CHRISTIAN YOGA? - C'MON!

Many pastors are unaware that some yoga practices, especially meditation to achieve an altered state of consciousness, can be spiritually damaging. If your pastor chooses to ignore your warning, you might want to consider finding a new church home.

Yoga's the latest fad. Everyone's doing it, including Christians. Churches are now offering "Christian yoga." (An oxymoron, if there ever was one.) What's up with fitness clubs and houses of God promoting yoga? Is yoga just good exercise, or is there more to it than that? Those who practice yoga techniques - especially professed Chhristians--should know what they're being exposed to.

Authentic yoga spiritual/religious disciplines derive from Eastern religious beliefs. There are several different forms of yoga:

"For the Hindu, on the journey to Spiritual-Realization, the many Yoga/Hindu spiritual disciplines take into consideration all aspects of one's being. The classic Yogas are progressive in nature; i.e., Karma Yoga (ethics), Bhakti Yoga (devotion), Raja Yoga (meditation) and Jnana Yoga (inner wisdom or enlightenment).

"These are the classic four yogas within which are several other forms of Yoga. Hatha Yoga (worshipful poses), for example, is part of Raja Yoga training. Some of the other forms of Yoga are Nada Yoga (music), Mantra and Japa Yoga (chanting and on beads) and Kundalini Yoga (study of the psychic centers or chakras)."[1]

Yoga has been taken out of its Hindu roots and given a whole new meaning. Subhas R. Tiwari, professor of the Hindu University of America, is not a fan of "Christian yoga" and explains why:

"Today we are witnessing an innitiative toward yoga from ordinary Christians whose positive physical, mental and spiritual heath and well being experienced as a result of "engaging " yoga cannot be denied or ignored. This 5,000-year-old system is perhaps the best known, most accessible and cost effective health and beauty program around. Yoga is also much more, as it was intended by the Vedic seers as an instrument which can lead one to apprehend the Absolute, Ultimate Reality, called the Brahman Reality, or God. If this attempt to co-opt yoga into their own tradition continues, in several decades of incessantly spinning the untruth as truth through re-labelings such as "Christian yoga," who will know that yoga is--or was--part of Hindu culture?"[2]

Government schools have embraced religious pluralism and are now offering yoga as a physical education course, even though yoga is a fundamental part of a religious system. Granted, most schools don't teach classical yoga; they incorporate snippets of it in their exercise program. Imagine the outrage if some brave soul were to attempt to introduce as part of the physical education course, "Fitness According to God," that aims to get children to adopt biblical principles for good mind/body health. The ACLU would file a lawsuit faster than the speed of a 56K modem.

The challenge of religious pluralism is that it doesn't require knowing anything about other cultures or religions. And let's be real. Most American's don't care to learn about other cultures, which is why they're ignorant of religious belief systems. This includes Christianity, even though polls show that more than 80% of Americans say they're Christians. Uh-huh. And Muhammad Ali was the greatest prima ballerina of all time.

Here's something you probably didn't know. The Hindu community is unhappy about the effort to separate yoga from Hinduism so they've started a group called "Reclaiming Yoga." They say they've had it up to here with fitness clubs that characterize yoga as exercise. (They have no one to blame but themselves. Hindu gurus who settled in the west are responsible for the commercialization of yoga.) David Orr, columnist for the London Daily Telegraph, tells us that, "The Indian government is furious that yoga practices dating back thousands of years are being 'stolen' by gurus and fitness instructors in Europe and the United States."[3]

Yoga is a $30 billion-a-year business in America, so the Reclaiming Yoga government task force have their work cut out for them. David Orr goes on to say, "The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office has issued 134 patents on yoga accessories, 150 yoga-related copyrights and 2,315 yoga trademarks, says the Indian task force. It also says that Britain has approved at least 10 trademarks relating to yoga training aids that are mentioned in ancient texts."

Many Christians have been duped into thinking that yoga is just relaxation and exercise. Nothing could be further from the truth. Classical yoga is intended to put one into an altered state of consciousness. Believers who think they're "just exercising" are being swept into a counterfeit religion.

Not all religions are equal, as liberals would have us believe. Orthodox Christianity teaches that there is one true God. God as the all-knowing, all-powerful being who created the universe and still rules it today. "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care" (Psalm 95:6,7). Moreover, orthodox Christianity teaches that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes"(Romans 1:16). On the other hand, "Progressive Christians" (PC's) believe that the Bible is a book of myths and legends. PC's "read the Bible symbolically or allegorically, as a collection of interesting stories to take whatever meaning out of that pleases them. This allows them to reject various portions of the Bible they disagree with. Liberals label their interpretation as a "critical" approach, which essentially allows most of their theology to consist of finding ways to criticize the Bible, rather than actually trying to determine what it says."[4]

PC's see nothing wrong with yoga. They see nothing wrong with Christian mysticism either. But that's another article.

According to God's Word, mystical practices of any sort are evil. Romans 12:9 instructs Christians to, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Sooner or later the sharks will pull Christians who wade into mystic waters under. Jesus gave this warning in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Eastern mysticism leads to destruction.

Professor Tiwari is an authority on classical yoga. He believes that yoga cannot be separated from its spiritual center. "The simple, immutable fact," he says, "is that yoga originated from the Vedic or Hindu culture. Its techniques were not adopted by Hinduism, but originated from it." These facts need to be unequivocally stated in light of some of the things being written to the contrary by yoga teachers. The effort to separate yoga from Hinduism must be challenged because it runs counter to the fundamental principles upon which yoga itself is premised, the yamas (restraints) and niyamas (observances). These ethical tenets and religious practices are the first two limbs of the eight-limbed ashtanga yoga system which also includes asana (postures), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sense withdrawal), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (contemplation/Self Realization). Efforts to separate yoga from its spiritual center reveal ignorance of the goal of yoga."[5]

If your church is integrating "Christian yoga" or any other New Age practice into its services, it's incumbent on you to speak up. Gently lay out your concerns to your pastor. Explain that yoga is a Hindu or Buddhist practice and has no place in a Christian church. 2 Corinthians. 6:14 says, "For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"

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To all you Christians who want to get in shape, I say halleluiah! I'm all for physical fitness. To stay in shape I've taken ballet (for the novice), jazz dance, aerobics, stretch classes, played tennis and racquetball, hiked in the mountains, and gone on brisk walks. All of these things will keep you in great shape. You don't need yoga to stay fit.

Footnotes:

1. Classical Yoga Hindu Academy's website.
2. Yoga Renamed Is Still Hindu By Subhas R. Tiwari
3. India makes moves to reclaim heritage from 'yoga piracy' By David Orr
4. Liberal Theology Misses Plain Truth By Rachel Alexander
5. Yoga Renamed Is Still Hindu By Subhas R. Tiwari

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