoming invisible, predicting the future, the power to control hunger and thirst, and the knowledge of the workings of the universe, such as the world, the stars, and human anatomy.[144] Even this extraordinary knowledge, *Sutras 3.35-3.37* caution, can become a distraction if allowed to impede pure concentration.[145] *Sutras 3.38-3.49* further describe the mastery of the physical world that is possible through perfect discipline: entering the body of another, walking on water, divine hearing, flying, shape-shifting, omniscience, and omnipotence.[146] Once a yogi attains this extraordinary knowledge and power through perfect discipline, *Sutras 3:50-3:55* conclude, he or she must cultivate indifference or "dispassion" toward them.[147]

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[141] Miller, *Yoga*, 60.
[142] Ibid., 61.
[143] Ibid., 62.
[144] Ibid., 64-67.
[145] Ibid., 68.
[146] Ibid., 70.
[147] Ibid., 72-73.

In practice, the eight limbs of yoga are a method of developing a meditation practice. The eight limbs organize specific actions—disciplines—in order for a practitioner to meditate with the intention of attaining union with the divine. Some concepts found in the eight limbs are in opposition to Christian spirituality (knowledge of past incarnations and ability to predict the future, for example), but as an ancient method for developing a meditation practice, parts of the eight limbs can help Christians develop a meditation practice for Christian spiritual formation. For Christians interested in exploring the connection between the body and spirituality, the third (*asana*) and fourth (*pranayama*) limbs, which comprise the bulk of most MPY classes, can be readily integrated into a model for spiritual formation, especially Christian meditation. This will be discussed in chapter five.

Part Four: Absolute Freedom

Part four of the *Yoga Sutras* does not relate specifically with the Eight-Limbed Path, and contains mostly a metaphysical discourse on the nature of thought, spirit, and material. Part four begins with a few *sutras* that discuss how reincarnation happens (*Sutras 4.1-4.3*) and explains the importance of meditation to still individual thought.[148] *Sutras 4.12-4.17* talk about the reality of material things.[149] Patanjali continues with further discussion of the relationship between spirit and thought, "The spirit, never subject to change, is master of the turnings of thought, which it always knows" (*Sutra 4.18*).[150] *Sutra 4.16*, which asks, "If an object is not structured within a coherent thought, will it still exist, even though unknown?" is the classical Indian equivalent of the well-

[148] Ibid., 74-77.
[149] Ibid., 77-78.
[150] Ibid., 79.

known conundrum, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" *Sutras 4.23-4.26* explain that thought "works by making associations."[151] *Sutras 4.27-4.30* describe the state of pure contemplation, which "pours knowledge to keep thought discriminative, calm, and effortless."[152] Patanjali concludes the *Sutras* with a few closing thoughts about the infinite knowledge that "means an end to the sequence of transformations in material things, their purpose now fulfilled" (*Sutra 4.32*).[153]

Early Yoga as a Multi-Religious Practice

Because Patanjali recorded the *Sutras* around the third or fourth century CE, some people assume that is when yoga originated and that Patanjali invented it. In truth, yoga had likely already existed for centuries, and Patanjali merely organized and recorded the *Sutras*.[154] Evidence suggests that the *Sutras* represent teaching derived from beyond Patanjali's Hindu context, and practices shared by multiple religious groups.

Some historians trace the origin of yoga to between 2600 and 1900 BCE. The evidence for this comes from archaeological findings from the Indus River Valley of small carved stones depicting human figures seated in a yoga posture. Andrew Nicholson, in his 2013 article, "Is Yoga Hindu?" argues that the origins of yoga are likely more recent:

> 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 exclusive "intellectual property" of any single sect or religion. Rather, it was a project shared among diverse groups that we

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[151] Ibid., 80.
[152] Ibid., 82.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Naranayan, "Hinduism," 311.

> may retrospectively label "Hindu," Buddhist," and "Jain," along with other sects, such as the "Fatalists" (Ajivikas), whose teachings have largely been lost.[155]

In the historical setting where yoga was first developed, the lines between religious traditions were not as clearly defined as they are today. In fact, in the ancient cultural setting of South Asia, the concept of "religion" did not exist in the way that it does today. Instead, the traditions and practices that eventually evolved into Hinduism involved healing, astrology, performing arts, and architecture.[156] In this setting, where there were no specifically religious practices but rather all practices and traditions were part of the broad cultural, geographic, and ethnic identity that eventually became known as "Hindu," yoga developed. Nicholson compares yoga to open-source software, because, "It was distributed freely and modified by different authors, all competing to come up with the best version for liberation."[157] Thus, even at the time yoga was developed, it did not belong to any one religious tradition.

The World of the Yoga Sutras

Nicholson notes the "fuzziness" of the historical boundaries between religions. The very term *religion* originated in Europe and only recently was assimilated as a concept in Asian languages: "The assumption, for instance, that a person can belong to only one religion at a time is not universal."[158] This informs an understanding of the world that produced Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*.

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[155] Andrew J. Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?: On the Fuzziness of Religious Boundaries," *Common Knowledge* 19.3. (Fall 2013): 497-498.
[156] Naranayan, "Hinduism," 301.
[157] Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?," 498.
[158] Ibid., 492.

The *Sutras* and the yoga they founded did not exist in a vacuum. The *Sutras* are the classical text of yoga but not of Hinduism. Hinduism has its own sacred text, the *Vedas*, which, similar to the Bible for Christians, are regarded as divinely inspired and infallible.[159] The *Vedas* are the basis for Hinduism, though the word *Hindu* did not emerge until 1500 years after Patanjali recorded the *Sutras*.[160]

The first few centuries CE in Asia saw tremendous variety and development of philosophy and spirituality. Hinduism, along with Buddhism and Jainism (both having branched off from early Hinduism around the sixth century BCE),[161] all coexisted and shared spiritual principles and practices. All three groups influenced and were influenced by the development of yoga and Patanjali's *Sutras*.[162]

Predictably, there were also interreligious and intrareligious disagreements among yoga's practitioners. In the *Yoga Sutras*, one of the moral principles found in the first limb of the Eight-Limbed Path is *ahimsa*, or non-violence. At the time, this was taken to mean non-violence toward all creatures, including the horses, goats, and cattle that were regularly sacrificed to the Hindu gods. This sacrificial "holy violence" was prescribed by the *Vedas*, but denounced by Patanjali's *Sutras*.[163] For this, the *Sutras* had its share of critics, and in this particular way had more in common with Buddhist philosophy than with *Vedic* teaching.[164] Even through the eighth century, *Vedic* philosophers regularly attacked the *Sutras* for being anti-*Vedic* and for its dualistic philosophy (the

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[159] R. N. Dandekar, "Vedas," in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 9549.
[160] Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?," 496.
[161] Vasudha Naranayan, "Hinduism," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, ed. Thomas Riggs (Detroit: Gale, 2006), 302.
[162] Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?," 493.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.

differentiation between spirit and nature).[165] One *Vedic* theologian, Sankara, denounced the whole yoga tradition as heretical, because its central teachings are contrary to "revealed" (sacred *Vedic*) texts.[166]

The question of whether or not Patanjali's yoga is Hindu does not have a simple answer. Though the word *Hindu* did not yet exist to describe a person's religious orientation, Patanjali was an inhabitant of the culture guided by the *Vedas* that eventually became Hinduism. Nicholson writes, "While his [Patanjali's] 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.'"[167]

Muslims Practicing Yoga (1000-1900 CE)

An important factor to consider in regard to the non-Hindu use of yoga for spiritual formation is the Muslim practice of yoga in northern India starting in the eleventh century. In Islamic texts from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, forms of yoga are regularly described alongside the Islamic practices of the Sufis. Muslims practiced yoga in India well into the period of British colonial rule.[168] Nicholson writes, "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."[169] One Sufi text called the *Pool of Nectar* adapts yogic teachings for its Muslim

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[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid., 494.
[167] Ibid., 498.
[168] Ibid., 499.
[169] Ibid.

audience, listing adaptations of the seven chakras to correspond with Arabic names for God, as well as teaching Sanskrit mantras to aid in meditation.[170]

The purpose of the previous section was to explain that though Patanjali (and therefore his *Sutras*) was a product of ancient Hindu religious culture, the *Sutras* and the system of disciplines they establish are not central points of Hindu religious belief and can be adapted to suit a variety of religious settings. Having discussed the cultural setting of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, the *Sutras* themselves, and yoga's relation to Hinduism and other religious traditions over the last two millennia, one can return to the original questions: What was ancient classical yoga? How much—if at all—did it resemble the Modern Postural Yoga seen in the West today?

In summary, ancient classical yoga was a system of disciplines designed to help the practitioner cultivate an advanced meditation practice, for the purpose of uniting the individual soul with the universal spirit or God. [171] Ancient classical yoga influenced and was also influenced by individuals in the developing Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain systems of religion. In some ways, such as lifestyle practice, philosophy, and meditation, the ancient practice of yoga is a much larger and more complex system than the Modern Postural Yoga seen in Western yoga studios today. In other ways, such as the variety of postures, MPY is more complex than ancient classical yoga. Though whether yoga is Hindu is debatable, there is precedent for some methods of yoga to be integrated by members of non-Hindu religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, and even monotheist religions such as Christianity and Islam, and still retain their faith.

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[170] Ibid., 500.
[171] Greenwood and Delgado, "A Journey," 950.

Vivekananda Brings Yoga to the West

In the nineteenth century, the United States was a melting pot of religious and cultic curiosity. Into this setting, 30-year-old Swami Vivekananda arrived and began fascinating audiences with philosophical teaching called *Neo-Vedanta*, a branch of Hindu philosophy. Vivekananda's teachings had evolved from the system of living described in the fourth-century *Yoga Sutras* but had not yet developed into the Modern Postural Yoga of today. Nonetheless, Vivekananda used the term yoga, and this was America's first impression of the concept and method of yoga.

In the fall of 1893, at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, Vivekananda, a "handsome monk in an orange robe" began giving talks and classes about a form of spirituality that blended *Neo-Vedantic* esotericism with the avant-garde American occultism of the day. He became an overnight star.[172] Vivekananda taught a system of living, comprised of four "yogas," or disciplines, that comprise the four paths to enlightenment.[173] These four yogas were the same mentioned previously in the Hinduism section—*Karma* (action), *Jñana* (knowledge), and *Bhakti* (worship)—and Vivekananda added a fourth yoga, which he called *Raja*, and which is essentially a paraphrase of the Eight-Limbed Path from Patanjali's *Sutras. Raja* yoga is the path of union with God, expressed through various methods of concentration and meditation.[174] In one newspaper article published in December 1895, Vivekananda's four yogas were compared to the four general personality types: rational, emotional, worker, and mystic.[175]

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[172] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 111.
[173] Ryan, "The Body Language of Faith," 89-90.
[174] Ryan, "The Body Language of Faith," 90.
[175] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 125.

Vivekananda stayed in the United States until 1896, when he published the books, *Karma-Yoga* and *Rāja Yoga*.[176] Vivekananda died in 1902. *Jnana-Yoga* and *Bhakti-Yoga* were published posthumously.[177]

Of the four yogas that Vivekananda described in his books, the most pertinent to the formation of Modern Postural Yoga is *Raja* yoga, or "royal" yoga. Vivekananda did not invent the term nor its practices. Rather he inherited them from his own teacher, Ramakrishna, before Ramakrishna's death in 1886.[178] The practices of *Raja* yoga are an interpretation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, specifically the eight-limbed path.

As a result of Vivekananda's mingling with "prominent members of America's cultic milieu," *Neo-Vedantic* ideology became integrated in Western occultism and vice versa.[179] In Vivekananda's interactions with Westerners, a new definition of the concept and practice of yoga was born.

Vivekananda downplayed the role of posture in his teaching of the yogic system and instead focused on philosophy. Vivekananda was not teaching postural yoga classes or putting his audience in poses and stretches. In fact, Vivekananda's attitude toward posture practice, referred to as *Hatha* yoga, was derogatory. At one point he referred to *Hatha* yoga as "nothing but a kind of gymnastics" and "queer breathing exercises."[180] For Vivekananda and other educated Hindus, the spiritual and philosophical disciplines of yoga were superior to posture practice of the *Hatha* yogis, who at the time were regarded

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[176] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 110.
[177] Ibid., 125.
[178] Miller, *Yoga*, x-xi.
[179] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 111.
[180] Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73.

in India much like a traveling circus troupe, performing tricks and contortions for money.[181] It was around this time and from this population that the large and still growing variety of bending, twisting, strengthening, stretching and balancing postures developed.

Though Vivekananda introduced the West specifically to the philosophical system of *Neo-Vedanta*, Vivekananda use of the word yoga to mean a philosophical and spiritual system has caused biases against Modern Postural Yoga to linger to today. Western occultism integrated elements of his teaching, including his definition of yoga, so when *Hatha* yoga and its wide range of postures and health benefits came to the West a few decades later, the term yoga already had cultic connotations. This led to the perception that persists to this day of yoga's association with a distinctly non-Christian spirituality.

Becoming Modern Postural Yoga

The current structure of the standard MPY practice—posture and breath—owes much to the work of an Indian yogi named B. K. S. Iyengar (1918-2014). *Hatha* (postural) yoga developed in the early twentieth century due to "dialogical exchanges between Indian reformers and nationalists and Americans and Europeans interested in health and fitness."[182] The specific postures developed from an amalgam of sources, such as "British military calisthenics, modern medicine, and the physical culture of European gymnasts, bodybuilders, martial experts, and contortionists."[183] The cultural exchange between Europe and India that resulted from colonization and trade affected many features of Indian culture, from their tea to their yoga. Iyengar was introduced to *Hatha* yoga at a young age, by his brother-in-law Krishnamacharya, who emphasized posture

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[181] Nicholson, *"Is Yoga Hindu?"* 491.
[182] Jain, "The Malleability of Yoga," 7.
[183] Ibid.

practice and encouraged his students to creatively develop their own style of physical posture practice. By the age of sixteen, Iyengar was teaching *Hatha* yoga to others.

Though he had been a sickly youth, Iyengar's consistent practice of various strengthening and stretching postures, referred to as *asana* after the third limb of yoga, transformed Iyengar into a healthy and strong man. As Iyengar's practice developed, he established standards and key points of proficiency for the growing variety of postures. By 1947, at 29 years old, he had established himself as a well-respected *Hatha* yoga teacher, and he was called upon frequently to deliver posture demonstrations to a wide variety of live audiences, some from professional bodies and institutions. His notoriety grew, and in 1966, he published *Light on Yoga*, which has sold more than a million copies to date. The book was an instant bestseller, and quickly became a standard reference volume for *asana* practice around the world. The book was successful in part because of Iyengar's worldwide fame and in part because of the thorough, step-by-step instruction, illustrated with photographs of Iyengar (who was 48 at the time) in an impressive variety of advanced poses.[184] De Michelis writes, "Iyengar's exposition of postural practice is detailed, systematic, and comprehensive enough not only to satisfy, but to impress Western audiences." Iyengar used Western medical terms and textbook organization to list the cues, benefits, and contraindications of the various poses. One pose "relieves backaches and neck sprains," while another "cures impotency and promotes sex control." Specific fitness needs were also addressed: a certain pose was "recommended for runners," and another could be "tried conveniently by the elderly." Furthermore, Iyengar's yoga poses could be attempted and mastered in the comfort of

[184] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 195-200.

one's own home and at no expense, since yoga practice "requires no special apparatus or gymnasiums. The various parts of the body supply the weights and counterweights."[185]

The publication of *Light on Yoga* provided the foundation for Modern Postural Yoga—particularly "Iyengar yoga," which had become a brand of its own—to spread around the world. By the 1990s, Iyengar Institutes existed in the UK, Europe, Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, the U.S., and India. Several million yoga practitioners around the world were following Iyengar's method.[186] Around this same time, other brands of yoga also emerged and gained popularity, many of which are still in practice today. In addition to Iyengar yoga, other successful yoga brands are Ashtanga yoga, which is structured around set sequences of postures, and Bikram yoga, named for its founder, Bikram Choudhury, in which every class is the exact same sequence, performed in a room heated to 105° Fahrenheit.[187] Andrea Jain points out, "Despite their differences, all of these styles of yoga aim at modern notions of physical fitness and health and are made up of postural sequences, which are synchronized with the breath."[188]

Modern Postural Yoga as a Non-Religious Practice

Up until this point, this chapter provides a brief summary of the evolution of Modern Postural Yoga, its beginning as ancient classical yoga, its relationship to Hinduism and other religious traditions, its migration to the West, and its present form. The purpose of this summary is to establish that yoga is a word and concept with a broad

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[185] Ibid., 217.
[186] Ibid., 205.
[187] Jain, "The Malleability of Yoga," 5.
[188] Ibid.

array of applications, which has resulted in confusion over what yoga actually is. As a method for developing a meditation practice, however, yoga is a spiritual discipline and not a uniquely Hindu act. Hindus have practiced yoga through the centuries alongside Buddhists, Jains, and Muslims. Because yoga developed in a Hindu setting, some parts of the *Yoga Sutras* might be problematic for Christians—such as the mentions of reincarnation—but the methodology for developing a meditation practice does not comprise Hindu religious acts.

The historical and comparative religious scholarship surveyed above show that yoga can refer to many things. As David Gordon White writes, "Like every Indian cultural artifact that it has embraced, the West views Indian yoga as an ancient, unchanging tradition, based on revelations received by the *Vedic* sages who, seated in the lotus pose, were the Indian forerunners of the flat-tummied yoga babes who grace the covers of such glossy periodicals as the *Yoga Journal* and *Yoga International*."[189] White reminds readers, "Every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga. One reason this has been possible is that its semantic field—the range of meanings of the term 'yoga'—is so broad and the concept of yoga so malleable, that it has been possible to morph it into nearly any practice or process one chooses."[190] The broad range of meanings of the word yoga have allowed it to be applied to some aspects of Hinduism that are religious in nature, such as *bhakti yoga*, which refers to the path of worship and adoration of Hindu deities.

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[189] White, *Yoga in Practice,* 1.
[190] Ibid., 2.

Perhaps another reason for yoga's variation through history is due to the fact that the *Yoga Sutras* are not considered sacred, and as such are not revered as absolute truth in the way Hindus approach the *Vedas* or Christians approach the Bible. The *Sutras* have informed the yogic method of meditation, but these methods also developed as they passed from teacher to student and between cultural groups. Nicholson's comparison of yoga to open-source software is an appropriate illustration for the way it was developed and modified by an innumerable number of authors.[191] White's description of yoga as "malleable" is fitting: yoga is pliable, or in terms of metal, able to be hammered or bent out of shape without breaking.[192] Yoga has developed in this way since 1500 BCE.

Andrea Jain noticed this same characteristic of yoga when she chose the title, "The Malleability of Yoga: A Response to Christian and Hindu Opponents of the Popularization of Yoga," for her 2012 article published in the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*. Jain paints a picture of the many brands of yoga today, from Iyengar to Ashtanga to Bikram, that "are not linked explicitly to any particular religious orientation, and their proponents consider them compatible with any religion that accepts a modern biomedical worldview with regard to the body and values health and well-being as defined by that value."[193]

Many Christians oppose MPY, because its Hindu roots make it incompatible with belief in Jesus. Part of this opposition may be due to the confusion over what the word "yoga" means. Additionally, because the *Yoga Sutras* were written in a pre-Hindu setting, they contain some *Vedic* philosophy (for example, references to reincarnation or mystical

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[191] Nicholson, "Is Yoga Hindu?" 498.
[192] White, *Yoga in Practice*, 2.
[193] Jain, "The Malleability of Yoga." 5.

powers), which might be problematic for Christians to observe. However, within the *Yoga Sutras* is found the Eight-Limbed Path, which is a method for developing a meditation practice and does not constitute Hindu religious acts. MPY incorporates the third and fourth of the eight limbs of yoga. Thus, neither the Eight-Limbed Path nor MPY are Hindu and should not pose a threat to a Christian's faith in Jesus. This is important to make yoga accessible to Christians.

User Discretion Advised

MPY is not a Hindu religious practice, and it does not belong to any particular religious practice. However, that does not mean that every guided MPY session is devoid of religious content. It is common for MPY teachers to share readings or offer thoughts during the course of the MPY practice that some people might consider spiritual or religious in nature. Just as yoga is malleable enough to bend and suit any culture, it is also malleable enough to serve as the canvas for a variety of religious doctrines. This characteristic makes MPY just as accessible to Christians as to any other religious tradition.

It is specifically this spiritual malleability that may contribute to MPY's popularity. Participation in individualized spirituality suits the needs of the contemporary West. The type and degree of spirituality that occurs in the average MPY session is as varied as the number of MPY instructors that exist. Of the spiritual content typically found in MPY classes, De Michelis writes, "the doctrinal aspects of the teachings are mostly rudimentary, the general underlying assumption being that understanding will come through first-hand experience rather than from intellectual deliberation. . . .

Practitioners are mostly left to make sense of the received theories and practices, and how these should be fitted into their lives, on the basis of their own rationalizations."[194] The religious concepts presented in MPY are general (e.g., God, transcendence, devotion) and align with a "modern understanding of 'spirituality' as awareness of and participation in/attunement to a holistic and evolutionary universe."[195] Despite the need for discernment, one can still maintain that MPY does not belong to Hinduism, nor does it turn its practitioners into Hindus.

Many who oppose the contemporary Christian practice of yoga evidence an assumption that yoga is "a static, homogenous system" that has remained unchanged since its ancient beginning.[196] On the contrary, yoga has a long history whereby adherents of any or no religion have taken hold of the practice and adapted it to their belief system, contributing astounding variety to the body of practices that is yoga. This suggests that yoga is both adaptable to any religious system and that any problematic or anti-Christian elements of yoga practice are not innate to yoga but rather added by the religious setting in which it is practiced. When a Hindu practices yoga, yoga serves the purpose of Hinduism. When a Muslim practices yoga, yoga serves the purpose of Islam. When a Christian practices yoga, yoga serves the purpose of Christianity.

A Precedent for Yoga: Fasting as a Non-Religious Spiritual Practice

One way for Christians to think about yoga's adaptability to various religious contexts is by comparing it to fasting. Fasting is "complete or partial abstinence from nourishment," and is a spiritual discipline practiced in the East, the West, and many

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[194] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 188-189.
[195] Ibid., 251.
[196] Jain, "The Malleability of Yoga," 8.

religions. [197] In the Islamic tradition, Muslims observe a month-long fast during the month of Ramadan, during which no food or liquid is consumed from sunrise to sunset. Some Muslims also observe weekly fasts on Mondays and Thursdays.[198] In the Judaic tradition, Mosaic law instated Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as an annual day of fasting.[199] Some Native American tribes view fasting as an important spiritual ritual, and others observe a period of ritual fasting to mark a child's transition into adulthood. Hindu and Jain ascetics fast during pilgrimages and in preparation for some festivals. It is common for Buddhists to fast and confess their sins four times per month.[200] Christian ascetics, such as desert dwellers and monastics, fast to "free the soul from worldly attachments and desires."[201] Contemporary Christians often observe daily or seasonal fasts, such as Wednesdays and Fridays (common among Orthodox Christians) and Lent (the forty days preceding Easter). Like many other religious traditions, some Christians also observe fasts before major milestones in life, such as baptism, ordination to priesthood, and reception of the Eucharist.[202]

Jesus teaches that intention is important for fasting in the Sermon on the Mount: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full." Instead, Jesus teaches, "put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your

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[197] Rosemary Rader, "Fasting," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 5, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 2995.
[198] Ibid., 2996.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid.

Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt 6:16-18). If someone fasts for the admiration of others, they have missed the point and will receive no reward from God. It is not the practice of fasting that produces spiritual growth, but the practice of fasting before God—practicing in the presence of God—that makes fasting a Christian discipline.

Like yoga, fasting is not always practiced for a spiritual purpose. The medical benefits of fasting have made it one of the oldest forms of therapy. Ancient healers, such as Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, relied on fasting to enable the body to heal itself. Five hundred years ago Paracelsus, another founder of the Western medical tradition, wrote, "Fasting is the greatest remedy, the physician within."[203] Alternative and mainstream medicine use fasting as a therapy for detoxification as well as for chronic conditions such as allergies, anxiety, diabetes, headaches, heart disease, and high cholesterol. Fasting is also a safe and effective weight-loss method.[204]

In practice, fasting is comparable to yoga. Fasting applies to a variety of religious and nonreligious purposes. Like all spiritual disciplines, the intention of the practitioner is an important factor in its effectiveness. When a Hindu fasts, it serves the purpose of Hinduism. When a Muslim fasts, it serves the purpose of Islam. When a Christian fasts, it serves the purpose of Christianity. When a person on a detoxification plan fasts, it serves the purpose of the detoxification plan. Like yoga, fasting is not innately religious but rather functions as a tool to support the purpose and intention of the person fasting.

Modern Postural Yoga as a Contemporary Western Invention

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[203] Douglas Dupler and Teresa G. Odle, "Fasting," in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine*, ed. Laurie J. Fundukian, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2009), 812.
[204] Ibid.

Though Vivekananda and Iyengar helped develop MPY, the seeds they planted only flourished because of the major culture shifts in the twentieth-century West. These shifts in physical and psychological practices—including the fitness revolution, the recognition of "stress" as a psychosomatic syndrome, and a decline of organized religion—contributed to the formation and popularization of MPY. These factors in MPY's development shed light on why MPY continues to be popular in the West and is particularly beneficial for members of contemporary Western culture.

The Fitness Revolution

The first of these shifts affected Americans' fitness habits. In the middle of the century, changes in popular ideals of body image gave rise to the "fitness revolution" of the 1970s. Fitness practices of all sorts were trending, and an increasing number of people saw MPY "as a safe and balanced way to keep fit and improve well-being."[205] The fitness revolution did much to place yoga in the "sports and fitness" category in the U.S.[206]

In addition to its value as a fitness discipline, MPY also correlates with improvements in body image. A study published in a 2005 issue of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* reports that "mind-body exercise, such as yoga, is associated with greater body satisfaction and fewer symptoms of eating disorders than traditional aerobic exercise like jogging or using cardio machines. Yoga practitioners reported less self-objectification,

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[205] Ibid., 249.
[206] Ibid. MPY practice in Britain is regulated by the sports council.

greater satisfaction with physical appearance, and fewer disordered eating attitudes compared with non-yoga practitioners."[207]

The Recognition of "Stress" as a Psychosomatic Syndrome

Another factor that helped MPY flourish in the West during the twentieth century, De Michelis writes, was the "recognition of 'stress' as a specific psychosomatic syndrome."[208] Industrialism had caused Americans to move out of the countryside and into urban settings. With city life came new aggravations: traffic, pollution, noise, and overcrowding. Urban living is also generally sedentary, with cramped living conditions, vehicular commutes, and desk jobs. These conditions created a demand for practices that met the need for de-stressing and fitness at the same time.[209] MPY was the perfect answer. In addition to the physical benefits, the breath and mindfulness components promote emotional and mental well-being.[210]

For the yoga studio owner, the MPY class is space-efficient, allowing for many practitioners to participate in a small space at the same time, and startup costs are low since setting up a studio demands only an empty room and an available teacher. A yoga studio does not require special or expensive equipment. Similarly, the barriers for entry for potential practitioners are minimal as well. Only one's body is essential to begin a yoga practice. Due to the urban demand for de-stressing practices that are convenient and space-efficient, MPY is uniquely adapted to thrive as a mind-body wellness discipline in contemporary city centers.

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[207] Greenwood and Delgado, "A Journey," 949-950.
[208] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 249.
[209] Ibid., 250.
[210] Büssing, et al., "Development of Specific Aspects," 1.

Decline in Organized Religion

Another reason MPY rapidly grew in the West was an increase in demand for universal, individual spirituality that is not affiliated with a specific religion or denomination. Around the mid-twentieth century, the growth of scientific knowledge and the continued diversification of social and ethnic groups caused institutionalized religion to decline.[211] Modern Postural Yoga, with its basic, universal spirituality, offers "various levels of access to the sacred, starting from a 'safe', mundane, tangible foundation of a body-based practice. In such DIY forms of spiritual practice there is room for the practitioner to decide whether to experience her practice as 'spiritual' or altogether secular."[212] There is also room for the Christian to do the same. As Thomas Ryan puts it, "all practitioners read into their practice the ideas and ideals they received by faith from their own sources of revelation."[213] In the words of another Christian writer, "If the God you recognize within is the God you know through Jesus Christ, that experience is transferable into various settings, even into those settings where God is called by other names or by no name at all."[214]

The cultural shifts of the fitness revolution, increased stress, and a decline in organized religion demonstrate a need for practices that speak to the changing needs and values of the contemporary West. MPY is uniquely adapted to address those needs and values. Western culture shifted to value fitness practices, and MPY offers the setting to increase physical fitness through strength and flexibility. Western culture shifted to

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[211] Robert C. Fuller, *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 118-119.
[212] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251.
[213] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart,* 132.
[214] Louis Hughes, *Body, Mind and Spirit* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 26, 150-151.

recognize the need for de-stressing activities, and MPY offers benefits to emotional well-being through mindfulness practice and the connection between the body, breath, and mind. Western culture shifted to value basic, universal spirituality, and MPY offers the setting for the practitioner to contemplate her spirituality on her own mat, on her own terms. MPY was developed by and for today's Western culture, out of *Hatha* yoga. As such, it does not "belong" to Hinduism, nor any religion, for that matter, and can be practiced by adherents of any religion or no religion. Furthermore, Modern Postural Yoga is a holistic mind-body practice that offers measurable, positive physical and emotional benefits to the general population.

Modern Postural Yoga as a Contemporary Western Spiritual Practice

Yogis practice MPY for a variety of reasons. Many are committed to their yoga practice for the physical benefits, like increased flexibility and strength, injury prevention, and weight loss. These benefits are not drastically different from the benefits of many other exercise activities—like mat pilates and swimming—nor are they in dispute. The truly unique benefits of MPY are more complex. MPY is unique and complex, compared to other physical disciplines, because of its holistic nature, integrating breath work with mindfulness and physical posture. When describing a practice, the term holistic refers to practices that "deal with the whole person, in which one's entire well-being is analyzed—his/her physical, emotional, spiritual, mental, social, environmental factors, etc."[215]

MPY is a Holistic Practice

[215] J. Gordon Melton, "Holistic," in *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology,* ed. J. Gordon Melton, vol. 1, 5th ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2001), 731.

A holistic practice is one that deals with the whole person. Thomas Ryan explains the holistic nature of MPY practice and its ability to relax the body and mind in preparation for meditation: "Yoga combines the mental with the physical. Its exercises produce a mental freedom from preoccupying thoughts, and induce relaxation. In effect, body control leads to mind control. The main purpose of the postures is to gain bodily poise and mental tranquility so that the mind can enter into contemplation."[216] Larry Payne, author of *Yoga Rx*, calls MPY a "natural, do-it-yourself prescription for good health and stress management."[217] Thomas Ryan notes the simplicity of the practice but also the importance of *how* the postures are performed and the intention behind them:

> On the surface, yoga looks like no more than a collection of stretching exercises and breathing techniques. But when they are performed slowly with grace and control, as a type of meditation rather than as a form of calisthenics, they bring one ultimately to a state of inner quiet. The result is an experience of equilibrium, peace, and interior harmony. Stretching and lengthening muscles that are chronically contracted helps to rebalance both body and mind.[218]

Ryan also states one of the primary differentiating factors between yoga and most other movement disciplines, and one of the reasons for yoga's popularity and effectiveness: "What happens in the body affects the mind, just as the mind affects the body. Thus there are two aspects to the practice of yoga postures: the external form or the posture that works through the body, and the internal form that works through the mind. This holistic union of body and mind provides the climate, the 'environment,' for a spiritual, intuitive experience with God."[219] The benefits of yoga, then, are found in the

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[216] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart*, 186.
[217] Larry Payne and Richard Usatine, *Yoga Rx* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 5.
[218] Ryan, "The Body Language of Faith," 90.
[219] Ibid.

integration of the body and the mind, but they are not only accessible for individuals who want to quiet the mind for the purpose of Christian meditation. De Michelis describes the immediate positive effects of yoga practice in non-spiritual terms:

> Depending on which of two overall practice patterns is used, one can obtain a relaxed and focused state (good against tension and stress), or a fairly durable state of mild euphoria (useful in cases of depression or apathy). This, along with relief from physical ailments, is one of the main reasons why people carry on practising Postural Yoga to start with. Indeed, from a psychosomatic point of view the health-related advantages of yoga are undeniable.[220]

De Michelis' use of the term *psychosomatic* is corroborated by research in the medical and mental health fields.

The Benefits of Modern Postural Yoga

The benefits of a holistic mind-body practice are not merely intuitive or anecdotal; they are supported by psychological research. Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, suggests that the goal of positive psychology is to "learn how to build the qualities that help individuals and communities not just endure and survive but also flourish."[221] While much of psychology is devoted to studying what is wrong with people's minds and behavior, Seligman and his colleagues decided to study what is right. An immense body of research and literature supports the field of positive psychology and has contributed significantly to the contemporary understanding of well-being. One area of study in this field is the interconnectedness of the various aspects of the human being, that what is done with one aspect affects the whole human being. The findings mentioned

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[220] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 257.
[221] P. Alex Linley and Stephen Joseph, *Positive Psychology in Practice* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.: 2004), 146.

below—studying the effects of exercise, breath, mindfulness, and meditation on well-being—fall into this category of research.

The Psychosomatic and Somatopsychic Principles

One of the principles of psychosomatic medicine is that "how we think and feel will affect the functioning of the body."[222] The term psychosomatic is commonly used in relation to psychosomatic illnesses, in which psychological factors can contribute to or exacerbate physical conditions. Today it is generally accepted as fact that the mind affects the body (though that has not always been the case). Equally true is the reverse: the body affects the mind. This is known as the somatopsychic principle, and can be summarized by the motto of Jesuit education, *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body).[223] The somatopsychic principle "has largely been addressed through studies assessing the impact of physical activity on variables such as subjective well-being, mood, and/or affect, stress, self-esteem, and self-perceptions… Evidence is consistent across a wide range of meta-analyses, randomized control trials (RCTs), and large-scale epidemiological surveys that physical activity can make people feel better."[224] These studies showed that exercise has short-term benefits (acute effects) and long-term benefits (chronic effects).[225]

For example, one study followed subjects who did 40 minutes of aerobic exercise on a stationary bike at 70% of their maximum heart rate, followed by 30 minutes of rest, before public speaking. In comparison with a non-exercising control group, the subjects

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[222] D. V. Harris, *Involvement in Sport: A Somatopsychic Rationale* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1973), 147.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Biddle, Fox, and Boutcher, *Physical Activity*, 152-153.
[225] Ibid.

who exercised experienced less of an increase in systolic and diastolic blood pressure during the stressful experience of speaking.[226] The results of cross-sectional and prospective surveys in the United States, Canada, Finland, and the United Kingdom indicate that "more active individuals self-report fewer symptoms of anxiety or emotional distress."[227] One survey followed a population of 1,497 people over eight years and found that "women who had engaged in 'little or no' activity were twice as likely to develop depression as those who had engaged in 'much' or 'moderate' activity."[228] One study looked specifically at the effects of two months of twice weekly MPY practice on a sample group of women. Compared with a control group of women who did not practice any yoga during the two months, the women who practiced regular MPY displayed significant decreases both in state (temporary) anxiety and trait (personality) anxiety.[229] The rationale offered by the researchers is psychosomatic. "By raising awareness of body tension and in learning a method by which this can be reduced, [yoga] may serve to increase self-confidence by promoting a personal sense of control."[230] These studies demonstrate the psychosomatic principle: what is done with the body affects the mind.

Modern Postural Yoga is a Psychosomatic and Somatopsychic Activity

As a movement practice that incorporates both the body and the mind, the benefits of Modern Postural Yoga are twofold; physical activity is shown to make people feel better (the body affects the mind), and the mindfulness component frequently found in

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[226] Ibid., 37.
[227] Linley and Joseph, *Positive Psychology*, 153.
[228] Biddle, Fox, and Boutcher, *Physical Activity*, 49.
[229] M. R. Javnbakht, Hejazi Kenari, and M. Ghasemi, "Effects of Yoga on Depression and Anxiety of Women," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 15.2. (May 2009): 104.
[230] Ibid.

MPY classes is a proven method of decreasing stress and increasing psychological well-being (the mind affects the body). Thus, MPY makes effective use of both the psychosomatic and the somatopsychic principles. Many studies have assessed the positive impact of physical activity on variables such as "subjective well-being, mood, and/or affect, stress, self-esteem, and self-perceptions."[231] Research consistently shows that physical activity makes people feel better, both immediately and long term.

Based on the teacher, many MPY classes incorporate mindfulness exercises that train practitioners to confront, deconstruct, and move past troubling thoughts without acting on them.[232] As one study reports, MPY practice reduces the activity of the stress response, enhances self-regulation, resilience, mood, well-being, and quality of life in general.[233] These benefits have led to the widespread use of Modern Postural Yoga as "a therapeutic intervention in a variety of physical and psychological conditions including depression, chronic pain conditions, low back pain and arthritis, and several other conditions."[234] The same benefits have also contributed to MPY's popularity in the general population.

The benefits mentioned above align with the traditional stated purpose of Modern Postural Yoga, described by B.K.S. Iyengar in 1966 in *Light on Yoga*,

> Yoga is a method by which the restless mind is calmed and the energy directed into constructive channels. As a mighty river which when properly harnessed by dams and canals, creates a vast reservoir of water, prevents famine and provides abundant power for industry; so also the

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[231] Biddle, Fox, and Boutcher, *Physical Activity*, 152-153.
[232] Greenwood and Delgado, "A Journey," 949.
[233] Büssing, et al., "Development of Specific Aspects," 1.
[234] Ibid.

> mind, when controlled, provides a reservoir of peace and generates abundant energy for human uplift.[235]

Iyengar paints a picture of what contemporary research has since shown: MPY provides significant psychophysiological benefits to those who practice it.

Breathing and Stress Relief

One major element of many mindfulness interventions is breathing. Breath control, known as *pranayama*, is also present in many MPY sessions. In his discussion of *pranayama* in his article, "A Christian Reading of Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra*," Thomas Kochumuttom illustrates a version of the psychosomatic and somatopsychic principles, as they apply to MPY:

> The mind and air in the body are so interrelated that the conditions of the one depend on and influence those of the other: when the mind is disturbed, the air also is disturbed and vice versa, whereas when the mind is quiet, the air also is quiet and vice versa. . . That the mental activities and states exert and influence the breathing is easily seen from the experiences of anger and fear accelerating and disturbing the breathing.[236]

Research has shown that the reverse of this principle is also true: that the breathing process influences the mental and emotional state. A 2009 article entitled, "Why Do You Sigh? Sigh Rate During Induced Stress and Relief," reports that the act of sighing serves as a physiological reset button, resulting in temporarily improved respiratory function and lung elasticity. Subjects of the study responded to induced stressors with increased rates of sighing, which is a response of the parasympathetic (calming) nervous system. The results of the study were inconclusive whether sighing caused relief or was a sign of relief; regardless the act of sighing strongly correlates with

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[235] B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 20.
[236] Kochumuttom, "A Christian Reading," 247.

relief.[237] The fact that sighing is a subconscious function of normal respiration in times of emotional distress is an indicator of the interconnectedness of breath and emotion.

The Benefits of Mindfulness on Psychophysiological Well-Being

Psychological research attests to the positive effects of mindfulness practices on psychophysiological well-being. Mindfulness was introduced to the field of mental health psychology by the influential psychologist, John Kabat-Zinn, in the 1970s.[238] His definition of mindfulness was "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of an experience moment by moment."[239] Kabat-Zinn pioneered an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program at University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Today, more than 20,000 patients have participated in the program.[240]

Mindfulness interventions have been successfully used to decrease symptoms in populations experiencing a variety of ailments, including depression, alcohol use disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, and borderline personality disorder. In a 2004 study, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) proved to significantly reduce the rate of relapse for patients with a history of depression.[241] In a 2006 study of undergraduate college students, mindfulness techniques, such as deep breathing, contributed to students' ability to tolerate negative emotions when shown sets

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[237] Elke Vlemincx, et al., "Why Do You Sigh? Sigh Rate During Induced Stress and Relief," *Psychophysiology* 46.5 (2009): 1011.
[238] Elizabeth St. Clair, "Bringing Mindfulness and Brother Lawrence Together: Clinical Implications for the Modern Christian," Ph.D diss., Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (2016), 42.
[239] J. Kabat-Zinn, "Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10.2 (2003): 45.
[240] St. Clair, "Bringing Mindfulness," 8.
[241] Ibid., 25.

of emotionally disturbing images.[242] This demonstrates flexibility in emotional response to a situation, which is a marker of mental health.[243] Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) focuses on accepting what is out of one's control and teaches research subjects to "feel emotions and bodily sensations more fully and without avoidance, and to notice fully the presence of thoughts without following, resisting, believing or disbelieving them."[244]

As reported by Davis and Hayes' 2011 article, "What are the Benefits of Mindfulness? A Practical Review of Psychotherapy-Related Research," published in the American Psychological Association's journal, *Psychotherapy*, the benefits of mindfulness can be broken up into three basic areas: affective benefits, interpersonal benefits, and intrapersonal benefits. The affective benefits of mindfulness are emotional regulation, decreased reactivity, and subsequent increased response flexibility. The interpersonal benefits of mindfulness include lessening of conflict and stress in relationship and overall higher rate of relationship satisfaction. The intrapersonal benefits of mindfulness are enhanced brain function, increased attention and processing speeds, and even strengthened immune system.[245] Anyone who practices mindfulness as part of an MPY practice can potentially receive these same benefits.

Herbert Benson's Relaxation Response

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[242] Further reinforcing the aforementioned connection between breath and emotion.
[243] Ibid., 39-41.
[244] Steven C. Hayes, et al., "The Impact of Acceptance Versus Control Rationales on Pain Tolerance," *The Psychological Record* 49.1 (1999): 1.
[245] D. M. Davis and J. A. Hayes, "What are the Benefits of Mindfulness? A Practice Review of Psychotherapy-Related Research," *Psychotherapy* 48.2 (2011): 199-202.

Cardiologist and researcher Herbert Benson coined the term, "Relaxation Response" to describe the relaxed physiological state that occurs—and the measurable medical benefits that result—when a person meditates, even for a period of 10-20 minutes. In the mid-1960s, as a young cardiologist, Benson was alarmed by the trend of high blood pressure he saw in his patients.[246] After prescribing medication, his patients reported side effects of fainting and dizziness. Frustrated by this, Benson decided to explore the relationship between high blood pressure and stress. His colleagues thought he was crazy for suggesting that stress—an emotional factor—could be linked to blood pressure—a physiological symptom. He returned to his alma mater, Harvard to research the connection. He describes the study, which was conducted on monkeys:

> We created an animal model, rewarding monkeys for increases and decreases in their blood pressure and signaling success to them with colored lights. Eventually, we were able to train the monkeys to control their blood pressure by turning on the appropriate colored lights. They regulated their blood pressure levels with brainpower alone. We published the results in the prestigious *American Journal of Physiology* in 1969.[247]

Individuals who practiced Transcendental Meditation (T.M.) caught wind of the research and asked Benson to study them. The findings were the same. "With meditation alone," Benson recalls, "the T.M. practitioners brought about striking physiologic changes—a drop in heart rate, metabolic rate, and breathing rate—that I would subsequently label 'the Relaxation Response.'"[248]

On a physiological level, the Relaxation Response serves as a counter to the well-known "fight or flight response" that is present in mammals in stressful situations. The

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[246] Herbert Benson and Miriam Z. Klipper, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1975), 5.
[247] Ibid., 7.
[248] Ibid., 8.

fight or flight response comprises the release of hormones to increase heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, metabolic rate, and blood flow and prepare the body to either engage or flee from a threat.[249] While the fight or flight response enabled the human race to survive and multiply to its current level of success, now, Benson writes, "the Relaxation Response is undoubtedly even more important to our survival, since anxiety and tension often inappropriately trigger the fight-or-flight response in us."[250] From the Transcendental Meditation study group, Benson and his colleagues identified four essential elements to elicit the Relaxation response: (1) a quiet environment; (2) a mental device—a sound, word, phrase, or prayer repeated silently or aloud, or a fixed gaze at an object; (3) a passive attitude—not worrying about how well one is performing the technique and simply putting aside distracting thoughts to return to one's focus; and (4) a comfortable position.[251]

After further research, Benson and his colleagues later discovered that only the second and third elements, the mental device and the passive attitude, were essential to elicit the Relaxation Response. "A person could be jogging on a noisy street and still elicit the Relaxation Response. The jogger needed only to maintain a mental focus and be able to return her focus when distracting thoughts interfered."[252] Benson published his findings in the 1975 book, *The Relaxation Response*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller.[253] Continued study revealed that the Relaxation Response was effective to treat

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[249] Ibid., 9
[250] Ibid., 9.
[251] Ibid., 10.
[252] Ibid., 10.
[253] Ibid., 14.

hypertension, headaches, cardiac rhythm irregularities, premenstrual syndrome, anxiety, and mild and moderate depression.[254]

As Benson taught the Relaxation Response to his patients, he found that it could be integrated in ways that were personally meaningful. The mental device (sound, word, phrase, or prayer) could be customized for a person's own spiritual beliefs. "Catholics could recite 'Hail Mary full of grace,' Jewish people might say 'Sh'ma Yisrael,' and Protestants might find 'Our Father who art in Heaven' calming. 'Isha'allah' might be repeated by Muslims, and 'Om' by members of the Hindu religion."[255] Over the years, Benson honed his method for achieving the Relaxation Response and included it in the foreword to the twenty-fifth anniversary update to his book:

1. Pick a focus word, short phrase, or prayer that is firmly rooted in your belief system.
2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Relax your muscles, progressing from your feet to your calves, thighs, abdomen, shoulders, head, and neck.
5. Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, say your focus word, sound, phrase, or prayer silently to yourself as you exhale.
6. Assume a passive attitude. Don't worry about how well you're doing. When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, "Oh well," and gently return to your repetition.
7. Continue for ten to twenty minutes.
8. Do not stand immediately. Continue sitting quietly for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return. Then open your eyes and sit for another minute before rising.
9. Practice the technique once or twice daily. Good times to do so are before breakfast and before dinner.[256]

In the sixties and seventies, Benson's research was ground-breaking: "It was considered heresy for a Harvard physician and researcher to hypothesize that stress

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[254] Ibid., 11.
[255] Ibid., 11.
[256] Ibid., 12-13.

contributed to health problems and to publish studies showing that mental focusing techniques were good for the body." Today, however, Western society takes for granted the relationship between the mind and the body.[257] What Benson researched, methodized, and taught his patients was essentially meditation. His work supports the research findings and case studies explored above: the mind affects the body, just as the body affects the mind. The benefits of yoga practice are immense and unique from other exercise activities because they combine the positive impact of physical exercise with the added benefit of mindfulness and meditation training. This combination is correlated with positive improvements to psychophysiological well-being.

Modern Postural Yoga as an Individualized Ritual

In addition to its benefits as a holistic practice, MPY also offers unique spiritual benefits. An MPY class offers individualized, voluntary access to ritual without the requirement of a faith commitment. As mentioned above, the methods of meditation found in the Eight-Limbed Path comprise a method of meditation that is accessible to adherents of any or no religion. Similarly, the holistic mind-body discipline of MPY, which is essentially comprised of the third and fourth limbs of the Eight-Limbed Path, is also accessible to anyone. Yogis who attend a Modern Postural Yoga class have access to a voluntary, non-confrontational ritual practice that can be imbued with any amount of religious meaning.

Though typically practiced in a group, under the guidance of a yoga teacher, MPY is a highly personal and voluntary practice. With the exception of "partner yoga" classes, MPY practitioners are alone and silent on their mats. Practitioners face the same direction

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[257] Ibid., 1-2.

and are encouraged to ignore their surroundings (*pratyahara*) and focus instead on their personal practice. All aspects of an MPY practice, including the various postures, stretches, breathing exercises, and mindfulness techniques, are voluntary. Practitioners are consistently reminded that their practice is personal and that they can choose whether to participate in any posture or activity. This structure of MPY offers the perfect setting for the stages of ritual.

In Arnold van Gennep's 1965 work, *The Rites of Passage*, he identifies the fundamental structure of ritual as consisting of three phases: (1) separation or preliminal state; (2) transition or liminal state; and (3) incorporation or postliminal state.[258] This threefold pattern of ritual is present in Western cultural practices, religious and secular, that are considered personally significant, such as graduations or wedding ceremonies.

This same structure is also present in a session of MPY, beginning with the separation, or preliminal phase. Practitioners are encouraged to leave their identity, salary, possessions, abilities, social status—all that comprises the ego—at the door and step onto their mats in simplicity. Only the essentials are required for a yoga practice: body and breath. An MPY practitioner takes his or her place amid the rank and file organization of yoga mats on the floor. Once the ego and external identity is shed, there is no hierarchy in the ritual of MPY. De Michelis describes the "otherness" of the time and place of the MPY practice,

> Even when one is practising on one's own, there is a sense in which time and the space used are 'other.' One tries to practise at a time and place where there will be no disturbance or interruption. As in the case of the Islamic prayer mat (the parallel is structurally closer than may appear at first sight), the yoga mat becomes a special object, not to be trodden on,

[258] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegen Paul, 1965), 11.

> not to be soiled, and not to be used for other purposes. Opening it up on the floor instantly creates a 'special' time and space in which certain practices, ritual-like, are repeated at regular intervals.[259]

The shedding of shoes in preparation for entering the "other" time and place of the MPY session should not be lost on the contemporary Christian yogi.[260] As many individuals in scripture learn, bare feet are for holy ground. After stepping onto the mat, MPY practitioners are guided into a time of quieting and mentally detaching from the past, the future, and the world outside.

Once the separation phase is complete, the next phase of the MPY ritual is the transitional or liminal phase. During this phase of a rite of passage, practitioners are no longer members of the pre-ritual world but are not yet members of the post-ritual world. This is the stage during which the rite takes place. In the context of MPY, this is the practice proper. The practitioner is guided through a variety of postures and breathing exercises, during which he or she "learns experientially to feel and to perceive in novel ways; most of all inwardly, though in ways that are also likely to affect external awareness and behavior."[261] In "Voices from the Mat," Casey Rock describes the time and space of her yoga practice as an oasis:

> My experience of the oasis of the yoga space tells me that this is one place where the spiritually hungry have fled when there is a disconnect between the longing for inner peace and the older, traditional representations of religious experience. The inner landscape is increasingly difficult to find, and that has to do not only with the pace of modern life but with the rapid disappearance of so much that was familiar. We are continually faced with changing customs, family constructs, work patterns, and the psychic demands of living in a global village… I see the student in the yoga class as someone who has found a way to hold onto one small something in the

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[259] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 253-254.
[260] In Ex. 3:5, God tells Moses to remove his shoes, for he is standing on holy ground.
[261] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 255-256.

> rushing river of their life. The decision to enter that space is a decision to become quiet and to put on hold any demands other than those they came into the world with—the breath and the movement of the body.[262]

After the transitional, or liminal phase is complete, yoga practitioners are guided into the third and final ritual phase: incorporation. In the case of the MPY class, the incorporation phase is comprised of *savasana*, which is the final resting pose for a few minutes at the end of the practice. De Michelis writes that the *savasana* represents a "final, assimilative phase of the healing ritual which is, through it, integrated and consolidated. At this point practitioners are ready, after a brief but important 're-emergence' phase (another ritual marker), to return to the 'normal' world of everyday concerns and commitments, their lives regenerated by contact with the sacred."[263]

Modern Postural Yoga is perfectly adapted to provide spiritual benefit to Western practitioners due to its setting and structure. MPY teachers reinforce an individualized, voluntary experience, which does not require any particular faith commitment. As such, a session of MPY is a nonconfrontational experience that provides voluntary access to a ritual experience: separation, transition, and incorporation. This is the level of spirituality offered to any MPY practitioner. For Christians who desires to apply MPY to their spiritual lives, the MPY practice can be approached as a ritual experience of spiritual formation. The individual Christian disconnects from everyday life in order to engage in care of the body and to cultivate a meditation practice, maintaining constant awareness of the presence of God. The yogi returns to the post-MPY-practice-world, still retaining the

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[262] Rock, "Voices from the Mat," 102.
[263] De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 259.

disciplines cultivated on the mat. The particulars of MPY as a tool for spiritual formation are discussed further in chapter five.

Summary: Modern Postural Yoga as an Invention of and for the West

As demonstrated, those who practice MPY do so for a variety of reasons. In addition to the overt positive physical adaptations of strength, flexibility, and more, MPY is a holistic practice that combines strengthening and stretching physical postures with breath work, mindfulness practice, relaxation, mental focus, and more. Mindfulness—much like what is found in MPY—is used as a therapeutic intervention in the case of many individuals suffering from a range of mental health disorders.[264] Furthermore, a session of MPY offers a secular ritual to contemporary Western culture, which can be experienced personally and voluntarily, with any degree of religious symbolism. Based on the above research, it can be concluded that MPY is a holistic, mind-body practice that offers observable positive benefits to those who choose to practice it. Chapter Four addresses whether an embodied practice like MPY can be integrated with spirituality.

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[264] St. Clair, "Bringing Mindfulness," 25.

CHAPTER 4

Clearing the Second Hurdle: Can Christians Incorporate the Body in Spirituality?

Chapter Three addressed the first hurdle by establishing that MPY does not impose a religious view on Christian practitioners, and offers holistic benefits to the general population. This chapter addresses the second objection to Christians practicing yoga: resistance to incorporating the body in spiritual practice. By establishing a theology of the value of the human body and its place in Christian spirituality, this chapter provides a theological framework for MPY to be practiced with the intention of deepening one's spiritual maturity. This theology counters the fundamentalist view that the purpose of the Christian faith is to save souls alone to the exclusion of the body, rooted in mind-body dualism. As a Christian spiritual discipline, yoga can serve a more robust theology of creation and incarnation, and a more holistic and biblical spirituality.

The Relationship Between the Body and Christian Spirituality

As discussed in chapter two, Christian fundamentalists insist that the purpose of the Christian faith is to save souls, not to care for the well-being of human bodies. This mindset led early-twentieth-century fundamentalists to reject the Social Gospel, for fear that too great an emphasis was placed on meeting physical needs to the neglect of the church's ultimate purpose, which was, as D. L. Moody put it, "Winning lost souls to Christ and being instrumental in redeeming the world."[265] Mind-body dualism manifests in this bifurcation between the practical and spiritual activities of the church. The alternative to dualism is to see human existence as one integrated whole of material and immaterial, mind and body; in fact, to identify a person as his or her body. As Dallas

[265] Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 81.

Willard put it, "There is an essential continuity and union between the person and the body. In an important sense. . . a person *is* his or her body."[266]

For many Christians, if there is a connection between the body and the spirit, it is negative. At worst, images come to mind of self-flagellation and various types of self-torture and ascetic self-deprivation.[267] At best, the spiritual only intersects with the physical in Sabbath. Willard explains that this view is not only opposed to Scripture, but "is a device of Satan to make the blessed life in God distasteful to young people overflowing with physical energy."[268] Willard quotes Lewis Sperry Chafer's assertion, "Spirituality is not a pious pose. It is not a 'Thou shalt *not*'; it is 'Thou *shalt*.'. . . It is a serious thing to remove the element of relaxation and play from any life. We cannot be normal physically, mentally or spiritually if we neglect this vital factor in human life."[269] Involvement and enjoyment of the physical experience is critical to living well.

As discussed in chapter three, the field of psychology has studied and reported extensively on the interconnectedness between the spiritual and the physical. Abraham Maslow explained in 1967,

> The so-called spiritual or "higher" life is on the same continuum (is the same kind of quality or thing) with the life of the flesh, or of the body, i.e., the animal life, the "lower" life. The spiritual life is part of our biological life. It is the "highest" part of it, but yet part of it. The spiritual life is part of the human essence. It is a defining characteristic of human nature without which human nature is not full human nature. It is part of the real self, of one's identity, of one's inner core, of one's specieshood, of full humanness.[270]

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[266] Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), 76.
[267] Ibid., 79.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That is Spiritual* (Findlay: Dunham, 1918), 69-71, quoted in Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines,* 79.
[270] Abraham H. Maslow, "The Good Life of the Self-Actualizing Person," *The Humanist* 25 (1967): 139.

To rephrase, the spiritual life is part of our biological life. This means the human body is not a shell for the immaterial soul, but rather spirituality is an integral part of the essence of humanity, along with the body.

Willard explains that our experience of others is inescapably an experience of their bodies. When a mother bestows care on her child, it is that child's body she feeds, bathes, and holds. The same is true between spouses: "Whatever further qualifications and explanations must be added, you cannot in the final analysis love another person in the normal human sense and not also love his or her body; and you cannot love or really care about that body and not love the person also."[271] People identify themselves with their bodies and others with their bodies.

In addition to the identification of the person with the body, the body is also the instrument through which spiritual realities are practiced. Personal and social growth is spiritual growth with skin on. As Simon Chan explains, "Problems in prayer frequently mirror difficulties in human relationships. For example, if people have difficulty relating to people, it is small wonder that they have difficulty relating to God. As they learn that some people can accept them in spite of themselves, that is to say, they are recipients of their grace, similarly, they can accept God's free forgiveness and receive God's grace." If the inner life is a mirror for the outer life, the opposite is also true. Chan continues, "Learning to trust God and receive his grace freely leads to better relationships with people."[272] This identification of the person with the body is a necessary counter to

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[271] Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 84.
[272] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 136.

fundamentalism and mind-body dualism in order to acknowledge the role of the body in Christian spirituality. It is also necessary to establish the value of the human body as more than a possession or a shell to be discarded upon death. The spiritual life—being part of the biological life—is indivisible from any other aspect of the human essence. As such, every action of the human body is by definition a spiritual action.

Spirituality from a Biblical Theology of Creation and Incarnation

The pages of scripture provide a theological foundation to value the human body, identify it with the human being, and incorporate it in Christian spirituality through embodied practices and spiritual disciplines. The first chapter of Genesis proclaims that human beings are made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), and as such, they reflect the glory of God. Scripture recounts God's incarnation in the historical human being, Jesus of Nazareth, his ministry to the physical needs of people around him, and his teaching that entrance to the kingdom of heaven depends on our faithful care for the physical needs of others. After Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, Paul's writings helped the first-century church understand the role their bodies played in living out the transformation of salvation: "the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). To be a Christian means a change in an individual's lifestyle and bodily practices. Furthermore, to be a community of Christians means to be part of the body of Christ, a union of many parts. Paul teaches the early Christians that the individual body and the body of believers are dwelling places of the Holy Spirit and as such should be honored and kept holy.

Lessons of *Imago Dei*

The Genesis creation story states that all human beings are made "in the image of God" (Gen 1:26-27, 5:1-3, 9:1-7). These passages provide the foundation for the theological concept of *imago Dei*, Latin for "image of God." Throughout Christian history, popes, theologians, activists and authors have taken this concept to mean that the human being—body and all—reflects the glory of God and therefore demands care, respect, and stewardship. One of the first verses in Scripture that explains human identity is in terms of our relationship with God. Gen 1:27 states that humans—male and female alike—are made in God's image. This verse provides the foundation for the theological concept of *imago Dei*, which is reflected in the complete human being. As Wakefield and Scorgie write, "The *imago Dei* adheres to the essence of each human being, regardless of his or her level of competence (Gen 9:6). It makes human life sacred and gives each person great dignity and worth."[273]

As Pope John Paul II explains the *imago Dei*, "The body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God, and thus be a sign of it."[274] As Simon Chan explains the *imago Dei*, "the fact that all things come from God suggests that there is no ultimate disjunction between the physical world and the spiritual world. A spirituality of the Father values the sacramental nature of created things." By created things, Chan is referring to literally all creation—from microorganisms to blue whales, pebbles to planets. Unlike Pope John Paul II, who sees

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[273] James L. Wakefield and Glen G. Scorgie, "Image of God (Imago Dei)," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2011), 524.
[274] Pope John Paul II, "Man Enters the World as a Subject of Truth and Love," *L'Osservatore Romano* (February 25, 1980).

the human body alone as a physical sign of the mystery hidden in God, Chan argues that all creation reflects the glory of God and therefore demands to be cared for and stewarded responsibly.[275]

When considering what it means to be made "in the image" of God, the question arises: How do humans reflect the image of God? Surely God does not have hands, feet, and a face. One way theologians have explained how humans bear the *imago Dei* is in terms of a capacity for relatedness. One understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity (the three-in-one God) is a social model: as a relationship between the Persons of the Trinity. Theologian John Zizioulas explains that nothing exists—not even God—apart from communion: "It is communion which makes beings 'be.'"[276] Furthermore, that "being" extends to the church when Christians created by God exist in community as the body of Christ. Just as a person cannot exist apart from his or her relationships, the same is true of the Trinity. The Trinity exists because it is a reciprocal relationship—described by the term *perichoresis*—of love and adoration from each person of the Trinity to the two others.[277]

We become the image of God, according to Pope John Paul II, "not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion."[278] The same self-giving love that constitutes the inner life of the Trinity is on display in the original created order and

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[275] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 46.
[276] John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 15.
[277] Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 164.
[278] Perry J. Cahall, *The Mystery of Marriage: A Theology of the Body and the Sacrament* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2016), 31.

through the redemption of the body brought about in Christ's death and resurrection."[279] Theologian Jürgen Moltmann describes the concept of the circular relationship of the Trinity as an "eternal life process" that takes place through the "exchange of energies."[280] In this picture of the triune relationship, the persons of the Trinity exist in terms of their relationship to one another. Moltmann writes, "The Father exists in the Son, the Son in the Father, and both of them in the Spirit, just as the Spirit exists in both the Father and the Son. By virtue of their eternal love they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one."[281]

Just as the Persons of the Trinity exist and are realized in terms of their relation to one another, so human beings bear the image of God when they too participate in self-surrendering love with other human beings. It is in humanity's capacity for relatedness—specifically self-sacrificial relatedness—that they carry the *imago Dei.*[282] This feature of the *imago Dei* is particularly relevant to the conversation about spiritual disciplines and the purpose of spiritual formation. A critical aspect of Christian spirituality is that the aim of spiritual disciplines is spiritual formation, and that spiritual formation is for the sake of others. Because Christians image God in relationship, they cultivate spiritual disciplines *for the sake of others.*

Acting on Imago Dei

Many Christians undertake profound acts of care and service toward others based on the rationale of the *imago Dei.* Activists such as William Wilberforce and Martin

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[279] Anderson, "God Has a Wonderful Plan," 37-38.
[280] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 174.
[281] Ibid., 174-175.
[282] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom,* 174.

Luther King, Jr. worked to end slavery and racial injustice. Mother Theresa and Henri Nouwen devoted their lives to tender care for and solidarity with the poor, destitute, and disabled. Such individuals and others like them are compelled by their understanding that all people are image-bearers of God to protect and care for the bodies of others. They see the *image Dei* in every human being. Wakefield and Scorgie write, "To encounter another human being is always to encounter transcendence; this is a spiritually attuned consciousness that transforms all human meeting."[283]

To view all humans of all abilities—including oneself—through the lens of the *imago Dei* is a radical concept, but it is necessary if Christians are to mend the rift dualism has caused between the spirit and the body. Led by a conviction that all people and perhaps even all creation is sacred, Christians treat their bodies and the bodies of others with care, respect, and stewardship.

This concept relates to Modern Postural Yoga because both serve to establish the value and goodness of the human body. Today, when so many people are troubled by unhealthy body images, eating disorders, and self-harm, the value of the human body established by the *imago Dei* is good news. As discussed in chapter three, studies have shown MPY to be particularly beneficial in improving body image.[284] Modern Postural Yoga can support those who practice it to develop a view of the human body that is in line with a healthy Biblical theology of the body.

Lessons of the Incarnation

[283] Wakefield and Scorgie, "Image of God," 524.
[284] Greenwood and Delgado, "A Journey," 949-950.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the central defining feature of the Christian faith. Thomas Ryan says, "At the heart of our faith is the grateful and joyful assertion that, in this human being, Jesus of Nazareth, a member of our race, God has personally come to meet us on our own level. Jesus places God within our reach and offers to us the gift of divine life."[285] The existence of Jesus serves as the ultimate identification of God with humanity and of human existence with a body. Jesus' existence in flesh demonstrates the value God places on material creation. Jesus' ministry to people's physical ailments and immediate needs further communicates the value God places on human well-being. Jesus' teaching establishes that love of God equates with love of people, and that love of people equates with care for their bodies.

Becoming Flesh, Becoming Human

The word *incarnation* comes from the Latin translation of John 1:14, "The Word became flesh." Here, the word *flesh* is used to identify a whole person. Even in the original Greek, John does not say the Word became *a* flesh but that the Word became flesh; the Word became human.[286] The incarnation was not a charade of the divine donning a human costume. In the human being of Jesus Christ, "the second person of the Trinity who is beyond space and time left heaven's glory and, entering our world, assumed a sinless human nature through the virgin birth."[287] John 1:14 goes on to say that after the Word became flesh, he "made his dwelling among us." The phrase to make a

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[285] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart*, 231.
[286] Raymond E. Brown, "The Gospel According to John I-XII," *ABD* 29:13.
[287] Demarest, "Incarnation," 530.

dwelling is literally "to pitch a tent."[288] Again, this earthy language identifies Jesus—God incarnate—with the realities of daily human life.

In the words of John Calvin, "God's natural Son fashioned for himself a body from our body, flesh from our flesh, bones from our bones, that he might be one with us."[289] Calvin's statement echoes the alternative to mind-body dualism: identification with humanity is identification with a body. To be human is to be embodied. God did not walk the earth as a spirit, ghost, or energy force. God became one human—Jesus of Nazareth—and embarked on a life of ministry to the bodies of others, ultimately resulting in his own physical death.

In considering the ramifications of the incarnation, it is tempting to think of it only as an event that occurred in ancient history. David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw describe the common over-simplification, "(1) because of a past event, (2) we are forgiven of sins so that (3) we can enjoy eternal life in the future."[290] In effect, this view of Jesus objectifies him to the sacrificial lamb—totally different from other humans, "too divine to be any good"[291]—and distances Christians from Jesus' person and life. Instead, Fitch and Holsclaw argue, a more holistic understanding of Jesus is as "the ultimate example of a life lived in the Father's kingdom."[292] Jesus is the Savior, certainly, but he is also the Teacher, offering a role model for Christians to imitate him. When Jesus

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[288] Brown, "The Gospel According to John I-XII," 13.
[289] Ibid.
[290] David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signposts into the Missional Frontier*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 33.
[291] Ibid, 36.
[292] Ibid., 35.

invited his disciples to "Follow me" (Matt 19:21), he invited them and his future disciples into his way of life.

Jesus Ministered to Physical Needs and Taught His Followers to Do the Same

Jesus spent most of his short ministry traveling from town to town doing two things: (1) teaching about the kingdom of God, and (2) miraculously ministering to people's needs. Fitch and Holsclaw write, "Jesus teaches—people are amazed. Jesus confronts evil—oppression flees. Jesus stretches out his hand—health and wholeness returns. This is the proclaiming and making present of God's kingdom."[293] Some people whose ailments Jesus miraculously healed were a leper (Matt 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-15), a centurion's servant (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10), a paralyzed man (Matt 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:18-26), a woman with internal bleeding (Matt 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48), and multiple blind men (Matt 9:27-31; 20:29-34; Mark 8:22-26, 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43; John 9:1-41). Jesus also raised a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17), Jairus' daughter (Matt 9:18-19, 23-25; Mark 5:22-24, 35-43; Luke 8:41-42, 49-56), and his friend Lazarus (John 11:1-44) from the dead. Jesus also met immediate physical needs of hunger and thirst by turning water into wine (John 2:1-11), feeding 5,000 people (Matt 14:16-21; Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:5-14), and feeding 4,000 people (Matt 15:29-39, Mark 8:1-10). There are many other miraculous things Jesus could have done but did not, like fix broken government systems, assemble an army, levitate, or silence his accusers. Instead the majority of his actions and miracles resulted in immediately improving psychological and physiological well-being of individual peoples' bodies. Jesus' emphasis on the well-being of bodies ought not be ignored.

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[293] Fitch and Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity*, 37.

Jesus' teaching frequently took on fleshly terms. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus describes the behavior of the righteous, who will be invited into his Father's kingdom. Specifically, the way they care for the bodies of those in need takes a primary place:

> "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matt 25:34-40)

These works described by Jesus later came to be referred to in the Catholic tradition as the "corporal works of mercy," because they relate specifically to the bodies of others.[294] The fact that Jesus lists these acts as the criteria for admittance into the kingdom of heaven should compel us to value the bodies of others and our own.

A few chapters before Jesus' teaching on the corporal works of mercy, Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" to which Jesus responds by quoting the *Shema*, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and then he goes on to say the second greatest commandment is to, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:34-40). Later, on the night before his death, Jesus washed his disciples' feet, an act of service and tender love for the well-being of their bodies, and instructed them to do the same (John 13:1-16). Ryan writes, "Time and again, Jesus makes it clear that love of God and love of neighbor are not separate realities or dimensions of life, but two sides of the same coin.

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[294] Ryan, "The Body Language of Faith," 69.

They are so closely related, in fact, that the New Testament uses the same Greek word—*koinonia*—to describe them both."[295]

Here and Now, on Earth as it is in Heaven

One final lesson of the incarnation of Jesus is the immediacy of his ministry. Jesus healed bodies, fed bellies, opened eyes and raised the dead in the midst of daily lives. He did not gather up his followers and whisk them away into the blissful hereafter. His good news was that the kingdom of God is present now, happening on earth as it is in heaven. N.T. Wright described this reality in his 2011 talk to the Society of Christian Philosophers,

> The western tradition, catholic and protestant, evangelical and liberal, charismatic and social-gospel, has managed for many centuries to screen out the central message of the New Testament, which isn't that we are to escape the world and go to heaven, but rather that God's sovereign, saving rule would come to birth 'on earth as in heaven'. The story of all four gospels is not the story of how God came in Jesus to rescue souls for a disembodied, other-worldly heaven. It is the story of how God, in Jesus, became king on earth as in heaven. Ultimately, any would-be Christian view which doesn't serve that central vision is, in my view, either folly or idolatry, or possibly both.[296]

Through the incarnation, Christians can affirm that material creation and human bodies matter to God. Through Jesus' ministry and teachings, disciples are taught to love God by loving other people—specifically by caring for their bodies.

Lessons from Paul: the Body of Christ, the Bodies of Christians, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit

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[295] Ibid., 69.

[296] N.T. Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All, Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in His Complex Contexts," *NT Wright Page* (March 18, 2011).

Today, in the absence of Jesus's physical presence, his teachings remain with his followers and continue to support the value of embodied existence. The first generation of the church was a foundational time. Christians collectively took on the task of establishing a new, uniquely Christian identity. Paul played a key role in this phase: "His [Paul's] view on the body becomes a matter of significance, since it developed from the very heart of his theology; i.e. how to define the identity of Christian believers."[297] Paul's letters contain frequent instruction for how the new Christians ought to behave—particularly in terms of their bodies—in light of their newfound faith. Faith in Jesus was then—and is today—a transformational choice that affects every aspect of life, including what people do with their bodies. As Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:23). Paul's references and instructions on the body can be broken down into two themes: (1) practically, how the individual believers should behave with their bodies, and (2) metaphorically, how the believers as a collective "body of Christ" (society) should behave.[298] These instructions in individual bodily and societal "bodily" practices helped establish a new identity for the believers, the churches and the Christian faith, which persists to today.

"The Old Has Gone, the New Has Come"

Many sections of Paul's letters to the early churches discuss matters of the individual Christians' physical bodies. It might seem odd that writings meant to

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[297] Sandnes, *Belly and Body*, 15.
[298] Neyrey, *Paul*, 115.

encourage new converts in their faith would be so concerned with daily existence, but upon closer inspection, it is appropriate that Paul spends so much time and detail explaining ways Christians should treat their bodies and the bodies of others. Many members of the early church were Jews who became followers of Jesus. Such people often grew up in a religious setting that included purity and dietary laws that regulated bodies.[299] By contrast, the Gentile followers of Jesus were socialized with very different bodily practices and norms. In order to build unity in these faith communities, it would be only natural for Paul to speak to such issues.[300]

Paul's frequent mention of the body is closely connected to the theme of transformation in his theology: *before* versus *after*.[301] Paul's letters are full of reminders that life and behavior after becoming a disciple of Christ are different from before. In 1 Cor 6, Paul uses two illustrations to explain this occurrence of before and after, both of which specifically relate to the body. Verse 19 compares the body of a Christian to a temple, which is indwelled and made holy by the Spirit of God. Verse 20 uses the metaphor of a slave, bought with a price and brought under the ownership of God.[302] Paul's words helped the new Christians understand the basic structure of the Christian faith, which hinged on transition or a turning away from their past. The putting on of the new self precipitated a new lifestyle. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul provides examples of the old way of life (sexual immorality, adultery, stealing, greed, drunkenness, and slander). Many of the "old identity" ways of living had to do with the

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[299] Sandnes, *Belly and Body*, 15.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid., 17.
[302] John Barclay, "I Corinthians," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1118.

body and how one treated others' bodies. "That is what some of you were," Paul says. "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:9-11). Even Paul's usage of the word, "washed," or bathed (*apolouomai*), paints a picture of bodily cleansing that was applied to the inner life as a result of a Christian's choice to follow Jesus.

One feature of Christians' new identity is that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Paul repeatedly exhorts the believers to avoid any lifestyle choices that pollute their "temples" (1 Cor 6:19). He also commands them to stop associating with people who commit immorality. "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough," he writes, telling the new converts not to associate or eat with sexually immoral, greedy, idolaters, slanderers, drunkards or swindlers (1 Cor 5:1-13). He particularly warns the believers to "flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor 6:18), because it is a sin against the body: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor 6:18-20).

Brian Lugioyo points out that in the early days of the church, "The major disputes of the faith were bodily. Can I, a Jew, share a meal with a Gentile? Can I, a Gentile, become a follower of Christ without circumcision? Can we eat unclean meats? Do I cut my hair and follow other Jewish bodily practices as a follower of Jesus the Jewish Messiah who has made all things new? Do I touch the unclean? … The Christian life is a

physical one."[303] Paul's first letter to the Corinthians illustrates Lugioyo's point. In it, Paul specifically addresses illicit sexual practices (1 Cor 5-6), whether to marry or remain a virgin (1 Cor 7), eating food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8, 10), abuse of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11) and future resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15). The rest of Paul's letters follow this pattern of frequent discussion of how the new Christian faith affected bodily practices and lifestyle.[304]

The individual human body is integrally connected to personal spirituality. As Dallas Willard says, the body is the place where one begins to "extend [God's] kingdom and take on voluntary aspects of identity."[305] Karl O. Sandnes describes *phsysiognomy*, which is the ancient art of determining a person's character by their external characteristics, such as their bodily form or facial features. Physiognomy was a well-established art at the time Paul was writing his letters, and though Paul does not equate the appearance of the body with the state of one's spiritual life, Sandnes writes,

> Paul has retained one basic insight of physiognomics. Body and character do belong together, not in the sense that the depths of human character can be inferred from the outward appearance of the body, but in the sense that lifestyle, which also includes matters of food, drinking and sex, represents a yardstick by which the spiritual life may be measured, judged or corrected. Faith was to Paul not purely a matter of the heart, invisible to all but God. Faith worked itself out also in body and stomach.[306]

Another feature of the new identity of Christians was that their lives and their bodies were to be used up—Paul uses the word *sacrifice*—in service to God as an act of

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[303] Brian Lugioyo, "Ministering to Bodies: Anthropological Views of *Soma* in the New Testament, Theology, and Neuroscience," in *Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament*, eds. Benjamin E. Reynolds, Brian Lugioyo, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 236.
[304] Sandnes, *Belly and Body*, 15.
[305] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 2014), 261.
[306] Sandnes, *Belly and Body*, 269-270.

worship: "Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Rom 12:1). By using the word body, Paul means the whole self,[307] but he also maintains that the life should be sacrificed while remaining alive—a life lived at God's disposal, with the parts of the body functioning as tools of righteousness.[308] In the new Christian identity, the body, with all its actions, functions, and practices, is to be dedicated to the work of the Lord on a daily basis. In the earthy language of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, Rom 12:1 says, "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering." When Paul calls the Romans to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, he calls that a "spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1). Paul could not have more plainly stated that people are capable of worshipping God with the actions of our bodies. Bodies have "been given as a gift—a gift to be returned to his service."[309]

The Body of Christ as a New Collective Christian Identity

In his letters, Paul uses the same illustration of the body to discuss a second theme of the new Christian identity: as the collective body of Christ. Paul's letters to the Corinthians remind the church at Corinth of its unity in diverse backgrounds and spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:4-20). This was a defining feature of the new identity of Christians as a whole: that they were united with the body of Christ, as participants in his crucifixion and resurrection. 1 Cor 15 reminds all Christians that they share in "Christ's glorious body, which will be enjoyed in full at the resurrection and which provides an appropriate

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[307] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 639.
[308] Fitzmyer, "Romans," 640.
[309] Anderson, "God Has a Wonderful Plan," 38.

heavenly body. In their present life, believers are preparing themselves for this full transformation. This preparation takes place in service and ministry, which in the end consumes the body; thus suffering and impending death serve the process of transformation."[310]

Paul's letters to the early church communities played a critical role in establishing the new Christian identity, answering for the Christians and the surrounding culture the question of who Christians are. Paul's frequent mention of the individual and collective body denotes his concern for Christians to understand their new identity as transformed individuals and a holy community. Paul encourages Christians to view their bodies and bodily habits as signs of distinction, Sandnes writes: "In conceiving of the Christians' body as God's temple, Paul reminds them of God's lordship and presence in their life."[311] The body as the dwelling place of the Spirit of God helped first-century Christians understand the necessity of their bodily holiness and helps contemporary Christians understand that value and care bestowed upon the human body is a spiritually significant responsibility.

Summary: A Biblical Theology of the Body

From Genesis to Paul's letters, Scripture compels Christians to value the body, to see it as identical with the human being, and to acknowledge the spiritual life as part of the embodied life—the two cannot be separated. Responses to the dualist perspective that the body is a carrying case for the "real" person—the soul—are the theological concept of the *imago Dei*, the incarnation of Jesus, and Jesus' embodied teachings, ministry,

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[310] Sandnes, *Belly and Body*, 21.
[311] Ibid., 21.

death, and resurrection. An appropriate counter to the fundamentalist perspective that the one purpose of the church is to win lost souls for Christ is Paul's exhortation to place our everyday life before God as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1). It is through the body that the Spirit implements the transformation of the disciple's heart and mind that results from an encounter with Jesus. With this in mind, even mundane daily tasks become deeply spiritual—even sacramental—practices. When one stops treating the human body like it is a possession, one can begin to see every moment of life as, in the words of Thomas Ryan, "shot through with divinity, with the very life of God."[312]

The pages of Scripture establish that all creation—human bodies included—reflects the glory of God, and that part of the task of the individual Christian and the collective church is to care for their own bodies and for the bodies of others. As Jesus taught in his description of the corporal works of mercy, participation in the kingdom of God depends on it.

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[312] Ryan, "Toward a Positive Spirituality of the Body," 23.

CHAPTER 5

How MPY Fits Into Christian Spiritual Formation

After asserting that Scripture assumes incorporation of the body in spirituality, many Christians might be left wondering how they can embody their spirituality. The teaching and ministry of Jesus establishes that caring for physical needs is one way to value the bodies of others. Choosing to value one's own body and the bodies of others is a way to worship God and honor Christ with the body. Another way to incorporate the body in spirituality is through spiritual disciplines, sometimes referred to as spiritual practices. In recent years, Christians have expressed increased interest in both classical spiritual disciplines and in any embodied practice that reinforces the value of the human body and its place in Christian spirituality. Modern Postural Yoga affirms the value and goodness of the human body and provides ample opportunity for Christians to orient their awareness to the uninterrupted presence of God.

What is a Spiritual Discipline?

As Gordon T. Smith writes, "Few questions are more central to understanding the fundamental character of Christian spirituality and how Christian growth is fostered or nurtured than the proper role of spiritual disciplines and practice."[313] J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler define a Christian spiritual discipline as, "a repeated bodily practice, done in dependence on the Holy Spirit and under the direction of Jesus and other wise teachers in His way, to enable us to get good at certain things in life that we cannot learn to do by direct effort."[314]

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[313] Smith, "Grace," 222.
[314] Moreland and Issler, *The Lost Virtue*, 46.

All Christian spiritual disciplines have two things in common: (1) human responsibility and action, and (2) the grace of God.[315] A helpful illustration of these two aspects of spiritual discipline is that of a farmer sowing a seed: "A farmer knows that he is not the grower. He cultivates the soil, plants, and waters, and prays for enough sunshine to bring all the seeds to life. But all the growth comes from dynamics embedded by the Creator; the farmer is but an agent of God whose practices allow God to do what only God can do."[316]

According to Moreland and Issler, the purpose of a spiritual discipline is to "get good at certain things in life that we cannot learn to do by direct effort."[317] Though simple in verbiage, the phrase is meaningful. Movement and action of the body provide a ready metaphor for challenges one faces in the mind. If practiced diligently, spiritual disciplines cultivate patterns of thought and action that carry into every moment of life.

As far as what spiritual disciplines are, there is no definitive list, but a few common examples of embodied practices are: Sabbath observance, which is the practice of setting aside work for one day each week to cultivate one's spiritual life; fasting, which is the practice of abstaining for a time from attending to one's physical appetites (most commonly food or sex); and simplicity, which is the choice to live within or even below one's financial means in order to be more generous and in tune with the needs of others.[318] Richard Foster, in his 1978 book, *Celebration of Discipline*, provided detailed theological explanation and practical instruction on twelve common spiritual disciplines:

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[315] Smith, "Grace," 224.
[316] Ibid., 225.
[317] Moreland and Issler, *The Lost Virtue*, 46.
[318] Smith, "Grace," 226.

meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.[319] As discussed in chapter four, Scripture affirms the value of the human body and its role in spirituality. Spiritual disciplines are an appropriate setting to honor the body and incorporate it in spirituality. Modern Postural Yoga, with its mindfulness, breath work, and variety of postures, is an ideal way to explore these same concepts of the value of the body and its role in spirituality.

Renewed Interest in Spiritual Disciplines

Contemporary evangelical Christians have shown a renewed interest in the classical spiritual disciplines. Guided by authors such as Richard Foster and Dallas Willard, Christians are exploring spiritual disciplines that incorporate the body. For some, this exploration includes Modern Postural Yoga. In researching for *Celebration of Discipline*, Foster wrote that he could not turn up a single book published on the subject of fasting from 1861 to 1954, a period of nearly 100 years. Today, publication on spiritual disciplines of all kinds, including fasting, is plentiful.[320] Foster points to this growth in scholarship on the subject of fasting as an indicator of our cultural return to disciplines of the spiritual life.

One *Christianity Today* article credits Dallas Willard with encouraging the movement toward spiritual disciplines: "Willard in particular, in books like *The Spirit of the Disciplines* and *Renovation of the Heart*, has articulated a scripturally shaped spirituality that infiltrates every part of the human person. This movement has reached

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[319] Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), v.
[320] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 47.

the point of gaining institutional support, both inside and outside the academy.[321] In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard makes the case that participation in the kingdom and companionship with Christ are only experienced through the disciplines of the spiritual life.[322]

In addition to the usual disciplines, Christians today are increasingly observing some of the more obscure, ancient spiritual disciplines that were practiced in early church centuries but had fallen out of practice more recently. These practices include pilgrimage, which is the practice of embarking on a physical journey and can be approached as a metaphor for the Christian life, as well as liturgical practices and routines, such as formal prayer, which have historically been practiced in monastic communities.[323] Willard comments on the phenomenon of the return to spiritual practice in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*:

> Today, for the first time in our history as a nation, we are being presented with a characteristic range of human behaviors such as fasting, meditation, simple living, and submission to a spiritual overseer, in an attractive light … Lectures, seminars, retreats, and books and articles on them enjoy a popularity that was utterly inconceivable fifteen years ago. They are increasingly looked to as a reliable means of growth in spiritual substance toward maturity in Christ.[324]

Christians are also discovering novel and not-so-traditional methods of cultivating spiritual maturity. Many Christians see their exercise routines as opportunities for spiritual growth. The movement of Christians practicing MPY is part of this exploration. Christian yogis, like anyone who practices MPY, start practicing yoga for a variety of

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[321] Anderson, "God Has a Wonderful Plan," 35.
[322] Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 26.
[323] Smith, "Grace," 226.
[324] Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 17.

reasons. Some begin practicing for health and fitness, some for stress reduction, and perhaps some for the spiritual dimension. Regardless of how a Christian ends up on a yoga mat in an MPY class, Thomas Ryan writes that they quickly discover its application to spirituality and are compelled to continue:

> There is, I believe, a deep and subconscious recognition of wisdom and truth in the Christian psyche when encountering spiritual-life disciplines that take the body seriously. When that instinctive and intuitive response is confirmed in the body by a felt sense of rightness in performing these disciplines, then people integrate them into their life practices even before being able to articulate to themselves the connections between what they are doing and their faith.[325]

Sacraments as Embodied Practices

Christians of many traditions—from Orthodox to evangelical, Catholic to charismatic—acknowledge and involve the human body in a variety of practices that guide them into deeper levels of spiritual maturity. Some of these practices are observed at regular intervals (such as Sabbath observance and the Eucharist) and some are observed as frequently as one chooses (such as the sign of the cross, various styles of repetitive prayer, bowing, veneration of icons, clapping, dancing, shouting, and laying on hands in prayer). The purpose of all these embodied spiritual practices is the same: to orient one's awareness toward the presence of God.

In addition to the array of spiritual disciplines discussed previously, another particular category of embodied spiritual practice is the sacraments, which are specific "ancient rituals understood to be the acts of Jesus Christ carried out through the continued

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[325] Ryan, "Toward a Positive Spirituality of the Body," 40.

ministry of the church."[326] Eastern Christians and the Roman Catholic Church define seven sacraments, most of which have a physical dimension to them: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, matrimony, ordination, and the anointing of the sick. Protestant Christians usually identify only baptism and Eucharist as sacraments, because they are clearly mentioned in the New Testament. Christians practice baptism to signify faith in Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and to enter into the Christian community (Mark 1:4-5, 16:16; Acts 22:16; 1 Pet 3:21; 1 Cor 12:13). The Eucharist, also referred to as communion or the Lord's Supper, is a symbolic meal of unleavened bread and wine and was established by Jesus on the night before his crucifixion, to be observed in Jesus' memory.[327]

The Purpose of Spiritual Disciplines: An Awareness of the Divine Presence

In 1 Thess 5:17, Paul instructs Christians to "pray continually." This is perhaps part of the inspiration for Theophan the Recluse's statement about prayer: "The principal thing is to stand before God with the intellect in the heart, and to go on standing before him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life."[328] Kallistos Ware writes that this statement sums up the attitude toward prayer found in many Christian texts for the first eleven centuries of Christianity.[329] Prayer is not an isolated activity that has a beginning and an end, but "*the* activity of our entire existence, a dimension present in everything

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[326] Monika K. Hellwig, "Sacrament: Christian Sacraments," in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 12, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 7958.
[327] Luke 22:19.
[328] Kallistos Ware, "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 395.
[329] Ware, "Ways of Prayer," 395.

else that we undertake."[330] The purpose of practicing unceasing prayer is to cultivate an awareness of the divine presence. [331]

Some practices are repeated throughout the day, as a way of constantly calling one's attention back to the presence of God. For Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and others, making the sign of the cross by touching the forehead, chest and both shoulders invokes the story of the crucifixion through the shape of the cross and is a reminder of the symbol of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[332] Frequent repetition of this simple physical ritual creates "a level of body awareness that can operate below the level of consciousness."[333] This subconscious awareness is also the intention behind the cultivation of silent repetitive prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer or Lord's Prayer.[334] Albert Haase describes this practice and its purpose in his book, *Living the Lord's Prayer*,

> I once heard someone say that God is like radio music playing in the background of life. I find the analogy helpful. Though I am not always consciously aware of it, the music continues playing. Once in awhile, a particular melody grabs my attention. Then I stop what I'm doing and hum along with the music. After a few moments or at the conclusion of the song, I go back to what I am doing. Sometimes my activity—some manual labor or enjoying a cup of tea—can proceed hand-in-hand with my singing for an extended period. At these times, the activity of the present moment and attention to the background music are bound together in one and the same act. Unceasing prayer is the traditional goal of the recitation and hallowing of the Name in the Jesus Prayer. It is analogous to our relationship with the radio music playing in the background. Periodically, the divine presence commands our attention. So we stop what we are doing and momentarily bask in the presence of God. Or we continue what we are doing but with the conscious awareness that we are doing it in God's presence. In either case, we have reached the first rung in

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[330] Ware, "Ways of Prayer," 395.
[331] Albert Haase, *Living the Lord's Prayer: The Way of the Disciple* (Downer's Grove: IVP Books, 2009), 86-87.
[332] Ryan, "Toward a Positive Spirituality of the Body," 42.
[333] R. A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 108.
[334] Demarest, "Jesus Prayer," 541.

> Benedict's ladder of humility, which is the awareness of the divine presence.[335]

This illustration closes by stating the purpose of any spiritual practice: to cultivate awareness of the presence of God.

Another practice of prayer that incorporates the body as well as breath is described by Orthodox theologian, Kallistos Ware in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*.

> (1) A particular bodily posture is adopted: [one is] seated, with the head and shoulders bowed, and the gaze directed toward the place of the heart or the navel. (2) The speed of the breathing is slowed down, and the words of the Jesus Prayer ("Lore Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me") are coordinated with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. . . . (3) Through a discipline of "inner exploration," attention is concentrated upon specific psychosomatic centers, . . . especially the heart."[336]

These methods of prayer and the ones that follow are all meant to be practiced with the same intention: to orient the awareness toward the presence of God. As with all things, paying attention gets easier with practice. For this reason, guidance on the discipline of prayer is frequently accompanied by an admonition to practice regularly, just as Paul wrote to "pray continually" (1 Thess 5:17).

Meditation, or Centering Prayer

Similar to (and some would argue the same as) the practice of unceasing prayer is Christian meditation. Some sources use the terms meditation, mental prayer, prayerful time, or centering prayer interchangeably. [337] Father John Main, a Benedictine whose method of meditation was drawn from both Western and Eastern traditions, said the goal

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[335] Haase, *Living the Lord's Prayer,* 86-87.
[336] Ware, "Ways of Prayer," 408-409.
[337] Marcy Braverman, "Meditation," in *Contemporary American Religion,* ed. Wade Clark Roof (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1999), 435.

of Christian meditation is "to allow God's mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but the reality which gives meaning, shape, and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are."[338] Christians practice centering prayer and other forms of meditation in order to "move beyond the 'faculties' (memory, imagination, reason, an affective emotion, which tends to reinforce the self-defining mechanisms of the ego) and to open to God at the most primodial level of the soul." Centering prayer integrates body, mind, and spirit in stillness to "release deeper levels of consciousness" and open the person praying to "contemplative union with God, not as an object of meditation but as a presence within and the source of all being."[339]

Though the practice of Christian meditation is ancient, it had a resurgence in the 1970s, during which old methods were revisited, developed, and honed by members of the monastic community, such as Father William Meniger, Father Basil Pennington, and Father Thomas Keating. Though these and other contemporary mystics have adapted a method of meditation to popular audiences, they stand in the long Christian contemplative tradition, integrating sources including Julian of Norwich, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the desert fathers, and St. John of the Cross.[340] Meninger, Pennington, Keating and others saw the impact of meditation on themselves and their communities and noted an increasing interest in Eastern meditation among younger Christians, who

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[338] James Bishop, *A Way in the Wilderness: A Commentary on the Rule of Benedict for the Physically and Spiritually Imprisoned* (Bloomsbury Academic: New York, 2012), 220.
[339] D. Kennedy and M. B. Pennington, "Prayer, Centering," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 601.
[340] Cynthia Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer," in *Contemporary American Religion,* ed. Wade Clark Roof (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1999), 104.

were perhaps unaware of the rich contemplative heritage of the Christian faith, which was largely neglected by Christians after the Reformation.[341]

Some who pioneered in the area of contemporary Christian meditation have written specific instructions on its method. John Main instructs Christian meditation as follows,

> Sit down.
> Sit still and upright.
> Close your eyes lightly.
> Sit relaxed but alert.
> Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word.
> We recommend the prayer-phrase *maranatha*.[342]
> Recite it as four syllables of equal length.
> Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously.
> Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise.
> If thoughts or images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word.
> Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.[343]

The Cistercian monks of Saint Joseph Abbey refined contemplative prayer from *The Cloud of Unknowing* as follows:

1. Sit relaxed and quiet.
2. Be in faith and love to God who dwells in the center of your being.
3. Take up a love word and let it be gently present, supporting your being to God in faith-filled love.
4. Whenever you become aware of anything else, simply, gently return to the Lord with the use of your prayer word.
5. After 20 minutes of meditation let the Our Father (or some other prayer) pray itself quietly within you.[344]

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[341] K. Kavanaugh and M. B. Pennington, "Spirituality, Christian (History of)," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 449.
[342] Aramaic expression meaning, "Come, Lord!"
[343] Benoît Standaert, *Spirituality: An Art of Living: A Monk's Alphabet of Spiritual Practices*, trans. Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck (Mineola (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 212.
[344] Kennedy and Pennington, "Prayer, Centering," 601.

Other common methods to facilitate Christian meditation are "rhythmical breathing, process meditation, the use of a mantra, mandala, or sacred symbol, and the repetition of the Jesus Prayer."[345]

Like with the Christian practice of yoga, some object to Christian meditation. Though mainstream Christianity generally accepted meditation, some conservative Christians denounce Christian meditation as a "thinly disguised attempt to introduce 'Eastern' spiritual practices into the Christian milieu," citing the common concern that too much clearing of the mind is dangerous. Adherents of Christian meditation counter that the discipline is letting go of conscious thoughts, but not the awareness of God or attention on the sacred word. Cultivation of Christian meditation amounts to spiritual surrender, the goal being an attentive heart rather than a still or clear mind.[346]

The renewal of Christian contemplative practices has extended the communal quality of monastic spirituality. Father Main's work inspired the birth of the World Community for Christian Meditation, a worldwide network that is inclusive of all denominations and connects individuals to one another and to resources that support the practice of daily Christian meditation.[347] Centering prayer is practiced by tens of thousands of Christians worldwide, resulting in organized networks such Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.[348]

Movement Practices

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[345] Ibid.
[346] Borgeault, "Centering Prayer," 104.
[347] World Community for Christian Meditation, St. Mark's, Myddelton Square, London, www.wccm.org.
[348] Bourgeault, "Centering Prayer," 104.

In addition to disciplines of unceasing prayer, Christians throughout history and today observe a variety of other spiritual practices that incorporate movement of the body. These movement practices have the same intention as prayer practices: to cultivate awareness of the presence of God. Roman Catholics and some Anglicans bow or genuflect (touch the right knee to the floor while keeping the upper body erect) upon entering and leaving the church. Eastern Orthodox Christians practice the *metania*, which is a deep bow from the waist with the right hand touching the floor, followed by standing up with a fluid sweep with the right hand, and a signing of oneself with the sign of the cross. Orthodox Christians are also known to bow before icons (images of saints) as well as kiss them and light candles before them. Pentecostal Christians are known for their expressive worship, including singing in tongues, clapping, dancing, raising hands, and shouting "amen" or "alleluia" during worship. Pentecostals and many evangelicals lay hands on one another during prayer for healing or blessing. Evangelical gatherings often include standing, sitting, kneeling, and bowing one's head and closing the eyes during worship or prayer.

These examples demonstrate the unlimited potential for embodied practices in a vitalized spiritual life. In considering the cultivation of any spiritual practice, such as Modern Postural Yoga, it is important for Christians to remember the intention of all spiritual practices: to orient one's awareness toward the presence of God.

Two Christians in particular who pioneered ways to orient one's awareness toward God in every moment of life were St. Benedict of Nursia and Brother Lawrence. Their teachings continue to inspire Christian spiritual disciplines to this day.

St. Benedict

One Christian tradition that emphasizes the presence of God in the midst of the rhythms and disciplines of daily life is Benedictine spirituality, which originated with Benedict of Nursia (480-547 CE) and his monastic rule in the sixth century.[349] The Rule of Benedict is "a practical guide for living the gospel and cultivating Christian virtues in the daily life of the monastic community."[350] A monastic rule is a blueprint for the disciplines of a monastic community. By observing the rhythms and practices prescribed by a particular monastic rule, multiple monastic communities could implement the same process of growth and cultivate parallel experiences for the individual monks.

Though there were other rules written and followed by various communities over the centuries, Benedict's Rule was the most prevalent.[351] Monks who follow Benedict's Rule are called Benedictines and make three vows: stability, obedience, and *conversatio morum*, or "fidelity to monastic life."[352] Benedictine life is highly disciplined. Days are divided up into manual labor, study, and prayer to create a balanced, sustainable rhythm in which one is, at all times, aware of the presence of God in every area of life: "The Benedictine's concern is for a balance between body, mind, and soul. Benedict's is no disincarnate spirituality; it is aimed at the conversion of the whole person. Everything, even tools, is part of God's gracious regime in the salvation of his people."[353]

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[349] Okholm, "Benedictine Spirituality," 299.
[350] Okholm, "Rule of St. Benedict," 724.
[351] Greg Peters, "Monasticism," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2011), 619.
[352] Okholm, "Benedictine Spirituality," 299-300.
[353] Ibid., 300.

In *The Body and Society*, Peter Brown describes how the body was an integral part of a monk's process of spiritual formation.

> The rhythms of the body and, with the body, his concrete social relations determined the life of the monk: his continued economic dependence on the settled world for food, the hard school of day-to-day collaboration with his fellow-ascetics in shared rhythms of labor, and mutual exhortation in the monasteries slowly changed his personality. The material conditions of the monk's life were held capable of altering the consciousness itself.[354]

Monastic communities mandated embodied practices and rhythms of life with the intention of molding the monks' personality and spirituality into a more Christlike existence. Over time, and in submission to the work of the Holy Spirit, the disciplines of the monastic life cultivated a constant awareness of the presence of God and led to deeper levels of spiritual maturity.

The monastic life is not an official church profession, organized within the hierarchy of church authority but is rather a chosen way of life that can be taken up by any layperson at any time. Bede Griffiths (1909-1993 CE) was a Benedictine monk and mystic known for his decades of work in the area of interfaith dialogue. In an article that was originally published in a newsletter from Saccidananda, the Christian ashram he founded in India, and published posthumously on the website, www.bedegriffiths.com, Griffiths reminds readers that,

> Saint Benedict was not himself a priest, and all his monks were laypeople. The monastic movement was a lay movement. In St. Benedict's time, monks were told to avoid two people—bishops and women—because a bishop would try to make you a priest and a woman would try to get you married. The monk was not a priest; he was a member of a lay community.

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[354] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 237.

> Today, more and more, the movement is growing in favor of lay communities.[355]

Griffiths' point is that the disciplined spiritual life is for everyone, not just priests in seminary or shoeless monks in a cloister. Awareness of the presence of God, being in all aspects and moments of life, from the mundane to the extraordinary, is accessible to all people who choose it. Benedict's Rule, with its rhythms of work, study, and prayer, helped monks in Benedictine communities cultivate this awareness and can inform the layperson who wants to do the same today.

Benedictine Spiritualities Today

Twenty-first century Christian communities can still rely on the wisdom of Benedict's process for spiritual formation. Andrew Arndt, a teaching pastor in Denver, Colorado, recounts a season of church growth during which their ministry staff decided to embark on a season of shared exploration of spiritual disciplines, as inspired by Benedict's Rule.

> To help accomplish this, we developed a rule of life. Drawing inspiration from sources like the sixth-century *Rule of Saint Benedict*, our rule would ground our spirituality in a constellation of embodied disciplines that we would practice in daily, weekly, and monthly rhythms. Thus, conversations about our spirituality as pastors resisted the Gnostic duality that separates spirituality from lived experience. We would not ask, "How is it with your soul?" Rather, we would inquire, "Have you been faithful in prayer?" We learned along the way that any questions about the concreteness of our practices were also unavoidably questions about the state of our souls. In searching for answers to questions concerning, for instance, why we had been lax in prayer, our interiority was laid bare: we didn't pray last week because, at our cores, we struggled to believe that prayer made any difference at all. Our embodied disciplines had a way of sounding out the depths of our souls.[356]

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[355] Bede Griffiths, "The Ashram and the Eucharist," *Bede Griffiths Sangha Index* (2001): 2-3.
[356] Andrew Arndt, "Holy Play: Toward Christian Engagement in Physical Fitness," *The Other Journal* 7.26 (March 7, 2016).

Arndt's observation that embodied disciplines expose spirituality aligns with Simon Chan's theology of the spirituality of all material things in chapter four. The exterior life is a mirror for the interior life.[357] This is the guiding purpose behind cultivating disciplines that integrate one's body with one's spirituality.

Brother Lawrence

Another monk is important for cultivating awareness of God in the midst of embodied, ordinary life. Brother Lawrence (1611-1691) is most prominently known for his short volume, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, which contains his writings and was published after his death.[358] The central message and legacy of Lawrence's writings can be summed up in one story:

> Shortly after entering a Carmelite monastery, Brother Lawrence was assigned duties in the kitchen. For several years, he labored with considerable frustration and resentment. Then, for reasons not fully known, he had a life-altering encounter with the reality of the presence of God—indeed, with God himself—in the kitchen. Often described by others as mystical, the resulting spirituality was not one of method or program but a way of life, an ongoing "practice."[359]

In *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence implores his readers, "Please keep my recommendation in mind that you think of God often; by day, by night, in your business, and even in your diversions. He is always near you and with you."[360]

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[357] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 136.
[358] W. David Buschart, "Brother Lawrence (1611-1691)," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2011), 320.
[359] Ibid.
[360] Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1982), 54.

A tool Lawrence used to help him practice the presence of God was to constantly calm his mind and center his awareness on God's presence at all times, not just during times of formal prayer. Lawrence writes,

> One way to re-collect the mind easily in the time of prayer, and preserve it more in tranquility, is not to let it wander too far at other times. Keep your mind strictly in the presence of God. Then being accustomed to think of Him often, you will find it easy to keep your mind calm in the time of prayer, or at least to recall it from its wanderings.[361]

What Brother Lawrence is describing is analogous to the Western definition of mindfulness—that "awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose"—of the presence of God.

Brother Lawrence stresses the importance of practicing awareness of God's presence, but he does not offer a practical method to achieve this awareness. The postures and breathing of Modern Postural Yoga provide a way. When implemented by Christians who desire to orient their minds to the presence of God, Modern Postural Yoga can have the same result described by Brother Lawrence. Thomas Ryan describes the mind-stilling effects of MPY practice:

> The goal of yoga is to center us, to ground us, to sensitize us, to make us present, to make us all here, now. It quiets the body as the environment of the mind, and then empties the mind and makes of it a blank page. In this state of focused awareness, one is not aiming at a deeper understanding of a truth, but at a direct, intuitive experience of the Presence at the center of our being.[362]

Ryan surmises that perhaps it is due to the simplicity of MPY's slow and mindful stretching and breathing that it is overlooked as beneficial to cultivating a mental state of prayer:

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[361] Ibid., 51.
[362] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart*, 182.

> The surprise is always that "something as ordinary as a set of exercises" has such an amazing ability to alleviate stress and dispel our scatteredness. All the masters of prayer dwell much on the importance of preventing the mind from moving away from God once it has been focused there, preventing it from engaging with the distractions which present themselves. But insufficient attention is given to how one arrives at such a state of self-possessed calm and control. The basic postures of yoga and simple breath control offer themselves as an answer—not the only answer, but one that certain people will find very helpful. When one teaches them, one almost expects to hear "Is that all there is to it?" They are, like the Incarnation, scandalously "ordinary."[363]

The practice of MPY is simple: breathe, move, breathe, move, and do it all mindfully. The research presented at the end of chapter three, however, highlights that the simplicity of MPY does not negate its effectiveness. The connection between the body and the mind is indisputable and can be leveraged as an ideal setting to cultivate awareness of the presence of God.

In *Spiritual Theology*, Simon Chan, a Singaporean Pentecostal theologian, describes an array of spiritual exercises, or disciplines, beginning with an assortment of mindfulness and prayer practices intended to constantly reorient the believers' awareness to the presence of God. These practices align with Saint Benedict's and Brother Lawrence's monastic prescriptions, and they include: recollection, or "the habit of turning to God at regular times throughout the working day"; recitation of the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"; observation of the church calendar; and acknowledging the providence of God in the happenings of the world.[364] Chan goes on to describe and encourage readers to try other spiritual exercises as well, including crafting a rule of life, in which a person designs a daily, weekly, or

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[363] Ibid., 184.
[364] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 141-147.

monthly rhythm of spiritual disciplines and exercises.[365] Chan encourages experimentation with disciplines to find those that help one cultivate awareness of the presence of God, suggesting that any embodied discipline, even MPY, can serve the purpose of spiritual formation.

MPY as a Christian Spiritual Discipline

After establishing that Scripture compels an incorporation of the body in spirituality and that Christian tradition supports the cultivation of contemplative prayer, some Christians might be left wondering how to embody their spirituality. Caring for physical needs, choosing personal purity of thought and action, and practicing embodied practices and sacraments all incorporate the body in faith and worship of God. Because it is a holistic mind-body practice, MPY is perfectly engineered to serve these purposes as a spiritual discipline.

Brother Lawrence stresses the importance of constant awareness of the presence of God, saying it is quite easy to maintain once it is achieved. The question still remains, however, how does one achieve constant awareness of God? Father Thomas Ryan explains the effectiveness of MPY postures to still the mind and body and prepare a Christian for meditation:

> If one comes to meditate but the body and mind are not prepared and the energies are not balanced, there is inner conflict. The mind resists because it is unable to concentrate, or the body suffers because it is not accustomed to holding one position for an extended period of time. . . . If one has been practicing certain recommended postures and using a simple technique to regulate breathing, there will be fewer mental distractions and difficulties coming from the body. The postures stimulate the glands and increase the

[365] Ibid., 190-195.

> flow of blood to all organs. They also loosen the muscles and joints, releasing tension from and giving greater flexibility to the body.[366]

Entering into a time of contemplation, prayer, or meditation comes more naturally after an MPY practice. As Ryan explains, "transforming the environment of the bodymind and priming it for meditation is the primary reason for the development of the yoga postures and breathing exercises."[367] This is in line with the historical purpose of the *asana* (posture) of the Eight-Limbed Path. Ancient classical yoga was developed to help practitioners cultivate an advanced meditation practice. Any adherent of a religious tradition that values meditation should consider the methods of the Eight-Limbed Path, now distilled to MPY, accessible as a practice. Modern Postural Yoga affirms the value and goodness of the human body and provides ample opportunity for Christians to orient their awareness to the uninterrupted presence of God.

The Importance of Right Intention for Spiritual Practice

Any spiritual discipline must be undertaken with the right intention in order for the grace of God to work in the heart and will of the believer. Like any spiritual discipline, MPY should be approached with the intention to orient one's awareness toward the constant presence of God. Without that intention, MPY is merely a healthy mind-body fitness practice.

Dallas Willard discusses the importance of intention with regard to spiritual disciplines in his book, *Renovation of the Heart.* Willard sets forth a simple model for spiritual formation, and indeed all human accomplishment, with the acronym VIM, which

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[366] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart*, 186.
[367] Ibid., 236.

stands for Vision, Intention, and Means.[368] All transformation starts with vision of "a desirable state of being."[369] In terms of Christian spiritual formation, this means being guided by a vision for life in the kingdom of heaven, constantly operating within the will of God.[370] Intention is next. With the vision of life in the kingdom, the next step is to choose, or intend, to live there.[371] This is the individual Christian's response to the vision. Finally, Willard writes, "the vision and solid intention to obey Christ will naturally lead to seeking out and applying the means to that end."[372] The means in this model are the "how," or the specific actions that result in spiritual formation. Guided by Jesus, scripture, and the people of God, the Christian who desires spiritual transformation will always incorporate these three elements: vision, intention, and means.

An example of the importance of intention can be found in Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. The two men were both engaged in the same discipline, prayer, but their intentions were different. The Pharisee addressed God from a place of pride and gloating, listing out his many pious works. The tax collector prayed in humility with downcast eyes, "beat his breast," and prayed a version of the Jesus Prayer, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Jesus explains that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, "went home justified before God" (Luke 18:14) because of his humility in prayer. Immediately after telling this parable, Jesus illustrates his point by allowing the little children to come to him: "Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:17).

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[368] Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 85.
[369] Ibid., 84.
[370] Ibid., 87.
[371] Ibid.
[372] Ibid., 89.

In order for any spiritual discipline—including MPY—to "work," the posture of the heart is paramount. At all times, Christians must approach their MPY practice with the intention to become more aware of the constant presence of God, and to allow the Spirit of God to work in the heart of the believer. Practical suggestions for how to practice cultivating one's awareness of the presence of God are found in the Appendix.

Inculturation

The importance of intention is illustrated by the concept of *inculturation*, which describes the articulation of Church teachings to various cultural contexts and, in turn, the influence of those cultures on the evolution of these teachings. Protestants call this concept "contextual theology."[373] The process of inculturation occurs regularly in missional contexts in order for practices and symbols to maintain both faithfulness to the Christian tradition and relevance to the surrounding culture of the faith community. Through the process of inculturation, practices that might be foreign to historic Christianity are adopted, while still maintaining the gospel at their core. This concept can be applied to MPY. A spiritual formation practice that might be culturally foreign to Christian spirituality can be infused with gospel truth through the process of inculturation.

A perfect example of inculturation is a 2010 story about a group in Togo, West Africa who planted and discipled churches in remote villages. One fledgling church in the village of Lassa Tchou, who encountered the gospel for the first time in their native Kabiye language, read the story of the Last Supper. They read and heard the words

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[373] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 447-457.

"bread" and "wine," but no one in the village had ever heard of or seen wine made from grapes. The missionaries explained the meaning of the Eucharist and Jesus' command to continue observing it, and they left it up to the church and the village elders to decide how best to go about observing Eucharist in Lassa Tchou. The village's decision is an example of inculturation: they decided to observe the Eucharist with a basic fire-roasted flatbread—a staple of every village meal—and local millet beer, called *tchouk*, which is brewed by women in the village, and consumed out of a shared calabash bowl. The gospel of Jesus intersected with life in the village of Lassa Tchou, and the one influenced the other without losing the meaning of the Eucharist. That is the power of the gospel.

Alan Hirsch, author of *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*, uses a different word to describe inculturation: incarnational. Referring to the incarnation of Jesus and reflecting the embodied nature of MPY, it is helpful to think of the Christian practice of yoga with this term. "Incarnational mission requires that we contextualize the Gospel in ways that honor the particular culture and existential situations of various peoples without compromising on the mission itself."[374] In this case, the culture can be understood to mean the contemporary Western culture that embraces MPY. Christians have an opportunity to be good news to bodies—literally incarnate—in the world of Modern Postural Yoga.

Modern Postural Yoga is a commonplace practice in contemporary Western culture. Rather than maintaining separation from MPY, Christian spirituality can be inculturated into MPY without sacrificing its Christian integrity.

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[374] Alan Hirsch, "What I Mean by Incarnational," posted on his Facebook page, May 9, 2011, http://www.facebook.com/notes/alan-hirsch /what-do-i-mean-by-incarnational/10150189514096009.

Research on MPY's Impact on Personal Spirituality

Many Christians have experienced the effects of MPY on their spirituality. Just as moving the body affects the mind, moving the body affects the spirit. Thomas Ryan explains, "The psychology behind religion body language is the same as that expressed when a man says, 'I kiss my wife because I love her; but kissing her also helps me love her.' The various actions expressed through the body are meant to both incline and align the body toward and with the mind and heart."[375] One study in Germany set out to observe the connection between MPY and spirituality. The results of the study were published in a 2012 article that focuses on the spiritual aspects of yoga.[376] With standardized tests, the article's authors measured changes in various aspects of spirituality, mindfulness, life satisfaction and positive mood in 160 individuals over the course of the first six months of a yoga teacher training program.[377]

The most significant findings were that several aspects of spirituality, including conscious interactions/compassion, religious orientation, and mindfulness all increased significantly. The results of the study suggest that "an intensive yoga practice (1) may significantly increase specific aspects of practitioners' spirituality, mindfulness, and mood, (2) that these changes are dependent in part on their original spiritual/religious self-perception, and (3) that there are strong correlations amongst these constructs (i.e. conscious interactions/compassion and mindfulness)."[378]

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[375] Ryan, "Toward a Positive Spirituality of the Body," 41-42.
[376] Büssing, et al., "Development of Specific Aspects," 2.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Ibid.,1.

The intention of the study was to "investigate whether and how specific aspects of spirituality may change within a six-month intensive yoga practice."[379] To address this question, the researchers chose "individuals who were already practicing yoga and decided to start a yoga teacher training, which would subject them to a greater intensity, frequency, and duration of practice."[380] The study began in March 2010, with data collected from 160 individuals enrolled in an intensive teacher training in Germany. The researchers administered standardized tests and collected data at the beginning, at the three-month mark, and at the end of six months. For the six-month duration of the study, the subjects met weekly for three hours, every eight weeks for a weekend intensive, and were given recommended supplemental reading at home. Participants learned and practiced "specific postures (*asanas*); breathing practices (*pranayama*), relaxation and meditation practices, and specific mantras. Moreover, they were also provided with instructions in the cultivation and development of positive qualities and attitudes based on the classical yoga teachings, and given lectures on yoga philosophy, and so forth." In addition to formal instruction, participants were advised to practice what they were learning at home for at least one hour each day and were also encouraged to observe the yogic lifestyle, including "adoption of a vegetarian diet, renunciation from drugs (including caffeine), and ethical behavior as described in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*."[381]

During the six-month period that they collected data, the specific aspects of spirituality of conscious interactions/compassion and religious orientation both increased significantly. Lightheartedness/relief and mindfulness also increased significantly.

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[379] Ibid., 2.
[380] Ibid., 2.
[381] Ibid., 2-3.

Additionally, the spiritual aspects of search for insight/wisdom and life satisfaction increased marginally.[382] "Some practitioners stated that while they have turned away from institutionalized religion years before, they have now rediscovered their relationship to their Christian traditions and have become more familiar with the underlying beliefs and practices—via their yoga practice."[383]

How MPY as a Spiritual Discipline Fits into Christian Spiritual Formation

Spiritual disciplines are part of a larger area of Christian spirituality called spiritual formation. Spiritual disciplines are the tools Christians use to grow in spiritual maturity, which is the process of spiritual formation. Modern Postural Yoga, when practiced as a spiritual discipline, fits into a model of Christian spiritual formation in much the same way as the more traditional spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual formation describes the process of maturation of an individual's faith. Jeffrey Greenman defines spiritual formation as "our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith for the sake of others."[384] Formation, Tom Schwanda writes, is "always occurring because shaping influences are ubiquitous and unrelenting. However, such formation may actually be negative and deformative, shaping a person in ways that are at odds with the gospel. Therefore, the proper question is not *whether* one is being formed, but *how* and *in what direction*."[385] The intention of Christian spiritual

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[382] Ibid., 4.
[383] Ibid., 6.
[384] Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 11-12.
[385] Schwanda, "Formation, Spiritual," 452, epmphasis original.

formation, to be shaped "into the likeness of Jesus Christ,"[386] is similarly stated by Marjorie Thompson: "to allow Christ to be formed in us."[387] Historically, spiritual formation referred to a process used by the Roman Catholic Church for developing priests, but through the centuries Christian tradition has acknowledged that growth is part of all Christian journeys, regardless of vocation.[388] Thus, spiritual formation is a concept that applies to every Christian's spirituality.

The definition of spiritual formation provides a *why* to the spiritual disciplines' *how.* Spiritual disciplines are tools for helping Christians cultivate an awareness of God. The outcome of spiritual disciplines is greater spiritual maturity. This is the process of spiritual formation. Greenman's definition contains the key phrase, "for the sake of others."[389] This outward impulse is central to the Christian faith: that Christians are formed into the likeness of Christ so that they may serve other people. The purpose of spiritual formation is not for the gain of the individual, but for the sake of the world. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. uses the same phrase when he defines spiritual formation as the "process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others."[390]

Hagberg and Guelich's model for spiritual formation, which they set forth in their book, *The Critical Journey*, applies to this conversation because the authors have used stage theory to identify a clear pattern of growth over the lifespan of a Christian. The structure of the stages bears some resemblance to the Eight-Limbed Path described by the

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[386] Greenman and Kalantzis, *Life in the Spirit*, 11-12.
[387] Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 8.
[388] Schwanda, "Formation, Spiritual," 452-453.
[389] Greenman and Kalantzis, *Life in the Spirit*, 11-12.
[390] M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 19.

Yoga Sutras and observed by yoga practitioners around the world for deepening personal spirituality. As a Christian spiritual discipline, MPY fits aptly into the Critical Journey, helping Christians develop their personal spirituality and providing a meaningful physical metaphor for the spiritual journey.

Hagberg and Guelich's Critical Journey

Hagberg and Guelich's *The Critical Journey* describes in detail the stages in a life of faith. They use the metaphor of a journey because it "implies more than a quick trip from point A to point B. It is more extended, with the time and places between departure and final destination being important for their own sake."[391] Though Hagberg and Guelich use the language of stages to describe the development of one's spiritual life, they point out that the stages are not hierarchical, with each stage superior to the one before. Like the stages of a human life—childhood, adolescence, adulthood, elder years—each stage is vital and has characteristics worth cherishing. "Each builds developmentally on the previous experience, but we are not inherently better people as adults than we were as children."[392] Additionally, Hagberg and Guelich state that their stage model is fluid and cumulative. A Christian in stage three of his or her journey of faith might vacillate between the first three stages and then move to stage four abruptly as a result of one event.[393] Then he or she would continue forward, experiencing all four stages.

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[391] Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey* (Salem: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1995), 5.
[392] Ibid., 8.
[393] Ibid.

Hagberg and Guelich identify six stages on the journey of faith: (1) the Recognition of God, (2) the Life of Discipleship, (3) the Productive Life, (4) The Journey Inward, followed by The Wall, which is not a stage but an event that occurs on the Journey Inward, (5) the Journey Outward, and finally (6) the Life of Love.

In describing the first stage, the Recognition of God, Hagberg and Guelich explain that some people encounter God as experiential rather than rational. "We are not given to thinking about God. Rather we simply experience the presence of God. We can see God in the sunrise over a cool summer lake . . . Some feel God in the soft velvet of the altar cloth warmed by the burning candle and sense God's presence in worship or the liturgy. And some experience God in the creative process. In other words, we do not experience God's presence primarily in a rational way but in an experiential way, using the various senses."[394] This is the same lived experience reported by many MPY practitioners who encounter God on their yoga mats or by runners who encounter God on the lonely trails. Depending on the circumstances, this stage of recognizing God usually accompanies a sense of awe or a sense of need.[395]

Stage Two, the Life of Discipleship, is characterized by learning and belonging. Usually during this stage, a Christian is deeply affected by a spiritual leader or mentor, such as his or her church pastor.[396] Stage Three, the Productive Life, is the "doing" stage, where a Christian discovers and uses his or her gifts and talents to glorify God.[397]

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[394] Ibid., 37.
[395] Ibid., 36.
[396] Ibid., 53.
[397] Ibid., 74.

Stage Four, the Journey Inward, is a mode of questioning, doubting, exploring, and struggling. Hagberg and Guelich write that stage four "almost comes as an unsettling experience yet results in healing for those who continue through it." On the Journey Inward, a faith that has been so externally focused begins to shift inward into difficult heart work between the Christian and God. Generally speaking, people begin the Journey Inward as a result of a life or faith crisis. During this stage, "we often look hopeless to those around us."[398] The Journey Inward is characterized by an apparent loss of faith and the painful discovery that "God is not who we had thought God was. God is very different."[399] In order to move from stage four to stage five, Hagberg and Guelich write, we must face "our insatiable hunger to continue searching for the self." The earlier stages of faith encourage and necessitate a search for self, but in order to progress along the journey, we must consciously choose to "let go of the search for self, except as it is continually revealed to us by God in the stuff of our lives."[400]

The Journey Inward also contains an important landmark on the journey of faith: The Wall. "The Wall represents our will meeting God's will face to face."[401] Experiencing and ultimately moving through the Wall is a unique experience for each person. Going through the Wall is the process of surrendering one's will to the will of God, "brick by brick," and to heal the crises and questions that triggered or were stirred up by the Journey Inward.[402] The Wall is the moment of transition from stage four to

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[398] Ibid., 93.
[399] Ibid., 98.
[400] Ibid., 108.
[401] Ibid., 114.
[402] Ibid., 119.

stage five. Without the conscious choice to surrender and move through the wall, one's journey will not continue.

The fifth stage is the Journey Outward. Grounded in a profound awareness of God's love and acceptance, a Christian on the Journey Outward is fully surrendered to God's will. This affects every area of life—work, social life, sense of self—and allows God to work through areas of weakness.[403] A person on the Journey Outward is characterized by a deep calm or stillness.[404]

The sixth and last stage is the Life of Love. This stage is marked by a Christ-like wisdom, compassion, and detachment from worldly concerns. Just as Jesus displayed supernatural acts of compassion, "even in Gethsemane, at his trial, and on the cross," so a Christian in this stage will demonstrate similar love beyond a human capacity.[405]

The Critical Journey and the Eight-Limbed Path

As a model for spiritual discipline, Patanjali's Eight-Limbed Path discussed in chapter three is comparable to Hagberg and Guelich's Critical Journey. Like the Critical Journey, the Eight-Limbed Path unfolds in stages, cumulatively. A yogi on the Eight-Limbed Path will begin by practicing *yama* (self-restraints) and *niyama* (observances). These are broad lifestyle choices: nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, celibacy, nongreed, bodily purification, contentment, ascetic practice, study of sacred lore, and dedication to the Lord of Yoga.[406] The characteristics of a yogi in this stage might be compared to those of a Christian in stages two or three, the Life of Discipleship or the

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[403] Ibid., 135.
[404] Ibid., 148.
[405] Ibid., 155.
[406] Miller, *Yoga*, 53.

Productive Life. On both the Eight-Limbed Path and the Critical Journey, these stages are marked by zeal, action, learning, and growth.

Progressing further along the eight limbs, a yogi will practice *asana* (postures and movement) and *pranayama* (breathing techniques) in preparation for the fifth through eighth limbs. *Asana* and *pranayama* prepare the body and mind for meditation practice. *Asana* and *pranayama* might be compared chronologically with the Journey Inward, but the Journey Inward is much more complex. While *asana* and *pranayama* cultivate the muscles, joints, and breath in preparation for contemplative calm, the Journey Inward describes a time of life or faith crisis. A Christian on the Journey Inward has accumulated some strong certainties about life and faith and has reached an impasse: for all the spiritual answers, there is still a vacuum for direction, a vacuum for God.

Still, a Christian might make ready use of *asana* and *pranayama* (the major components of MPY) in much the same way as a yogi. A Christian on the Journey Inward can find tremendous comfort and meaning in spiritual disciplines like MPY. When intellectual answers to nagging spiritual questions might seem hollow and insufficient, the "felt sense of rightness"[407] Thomas Ryan describes in embodied spiritual practices provides a welcome relief from the temptation to over-think one's spiritual crisis. Approaching MPY as a spiritual discipline teaches a yogi to marvel at the goodness and value of their human body and in turn to glorify the Creator. Such a practice can serve to rekindle the initial awe and need for God that he or she might have felt in stage one, the Recognition of God. The Journey Inward is a lonely time where a Christian might feel like he or she is drowning in questions, but brief moments of

[407] Ryan, "Toward a Positive Spirituality of the Body," 40.

connection to the goodness of all creation made manifest in the human body can provide a lifeline.

The stories of Jonah and Elijah both illustrate this connection to creation. When Jonah evangelized to Ninevah, God showed grace and spared the city. This angered Jonah, who did not understand God. Instead of explaining lofty concepts to Jonah, God taught Jonah a lesson through the tangible objects of the shade vine—grown in one day and withered the next—to explain that God's ways are higher than Jonah's (Jon. 1-4). A physical illustration helped to provide answers where words might have failed. Elijah's story also illustrates this pattern (1 Kings 18-19). When Queen Jezebel sought to kill him for what he did to the prophets of Baal, Elijah despaired and retreated into the wilderness. Exhausted and wishing to die, Elijah complained to God that things were not working out for him, though he alone in Israel had served God faithfully. "I have had enough, Lord," he said, "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4). Again, rather than explaining God's plans, the Lord sent an angel to care for Elijah's physical needs, with bread and water. When a Christian is in stage four, the Journey Inward, they are no longer seeking an answer. In the words of Hagberg and Guelich, "We are seeking deep inner direction for our lives. We want peace in our brokenness."[408] The simplicity of embodied spiritual disciplines such as MPY can provide that peace.

After *asana* and *pranayama*, the Eight-Limbed Path can still be loosely compared to the stages of the Critical Journey after the Wall. The fifth through eighth limbs are increasing levels of meditative discipline, ultimately resulting in "pure contemplation," which is a state of bliss. The description of a Christian in the final stages of the Critical

[408] Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 97.

Journey is similar: characterized by deep calm, stillness, transcendent joy, wisdom, compassion, and detachment from worldly concerns. In summary, though the Eight-Limbed Path is not exactly the same as the Critical Journey, and ultimately guides the practitioner only to a refined meditation practice, the stage model of development is similar. The components of MPY—*asana* and *pranayama*—can be applied to both journeys.

The Journey of MPY as a Metaphor for the Critical Journey

In addition to the journey of the Eight-Limbed Path, a Christian's development of a personal MPY practice can also serve as a metaphor for his or her own Critical Journey. Much like a Christian experiences the stages of the Critical Journey in succession and cumulatively, a developing yogi on her journey of MPY will also experience similar stages of recognition, growth, output, frustration, stagnation, healing, and even surrender, all in terms of the discipline of posture, breath, and awareness. In my personal twelve-year yoga practice and as an MPY teacher, I have observed that the journey of the yogi can serve as a ready metaphor for Christian spiritual life. To recognize the journey of MPY as a metaphor for the spiritual life can be a source of comfort and inspiration for a Christian on the Critical Journey. Again this corroborates with Simon Chan's explanation of the external life as a mirror for the inner life.[409]

Like Hagberg and Guelich's first stage, the Recognition of God, anyone who cultivates an MPY practice has a moment of recognition. Over the years I have heard many people refer to this as an "aha" moment, when they discovered that MPY was for them. Some individuals of an athletic persuasion discover that MPY is difficult,

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[409] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 136.

exhausting, challenging, great for flexibility or injury prevention, and helps them increase their athletic ability. Some individuals, after their first MPY class, have said, "I've never felt so in tune with my body as I do now." The total-body sensation of calm and well-being is powerful. Some individuals discover a relief from chronic pain that no chiropractor, acupuncturist, masseuse, or pain medication could mitigate. Personally, I remember remarking that the hour spent on a yoga mat, paying close attention to my breath, balance, and alignment created a profound oasis of "here-ness" and "now-ness" in my chaotic world of social media consumption and to-do lists. Whatever the rationale, there is always a moment of recognition that causes the future yogi to vow, "I will do this again."

After the moment of recognition, a yogi enters a stage of learning, much like Hagberg and Guelich's stage two, the Life of Discipleship. During this stage the yogi is a learner and might experience fear and inadequacy mixed with excitement of new learning, much like a growing Christian.[410] Also like growing Christians, yogis in this stage are highly dependent on their teachers to provide advice and instruction that deepens their practice. MPY practice is detailed and continues to evolve and expand. There is plenty of information to ingest by those voracious enough to seek it out. A yogi in this stage might attend workshops or retreats, sample new styles of classes, or even invest in a 200-hour teacher training.

After the stage of discipleship, the next stage of a yogi resembles the Productive Life. In an MPY setting, the most obvious expression of this is to become a teacher. Hagberg and Guelich's description of this stage in the spiritual journey also applies to

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[410] Ibid., 53.

MPY: "This is usually a very active phase on the critical journey. It is positive and dynamic, centered on being productive in the area of our faith. It nourishes us because it is so personally rewarding, even when the objective is to help others."[411]

Anyone who has ever pursued a discipline knows the inevitable plateau that comes after the beginning season of abundant growth. Hagberg and Guelich identify it as the Journey Inward, a time of crisis in which there are more questions than answers. For a yogi, the Journey Inward might parallel a plateau. Perhaps the yogi has mastered all the basic poses and even many advanced ones, but his or her development has slowed to a crawl. Perhaps the yogi begins comparing his or her abilities or body with that of others and comes to believe that yoga is not "working." This is the Journey Inward. Knowing that this is a natural and common stage on the journey can be comforting to yogis. For Christians who practice MPY, it can be comforting and inspiring to relate this stage to their own spiritual lives. The practice of MPY provides a metaphor for the spiritual journey.

Just as all disciplines contain plateaus, every plateau ends at the Wall. For Hagberg and Guelich, moving through the Wall requires surrender of one's will to God's will and acceptance of God's unconditional love. For yogis, moving through the wall also requires a conscious choice to let go of previously held notions about MPY practice and consciously redefine their purposes for practice. Like the Journey Inward and the Wall of the Critical Journey, this is a deeply personal, internal experience. Later stages of development might resemble the early stages of zealous learning and productivity, but the heart and intention behind them is different.

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[411] Ibid., 73.

Summary: Christian Spiritual Formation

The process of Christian spiritual formation is the shaping of a believer into the likeness of Christ for the sake of others. One of the primary tools in the process of spiritual formation is spiritual disciplines. There is precedent in the Christian tradition for a wide variety of embodied and meditative disciplines that orient the practitioner's awareness to the uninterrupted presence of God. Because it combines the external (movements of the body and breath) with the internal (focused awareness of God's presence), Modern Postural Yoga is a tool that applies to the process of spiritual formation, and many Christians have experienced growth as a result of practicing it. As a model for developing a meditation practice, some the stages of the Eight-Limbed Path apply to a Christian's process of spiritual formation, and the third and fourth limbs in particular serve as effective methods of cultivating a Christian meditation practice.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion and Integration

From the first five chapters, this thesis concludes the following: Ancient classical yoga, particularly the Eight-Limbed Path found in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (and out of which Modern Postural Yoga emerged) does not comprise Hindu religious practice, nor does it belong to Hinduism or any other religion. Modern Postural Yoga is "safe" for Christians to practice and offers benefits to the general population. Informed by a biblical theology of the body as integral to the human identity and spirituality, Christians should feel free to approach MPY as a spiritual practice, with the intention of cultivating an awareness of the presence of God.

One Final Case Study: The Benefits of a Unified Exercise Program

A final case study illustrates the impact of exercise as a spiritual discipline. A 2013 study published in the *Journal of Religion and Health* reports, "Physical fitness expressed through exercise can be, if done with the right intention, a form of spiritual discipline that reflects the relational love of humanity to God as well as an expression of a healthy love of the embodied self.[412] Tracey Greenwood and Teresa Delgado studied individuals with a variety of physical disabilities, all of whom felt an adversarial relationship with their bodies. The study observed the individuals as they participated in what Greenwood and Delgado referred to as a "unified exercise program," the goal of which was to "assist clients to reunite their physical bodies with their spiritual desires, to teach them not to be ashamed of their weakened flesh but to regain respect for it and to

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[412] Greenwood and Delgado, "A Journey," 941.

learn to work with it in a sacred fashion."[413] The physical exercise program was not drastically different from the way a physically able person trains. What set the exercise program apart was the same thing that sets MPY apart from other forms of exercise: the emotional and spiritual aspects that were integrated with the physical exercise.[414]

> Part of the program designed for these special needs clients contained a verbal component that was performed simultaneously with the physical exercise. The clients would reiterate their goals for entering the program out loud and state a blessing in their lives for which they could give thanks to remind them of the connection of the body, will, emotion, and spiritual essence … Every exercise session ended with 5-10 min of mindful stretching and meditation, much like the meditation practice used in yoga. During this time, each client would silently reflect back on the intentions that they set for that day's workout at the beginning of the session, and what they were thankful for achieving through today's session, while an inspirational/spiritual piece of literature or scripture was read to them. All of this provided reminders of the ways in which they were bringing together the elements of an able body, focused will, positive emotion, and spiritual self into their practice of exercise.[415]

Greenwood and Delgado's unified exercise program is a holistic discipline, because it integrates and acknowledges every aspect of their participants' minds and bodies.

The outcome for the participants involved in the study was positive. Greenwood and Delgado observed that the participants were "able to do more tasks on their own, felt less fatigued and less embarrassed."[416] Additionally, the participants experienced emotional benefits from the unified exercise program: "They seemed to lose the humiliation and guilt they originally felt. Their anger toward themselves, society, and God subsided. They realized they were truly able to overcome their suffering and feel

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[413] Ibid., 950.
[414] Ibid., 951.
[415] Ibid., 950.
[416] Ibid., 951.

whole again. Physical exercise may not have healed their injuries or diseases, but it improved their sense of mind/body/spirit cohesion."[417]

The outcome for all Christians is the valuable insight into the damage done when the body and the soul are disconnected, as well as a reminder of the profound impact of holistic mind-body practices. Instead of reinforcing an adversarial relationship between body and self, anyone of any ability can find ways to acknowledge and thereby honor the body as integral to the human being. Though perhaps not the only answer, certain Christians will find Modern Postural Yoga to be one such way. What follows is a brief summary of the conclusions of this thesis, based on comparative religious, historical, and theological scholarship, integrated with research in the mental health and medical fields. These conclusions provide a rationale for Christians to practice Modern Postural Yoga as a spiritual discipline.

MPY is Not Hindu and is Therefore Safe for Christians to Practice

Many oppose the Christian practice of MPY because of yoga's Hindu roots. This perspective is rooted in the assumption that ancient classical yoga comprises Hindu religious practice. In truth, the word "yoga" has many meanings, and the yoga set forth in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* is not and never was integral to Hinduism or any other religion but was practiced by Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Muslims. Though some philosophy in the *Sutras* might be problematic for Christians to accept, the Eight-Limbed Path is a model for developing an advanced meditation practice, and its method does not require any religious doctrine. Furthermore, the MPY that is practiced in the West today bears little resemblance to ancient classical yoga and is an areligious discipline that

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[417] Ibid.

accommodates any amount of spirituality. MPY is a modern Western fitness phenomenon that does not require its practitioners to adhere to any religious doctrine. Practicing MPY does not compromise faith in Jesus Christ.

MPY Offers Benefits to the General Population

As a fitness regimen, MPY offers the same physical benefits as many other fitness practices: increased flexibility and strength, injury prevention, weight loss, and more. MPY's holistic nature distinguishes it as particularly beneficial by adding the elements of breath work, mindfulness, relaxation, and mental focus. The psychosomatic principle and the somatopsychic principle corroborate the interconnectedness of all parts of the human being. MPY cultivates the body and the mind; stretching and strengthening postures coupled with mindfulness result in short-term and long-term improvements in individual well-being. Decades of research affirm the efficacy of mindfulness interventions in improving symptoms of various disorders, and many of these mindfulness intervention techniques—like deep breathing and nonjudgmental awareness of sensation—are also present in a typical session of MPY. Because it is a holistic mind-body practice, Modern Postural Yoga offers benefits to the general population.

Though some Christians accept that MPY is "safe" to practice, they might draw the line at incorporating it into their spiritual disciplines. This reluctance correlates to the fundamentalist notion that the purpose of the Christian faith is to save souls, not care for human bodies, which finds its rational support in a dualist understanding of the human being—that the essence of personhood is found in the immaterial soul, which is encased temporarily in a physical body. Before making a case that MPY can be incorporated in

spirituality, it is essential to present a theological rationale to value the human body and acknowledge its role in the spiritual journey.

Scripture Affirms the Value of the Human Body

Genesis proclaims that human beings are God's image bearers, reflecting the glory of God, and as such the human body is sacred. Jesus' teaching and ministry compel us to care for our bodies and the bodies of others, and the incarnation of Jesus asserts that to be human is to be embodied. Paul instructs Christians to honor God with their bodies. Modern Postural Yoga also affirms the value and goodness of the human body. During a typical session of MPY, practitioners might be guided through mindfulness practices of listening to the body and experiencing gratitude for the abilities one has in the body. Cultivating a personal commitment to value one's body is in line with Simon Chan's position that all created things are sacramental in nature.

MPY Classes are a Place for Christians to be Good News

MPY classes are uniquely positioned to intersect with the good news that God values human bodies. In a typical MPY class, the body is honored and cared for through breath, mindfulness, and movement. Christians can add purpose to this practice: ours is a spirituality that affirms the value of the human body through the *imago Dei*, the ministry and teachings of Jesus, and the writings of Paul. Matthew Anderson writes, "If ever the dignity and status of the body were in question, it is now, and evangelicals have an opportunity to welcome bodies of all sorts, giving them an intrinsic dignity and worth

they may not have elsewhere."[418] Christians have an opportunity and a responsibility to communicate the good news of the value of human bodies.

MPY Classes Can Be Good News to Anyone (Even Christians)

Christians can bring the good news of the gospel into the space of an MPY class, and the reverse is also true: that MPY classes offer good news to Christians. As demonstrated by the examples of Christian resistance to yoga in chapter two, there are many Christians who hold a fundamentalist understanding of the purpose of the Christian faith—to save souls only. Furthermore, Christians are not immune to the ailments for which MPY provides relief. MPY is one setting where, in the words of Thomas Ryan, Christians can experience that "deep and subconscious recognition of wisdom and truth in the Christian psyche when encountering spiritual-life disciplines that take the body seriously." When that recognition is confirmed by a "felt sense of rightness" in the body while performing the physical postures of MPY, then all Christians—regardless of theological background—should feel invited to integrate embodied practices with their faith and experience deeper levels of spiritual formation as a result.[419]

MPY is an Appropriate Setting to Cultivate Awareness of the Presence of God

MPY provides the perfect setting to cultivate the discipline of unceasing prayer, or in the words of Brother Lawrence, to "practice the presence of God." As Brother Lawrence and other theologians guide Christians deeper into the spiritual life through Christian spiritual disciplines, the intention of the practices they prescribe—such as contemplation, unceasing prayer, and meditation—cultivate awareness of the presence of

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[418] Anderson, "God Has a Wonderful Plan," 38.
[419] Ryan, "Toward a Positive Spirituality of the Body," 40.

God. MPY provides the setting to practice this awareness while incorporating the body through stretching and strengthening postures. Ryan describes the profound impact of posture on creating an environment for mindfulness,

> What I am really doing is recollecting myself in the true sense of the word: gathering myself together, possessing myself, bringing myself under control so as to hand myself over to God. One creates an atmosphere of calm, peace, and silence without and within, establishing a harmony between body and spirit so that nothing hinders the working of grace, the Holy Spirit. Given the seamless unity of the human person and God's incarnational embrace of our totality, one's spiritual life cannot help but be affected by exercises in which body and soul are in possession of each other and work together.[420]

MPY provides the *how* to satisfy the *why* of the spiritual disciplines, to orient one's awareness to the presence of God. Practical suggestions for specific ways to cultivate the awareness during a session of MPY are found in the Appendix. This provides a rationale (*why*) and the tools (*how*) for Christians to freely practice Modern Postural Yoga as a Christian spiritual discipline, with the intention of spiritual formation.

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[420] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart*, 182.

ILLUSTRATIONS

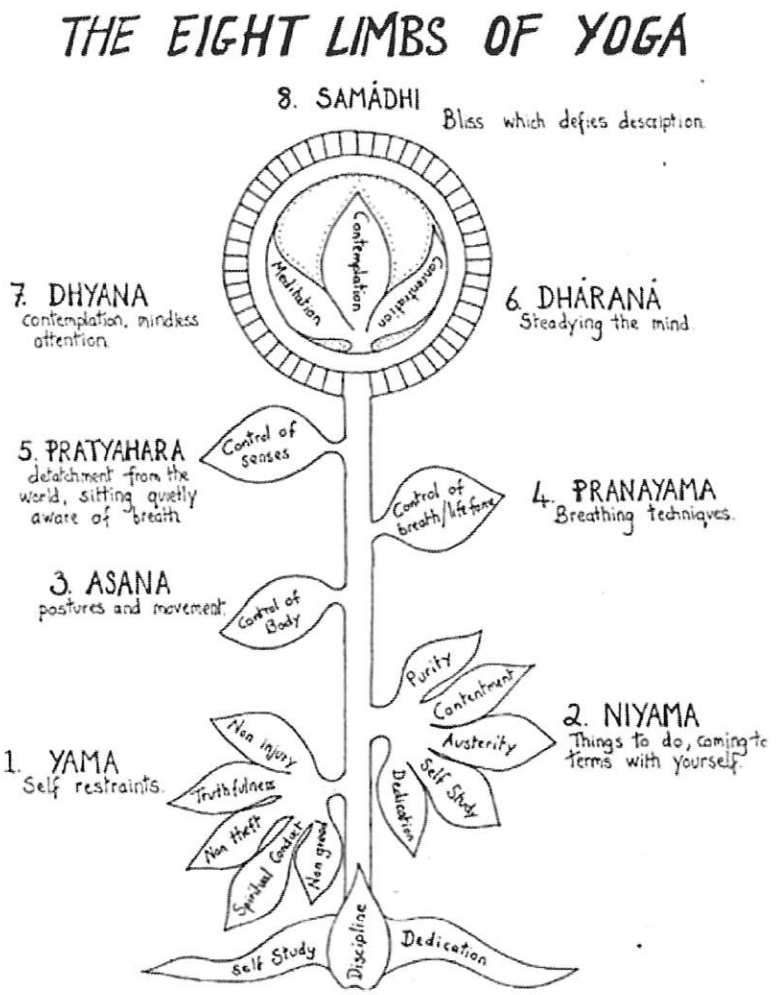

Fig. 1.

"The Eight Limbs of Yoga," *Hester Yoga* website, http://www.hesteryoga.co.uk/the-eight-limbs-of-yoga.html

APPENDIX
How Christians Can Practice Modern Postural Yoga as a Spiritual Discipline

Setting the Stage

Environmental cues that stimulate the senses, such as the following, can play a role in an experience of the presence of God.

Sight

- Dim the lights if possible, so no one feels exposed or scrutinized, and so no one is tempted to look around and compare themselves with others.
- Burn candles to represent Jesus and his followers as the light of the world (Matt 5:14).

Touch

- Heat the practice space to a comfortable or slightly warm temperature that is conducive to building a sweat and warming the joints and muscles for movement and stretching. Excessive heat or cold can be a distraction.
- Use prayer beads. Christians have used prayer beads to guide and focus their prayers for centuries. Pick up a strand of Anglican Prayer Beads, an Orthodox Prayer Rope, or a Catholic Rosary. The simplest use of prayer beads is to say the Jesus Prayer with each bead, and the Lord's Prayer at the knot, crucifix, or large bead. Endless combinations of prayers, verses, or phrases can be recited. Examples of prayer bead practices can be found at www.kingofpeace.org/prayerbeads.
- In the absence of prayer beads, the hands are an excellent tool to focus the mind and keep track of silent repetitive prayer. Repeat breath prayers (see below), verses, poetry, or song lyrics as follows: (1) open hand, (2) thumb to forefinger, (3) thumb to middle finger, (4) thumb to ring finger, and (5) thumb to little finger; (6-10) repeat with other hand.

Smell/Taste

- Burn incense (Ps. 141:2).
- Anoint and inhale essential oils. Frankincense in particular carries deep meaning as a traditional incense burned in liturgical Christian worship gatherings, such as the Orthodox Church. Because scent is connected with emotion, this can be a deeply meaningful experience for those Christians who have fond memories of worship experiences in liturgical traditions.

Sound

- Song choices. Be aware that rhythms, melodies, harmonies, and lyrics have the ability to stir up emotion. Speed up, slow down, or still your movement as the music leads.

Awareness

Consider the following cues to direct your attention to the presence of God, in the opening stage of the class:

- Become aware of the breath, the *pneuma*, or life-force that brings life to every cell in your body (Ezek 37:1-14).
- Allow the breath to become a reminder of your minute-by-minute dependence on God to sustain you. The human body requires regular sustenance: 8 hours of sleep each night, food and hydration every day, breath by the second. Your breath is a reminder that, like the Hebrews in the wilderness who had to depend on God for food every morning and could not store it up but had to trust it would always be there for them, you cannot store up the breath and must trust that oxygen will always be there for you.
- Become aware of the sensations in the body, where the muscles might feel tight, tired, strong, or sore. Silently express gratitude to God for the fact that you have a body that is capable of moving and working hard. Silently offer a blessing over your body, as part of the created order, and an image bearer of Creator God.
- Read, recite, or listen to the list of the fruit of the Spirit. Repeat silently or out loud, "I am love. I am joy. I am peace. I am patience. I am kindness. I am goodness. I am faithfulness. I am gentleness. I am self-control." Or focus on one of the "fruits" that you want to meditate on over the course of your practice.
- Consider Hagberg and Guelich's stages of the Critical Journey: Recognition of God, the Life of Discipleship, the Productive Life, the Journey Inward, the Wall, the Journey Outward, and the Life of Love. Consider which of the stages you're in today on your journey. Ask God to grant you wisdom and humility to live in the present stage well.

Breath Prayer

Breath prayer is a practice of silent, repetitive prayer that follows the rhythmic pattern of the breath. Breath prayers have two parts, the first to be recited silently with the inhale and the second recited with the exhale, as many times as desired. An MPY session is an easy place to learn and cultivate the practice of breath prayer. Once breath prayer has become habitual, it can be practiced at any moment, throughout the day.

- The Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." (alternatively, ". . . have mercy on your servant, [person's name]." (Psalm 123:3; Luke 18:13, 38)
- "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam 3:9)
- "Not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)
- "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:2)
- "Yahweh." (one syllable for each half of breath)
- "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." (Matt 6:10)
- "Emmanuel, God with us." (Matt 1:23)
- Any line from the Beatitudes. (Matt 5:3-10)

Postures

Not every pose has to have meaning for it to have value. The poses and stretches of MPY calm the muscles and still the restless mind, which is value enough. Some poses, however, lend themselves to symbolism, prayer, cultivation of awareness of the presence of God, or all three.

Child's Pose

Child's Pose is a well-known resting pose and is a common way to begin an MPY practice. It is similar in shape to a *prostration*, which is an ancient posture Christians have practiced for centuries. A prostration is in fact a series of postures. It begins with kneeling (a symbol of our humility before God) and bending forward until the forehead touches the ground (a living image of our fall into sin), followed by a return to standing (a symbol of our repentance, and our commitment to change from the old Adam into the new).[421] Time spent in Child's Pose can be devoted to contemplating this repentance before God, or the whole movement series of the prostration may be repeated a few times.

Sun Salutations

The Sun Salutation is another common movement series. The purpose of the Sun Salutation is to synchronize breath with movement, warm the body, and focus the mind on the practice of the present moment. Sun Salutations also involve 3 full rounds of breath from the standing position to Downward-facing Dog. Next time you move through a Sun Salutation, invoke each of the three persons of the Trinity, with each of the breaths of the Sun Salutation.

Long Stretches, Held for Several Breaths

Once the muscles and joints are warm, it is common to hold a few stretches for several breaths or even several minutes. This is an opportunity to cultivate mindfulness by becoming aware of the sensations of the body (honoring the body), returning to a breath prayer, or noticing where one is holding unnecessary tension and intentionally choosing to surrender. Though people experience pain when they focus on painful circumstances, they can choose to, in the words of Jesus, not worry about tomorrow and acknowledge that God will also give us what we need when we need it (Matt 6:34). We can rest and surrender our will to God's.

Corpse Pose

Corpse Pose is the final resting pose of most MPY sessions. One practitioner described her experience of the pose to Thomas Ryan:

> The letting-go in relaxation is in and of itself significant; the entire front of my body being open and vulnerable is a position of great trust, calling to mind the trust in God that is the ground of my faith. Conscious awareness of how I am supported by the earth beneath my back recalls both my connectedness with all of creation and the unfailing support of God's love. Focusing on nothing but my

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[421] John Breck, "And Why Do We Make Prostrations?" *Orthodox Church in America* (March 2, 2007).

breath entering my body reminds me of how there is nothing essential to life that is not provided through God's love for me. Finally, my open and upward-facing palms are a gesture of gratitude and of readiness to receive the gifts of love and grace.[422]

Another application of Corpse Pose is in the picture of resurrection, or redemption, that comes to us through the blood of Christ. In an MPY practice, Corpse Pose lasts for a few minutes, then the teacher will bring the collective class out of Corpse Pose, up to a comfortable seated pose to close out class with a few moments of mindfulness or a final thought. This is an opportunity to draw the attention to the fact that, as followers of Jesus, we believe that death is not the end, but a transition. Just as Corpse Pose is a gateway into the rest of the practitioner's day, the physical death of the body is a transitory stage, pending the hope we have for resurrection in Christ.

Trinity Movement Mantra

Inhale, arms overhead, look up (expressing relationship with Creator God). Exhale, arms out to sides, to form a cross (Jesus Christ our savior). Inhale, hands over heart (dwelling place of the Spirit of God). Exhale, reach forward, palms up (receptive toward others and all creation).

Prayers

The Grail Prayer

Lord Jesus, I give you my hands to do your work.
I give you my feet to go your way.
I give you my eyes to see as you do.
I give you my tongue to speak your words.
I give you my mind, Lord, that you may think in me.
I give you my spirit, that you may pray in me.
Most of all, I give you my heart, Lord,
That you may love in me your Father and all humankind.
I give you my whole self, so that it is you, Lord Jesus,
Who lives and works and prays in me.[423]

Benediction

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing at the wonders he has show you;
May he bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.[424]

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[422] Ryan, *Prayer of Heart*, 152.
[423] Ryan, "The Body Language of Faith," 65-66.

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[424] Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 50.

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