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Help from Hindu Quarters — The New York Times on “Take Back Yoga”

Monday, November 29, 2010

In Sunday’s edition of *The New York Times* — the front page, no less — reporter Paul Vitello writes about “a surprisingly fierce debate in the gentle world of yoga.” Well, welcome to my world. My last few weeks have been heavy into “fierce debate” and light on “the gentle world” part. It all started when I was asked to answer a practical pastoral question: [Should Christians Practice Yoga?](#) My answer was the answer long offered by those committed to orthodox biblical Christianity — No.



There is nothing wrong with stretching exercises, and Christians are called to meditate upon the Word of God, but the practices of Yoga, both historic and current, are not about mere stretching. I will not repeat the argument here, but you can read my essay for yourself. After that, came the deluge. After a major story by the Associated Press and coverage in the mainstream media, I found myself (and my poor inbox) flooded with angry, vitriolic, confused, and even threatening emails. I did not seek to fuel the national debate, since I was trying to advise Christian believers, not attempting to launch a social crusade against Yoga.

Along the way, something really interesting happened. I started getting emails of a different sort, and many came from India. Central to my argument was the fact that Yoga is inseparable from Hinduism. I was nonetheless a bit startled to receive, for example, an email from a teenager in India thanking me for my “heroic” act of recognizing that Yoga is historically and essentially Hindu. After coverage in the Indian press, my exhausted inbox received many similar messages.

Stefanie Syman deserves credit for raising the issue of the American commercialization of Yoga in her book, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*. But now *The New York Times* reports on a movement called “Take Back Yoga” that seeks to reassert the Hindu roots of Yoga. As Paul Vitello reports, the group is “mounting a campaign to acquaint Westerners with the faith that it says underlies every single yoga style followed in gyms, ashrams and spas: Hinduism.”

Before diving into the terms of the debate within the world of Yoga, Vitello briefly juxtaposes me with New Age guru Deepak Chopra. Interestingly, Vitello cites Professor Loriliai Biernacki of the University of Colorado, who points to a range of spiritual practices and beliefs rooted in Hinduism but increasingly common in American today, including reincarnation, meditation, karma, and even cremation. “All these ideas are Hindu in origin, and they are spreading,” she told the paper. “But they are doing it in a way that leaves behind the proper name, the box that classifies them as ‘Hinduism.’”

I take that as a vindication of my argument from an unexpected source. I am not so deluded as to think it will end the debate. I just sent a warning to my inbox.

Paul Vitello, “[Hindu Group Stirs a Debate Over Yoga’s Soul](#),” *The New York Times*, Sunday, November 28, 2010.

Albert Mohler, "[The Subtle Body — Should Christians Practice Yoga?](#)," Monday, September 20, 2010.

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