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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YOGA'S MOST  
FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURES AND  
RELEVANT BIBLICAL PASSAGES

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Joshua Kyle Brosseau  
December 2024

**APPROVAL SHEET**

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This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Kate.

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## PREFACE

Like so many of the steps we take in life and ministry, my submittal of this dissertation can be attributed to a host of people who have come alongside me to make it a reality. My wife Kate has supported me in incalculable ways, even while expertly meeting the demands of her own ministry. Dr. George Martin has been a source of rich insight, providing support with the perfect blend of both directness and grace. Even throughout the earlier stages of my PhD program, the great folks in the Research Doctoral Studies office and other professors in the Billy Graham School have been crucial supports to me in a number of ways. Lastly, I am eternally grateful to the International Mission Board and to the thousands of Southern Baptists across the country who make our work possible through their unending prayer and support. As an IMB missionary, I can think of no better ministerial position in which to have gone through a PhD program like this one.

J. Kyle Brosseau

Prague, Czech Republic

December 2024

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Should Christians participate in yoga? Do yoga’s original teachings contradict the Bible’s guidance on life and faith? Too often, Christians have offered a confident answer to the first question without adequately addressing the second. In this dissertation, I contribute to the literature that argues yoga contradicts Christianity, but I bring something new. I present direct, original-language analysis of significant portions of yoga’s most foundational scriptures in a comparison with pertinent biblical passages.<sup>1</sup> Since yogic scriptures contradict the Bible on crucial matters of theology and soteriology, insofar as a yoga practice adheres to its own scriptures, that practice is incompatible with biblical teaching and should be avoided by Christians.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Thesis and Argument**

My thesis is that yoga’s most foundational scriptures directly contradict sound, biblical teaching. This thesis rests upon a clearly trackable argument: (1) Yoga’s most foundational scriptures are the *Patanjali Yoga Sūtras (PYS)* and the *Bhagavad Gītā (BG)*, and (2) these two yogic scriptures contradict the Bible on crucial matters of theology and soteriology, therefore, (3) yoga’s most foundational scriptures contradict the Bible. In other words, the assertion that yoga is at odds with Christianity finds substantiation in

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<sup>1</sup> I will examine those scriptures that are most foundational to the yoga tradition within Indian religiosity. I understand the yoga tradition as a major strand of India’s religious landscape, not as coterminous with Hinduism as a whole. I will not examine other Hindu scriptures, such as the Vedas or Upanishads, that are not among those most commonly invoked as foundational to yoga.

<sup>2</sup> I do not use “yoga practice” to refer to individual postures, motions, meditative techniques, or even points of teaching. Rather, in accordance with its common usage, I employ the term to refer to the whole corpus of activities and teachings that are typical of a given yoga teacher or context.

each tradition’s primary sources. The upshot of all this is that genuine yoga practices—those that adhere to their own scriptures—are unbiblical and should be avoided by Christians. Before getting into the practical significance of this dissertation, though, each of my argument’s three steps calls for some explanation.

First, the most foundational scriptures of yoga are the *Patanjali Yoga Sūtras* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Both are part of Hinduism’s classical literature, dating to the first few centuries AD. As such, *PYS* and *BG* are among yoga’s earliest teachings. Alistair Shearer argues convincingly that common allusions to yoga’s “prehistoric” origins lack any real evidence, pointing out that in the Indian vernacular, saying something arose “5,000 years ago”—as is often asserted of yoga by its practitioners today—can simply be a way of claiming it happened “an awfully long time ago.”<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging that the term “yoga” does appear in some Vedic materials well before India’s classical period, Shearer explains, “When the word ‘yoga’ is used in these early texts, it appears to be with a meaning far removed from postural or even meditational practice.”<sup>4</sup> Nothing in yoga’s pre-classical literature describes anything like what is meant by yoga in our time. To examine the most foundational, primary sources of yoga, then, it is best to look to the classical works of *PYS* and *BG*.

These are two of three yogic scriptures whose titles are most commonly invoked as the authoritative bases for yoga. The other is the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (*HYP*). The world’s leading yoga teacher training accreditation entity, Yoga Alliance, lists these three scriptures as the major texts of yoga philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Anyone receiving their credential must be aware of all three works. Kali Om of Chicago Yoga attests, “Many

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<sup>3</sup> Alistair Shearer, *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West* (London: Hurst, 2020), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Shearer, *The Story of Yoga*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> “Elevated RYS 200 Standards,” Yoga Alliance, last modified July 19, 2023, [https://www.yogaalliance.org/Our\\_Standards/Elevated\\_RYS\\_200\\_Standards](https://www.yogaalliance.org/Our_Standards/Elevated_RYS_200_Standards). YA’s 2020 elevated standards added the Upanishads to their list of yogic philosophy’s major texts.

yogis begin with The Yoga Sutras, and then move on to the Bhagavad-Gita and Hatha Yoga Pradipika.”<sup>6</sup> Among the three scriptures, *PYS* and *BG* stand out as the earliest and most foundational to the yoga tradition as a whole. As part of Hinduism’s classical literature dating to the first few centuries AD, *PYS* and *BG* are much earlier than *HYP*, which is a medieval work compiled in the fifteenth century. As works of classical Hinduism, *PYS* and *BG* operate within the same conceptual universe and share a core vocabulary for expressing their rich theologies and soteriologies. *HYP* is in another world altogether, dealing not so much with matters of God and salvation, but with physical postures and their supposed supernatural effects on the body. *PYS* and *BG* are the primary sources of yoga, and in them we have the foundational core of yogic teaching, directly contrastable with biblical doctrines on who God is and how to be saved.

It is no surprise, then, that on both the popular and scholarly levels, *PYS* and *BG* stand out as especially foundational to yoga. Self-help guru and yoga teacher, Dave Ursillo, puts these two scriptures at the top of his short list of “textbooks” that are crucial for beginning one’s yoga practice.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, leading scholars also acknowledge *PYS* and *BG* as the most foundational scriptures of yoga. Daniel Simpson observes that these two classical works are “the texts first encountered by many [yoga] practitioners.”<sup>8</sup> Georg Feuerstein reports that yoga students tend to hold these two scriptures as favorites, attesting that *PYS* and *BG* “can be considered foundational Yoga texts.”<sup>9</sup> As for *PYS* in particular, a long list of scholars including James Mallinson, Mark Singleton, David

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<sup>6</sup> Kali Om, “Yoga Scripture: The Primary Texts,” Chicago Yoga, June 2013, <https://yoga.chicago.com/2014/01/yoga-scripture-the-primary-texts/>.

<sup>7</sup> Dave Ursillo, “3 Perfect Yoga Textbooks for Beginners to Begin Their Practice,” Dave Ursillo, June 27, 2014, <https://daveursillo.com/books-for-yoga-beginners/>. The only other “textbook” Ursillo mentions is Tirumalai Desikachar’s 1995 how-to book, *The Heart of Yoga*.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga: A Comprehensive Guide to Yoga’s History, Texts, Philosophy, and Practices* (New York: North Point Press, 2021), 49.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Feuerstein, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2011), xii.

Gordon White, and Edwin Bryant all speak to its widespread popularity in the yoga world and to its foundational status among yogic scriptures.<sup>10</sup> Of the other foundational text, Shearer writes that *BG* is “universally agreed to be a celebration of the ancient teaching [of yoga] and a symphony of its many themes.”<sup>11</sup> Simpson goes so far as to dub *BG* “one of the most popular books about yoga,”<sup>12</sup> and Pavulraj Michael writes that the scripture offers “a comprehensive *yoga-shastra* [yoga teaching], large, flexible and many-sided.”<sup>13</sup> Put simply, *PYS* and *BG* are the earliest, most popular, and all-around most foundational scriptures of yoga. They are yoga’s essential, primary sources.

While the first step of my argument was to establish that *PYS* and *BG* are yoga’s most foundational scriptures, the second step is to demonstrate that these two texts do indeed contradict the Bible on crucial matters of theology and soteriology. Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate that they do so on many levels. Chapter 3 shows that *PYS* operates with an understanding of God that is starkly different from that of the Bible and reveals that the classical Hindu scripture paints an obviously counterbiblical picture of what salvation even is. Chapter 4 demonstrates that *BG* reveres Krishna, not Yahweh, as the only supreme God, and shows that the work’s soteriology is aimed at an unbiblical idea of oneness with Krishna’s divine nature. These two chapters constitute the heart of this dissertation, as they demonstrate that *PYS* and *BG* are profoundly unbiblical on weighty theological and soteriological points. Since these two works of classical Hinduism are the most foundational texts of yoga, it follows that yoga’s most foundational scriptures do

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<sup>10</sup> James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), xi, xvi–xvii; David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), xvi, 1, 16; Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: North Point, 2009), xvii, xxxiii–xxxiv.

<sup>11</sup> Shearer, *The Story of Yoga*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Pavulraj Michael, “Jñāna Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita—The Path for Self-Realization,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (2015): 197.

indeed contradict the Bible. Hence my argument's third step and this dissertation's thesis: Yoga's most foundational scriptures directly contradict sound, biblical teaching.

### **Core Problem and Unique Contribution**

This thesis, or something like it, has been asserted many times over by scholars and social commentators on the Christianity-and-yoga question over the years. However, this assertion appears to have never been demonstrated using the relevant primary sources. In chapter 2, I examine the existing body of literature asserting that yoga's foundational teachings are at odds with the Bible. While many of those voices have alleged yoga contradicts Christianity, I have found none that go on to demonstrate where and how yogic scriptures actually contradict the Bible. In other words, I have not encountered any commentator on yoga who has shown in the primary sources that yoga's teachings contradict Christianity's. Chapter 2 shows that the existing literature I have found to date includes no scholarly analysis of significant portions of yoga's most foundational scriptures in their original language contrasted against relevant biblical texts. This apparent lack of primary-source, original-language substantiation for the assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity is the core problem my dissertation addresses.

As it turns out, the common assertion that yoga is incompatible with Christianity is substantiable on scriptural grounds. However, the trustworthiness of this assertion depends on whether the primary sources in question—yoga's most foundational scriptures and relevant biblical passages—do indeed contain irreconcilable teachings. In chapter 2, I establish that no scholarly work I have uncovered so far adequately demonstrates, specifically, how and where yogic scriptures contradict the Bible. Then, in chapters 3 and 4, that is precisely what I do. There, in the heart of the dissertation, I demonstrate that *PYS* and *BG* contradict the Bible on significant points of theology and soteriology. My dissertation's unique contribution to the literature is primary-source, original-language substantiation for the claim that yoga contradicts Christianity.

## Methodology

In this dissertation, I employ a methodology of textual analysis. In chapters 3 and 4, I examine *PYS* and *BG* in their original Sanskrit, showing where specific portions of these foundational yogic scriptures contradict particular biblical teachings on God and salvation. I work with a well-regarded Sanskrit edition of each of the two yogic texts.<sup>14</sup> I chose certain passages for translation and examination, not based on how frequently they are invoked as foundational to yoga, but on their pertinence to biblical doctrine. When appropriate, I elucidate points at which these passages' Sanskrit terms carry meaning and significance not relayed by their English glosses. Throughout the course of my translation and analysis of these *PYS* and *BG* passages, I also consult a carefully selected set of commentaries on each of the two scriptures. Most important are the insights I incorporate from the scriptures' earliest commentators: Vyāsa's commentary on *PYS* dating to just after the compilation of *PYS* itself, and Ādi Shankara's commentary on *BG* from the ninth century. Beyond these two early commentators, my use of secondary literature is strategically limited. My aim in chapters 3 and 4 is to reveal the plain sense of the theological and soteriological teachings found in these two foundational yogic texts.

In those two chapters, I also demonstrate how the millennium-later *HYP* adheres to and passes along much of the core theological and soteriological teaching established by *PYS* and *BG*. The focus of *HYP* is on how to utilize various bodily postures, breathing techniques, dietary standards, and hygiene practices to awaken Kundalinī (the immaterial serpent coiled at the base of one's spine), and thereby actualize certain concrete outcomes like the healing of diseases, perpetual youth, immortality, and a host of other magical powers. Joseph Alter affirms that "medieval *hathayoga* is

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<sup>14</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*; Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*. Bryant's well-regarded publication contains the Sanskrit text of *PYS* itself, and Feuerstein's book includes a critical Sanskrit edition of *BG*. Each of these publications also contains an English translation. I work from their Sanskrit texts, but I also draw on the expertise of the translators, as well as from the insights of other commentators, where appropriate.



concerned with magic and magical power and with using the body to change the nature of reality on all levels of experience.”<sup>15</sup> As a medieval text with such a practical focus, *HYP* does not contribute to yoga’s most foundational teaching on God and salvation. However, its author does rely on and relay some of the main theological and soteriological themes found in yoga’s classical scriptures. And right or wrong, *HYP* is often invoked alongside *PYS* and *BG* as an authoritative basis for yoga. For this reason, chapters 3 and 4 (respectively) also reveal how *HYP* serves as a conduit for much of the theology and soteriology that is laid out in yoga’s foundational scriptures, *PYS* and *BG*.

Also in chapters 3 and 4, I go on to compare the theological and soteriological teachings of *PYS* and *BG* against relevant biblical passages. For this, I utilize the *Christian Standard Bible* in consultation with the Hebrew and Greek texts.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, the Bible passages I have selected are those that speak to the issues raised in my examination of the yogic scriptures. In my presentation of the biblical material, just as in my analysis of *PYS* and *BG*, I aim to exegete the plain, authorial intent behind each passage.<sup>17</sup> To that end, I consult some popular-level commentary on the relevant Bible verses. By design, I do not endeavor to offer any novel scholarly insight into the biblical passages being examined. Rather, my aim is to show how a simple reading of these familiar Bible verses reveals an obvious contrast between their teachings and those of *PYS* and *BG*. Chapter 5 offers a concise review and collation of the ten most significant counterbiblical teachings on God and salvation found in these two foundational yogic

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph S. Alter, “Shri Yogendra: Magic, Modernity, and the Burden of the Middle-Class Yogi,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Michael W. Holmes and Society of Biblical Literature, eds., *Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), Parallel Plus, <https://thebible.org/gt/index>; Donald R. Vance et al., eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart, Germany: German Bible Society, 2021), Parallel Plus, <https://thebible.org/gt/index>.

<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Bible, I understand the authorial intent of each passage to be divinely inspired. I do not, however, consider any portion of any yogic scripture to be divinely inspired.

scriptures. Ultimately, the methodology of this dissertation is textual analysis of yogic and Christian scriptures in their original languages.

### **Significance**

My thesis is that yoga's foundational scriptures contradict the Bible, so my unique contribution is primary-source substantiation for the assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity. In chapter 6, I explain the significance of all this. Since yoga's scriptures contradict biblical teaching on crucial matters of theology and soteriology, genuine yoga practices—those that are faithful to their own scriptures—are necessarily counterbiblical and should be avoided by Christians. Put differently, insofar as a yoga practice reflects its own scriptures, that practice is unbiblical and impermissible for believers. Christians considering yoga, then, should evaluate individual yoga practices on a case-by-case basis. To the degree that a practice reflects its own scriptures on matters of God and salvation as laid out in chapters 3 through 5, that practice is counterbiblical and should not be taken up. In chapter 6, I offer practical guidance on how to go about a case-by-case analysis of individual yoga practices in light of what is taught in their own scriptures. This dissertation's significance lies in its conclusion that Christians should avoid genuine yoga practices since the tradition's scriptures are counterbiblical. Chapter 6 provides practical guidance for identifying which yoga practices are genuine.

In this dissertation, I do not speak comprehensively to questions surrounding the permissibility of those yoga practices that do *not* reflect their own scriptures. While such practices may avoid transgressing biblical teaching by eschewing their own primary sources, there may be circumstantial reasons for which Christians should still steer clear. A believer's familial or social situation may be such that participating in any practice called yoga would cause his or her loved ones to stumble in the Pauline sense. The general atmosphere of a given yoga session or the typical attire worn by its practitioners may incline a believing participant toward vanity or lust. Going through the motions of

even a seemingly fitness-focused yoga class may adversely affect a Christian participant's beliefs over time. In chapter 6, I make note of such considerations as possible foci for further research, but I make clear that they lie outside the scope of my work. This dissertation's significance, after all, lies in its determination that Christians should avoid yoga practices that *do* reflect the primary sources of the yoga tradition.

This determination implies, however, that Christians may—at least in some cases—participate in those yoga practices that do *not* reflect their own scriptures, what we might call ungentine yoga practices. Indeed, it is precisely because such practices eschew their own primary sources that Christian participation in them may be permissible. This brings up the issue of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation involves the use of features from one culture by members of another culture in ways that lack understanding and may be exploitative.<sup>18</sup> Participating in practices called yoga that evince no understanding of yoga's host culture or the classical scriptures on which it is based leaves one liable to allegations of cultural appropriation. This issue deserves special attention because it is precisely those ungentine, potentially appropriative yoga practices that my dissertation implies may be permissible for Christians. In chapter 6, I explain the significance of my thesis and offer practical guidance on how to apply it while giving due consideration to the issue of cultural appropriation.

## Conclusion

Yoga's most foundational scriptures—*PYS* and *BG*—contradict the Bible on crucial theological and soteriological points. Since these are the primary sources of yoga and of Christianity, the reality of their contradictory nature constitutes primary-source

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<sup>18</sup> This understanding of cultural appropriation is supported by the following sources. "What Is Cultural Appropriation?," *Britannica*, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-cultural-appropriation>; "Cultural Appropriation," *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cultural-appropriation>; "Cultural Appropriation," *Oxford Reference*, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095652789>.

substantiation for the assertion that the two traditions are diametrically opposed. In other words, since yogic scriptures and the Christian Bible do indeed contradict each other in essential matters, the allegation that yoga is incompatible with Christianity is found to be on solid textual footing. The practical upshot of all this is that genuine yoga practices—those that adhere to their own most foundational scriptures—are necessarily counterbiblical and should be avoided by Christians.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I examine the literature asserting yoga's impermissibility for Christians. While several scholars and social commentators have asserted that yoga contradicts Christianity, I have encountered none who adequately demonstrate where and how yogic scriptures (the primary sources in question) contradict the Bible. In the literature to date, I have found no scholarly analysis of significant portions of yoga's scriptures in their original languages in comparison with relevant biblical texts. This lack of primary-source, original-language substantiation for the assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity is the core problem I address in this dissertation.

The common assertion that yoga itself is incompatible with Christianity is indeed defensible on textual grounds. However, the veracity of this assertion depends on whether the primary sources in question—yoga's most foundational scriptures and pertinent biblical passages—do indeed convey contradictory teachings. In chapters 3 through 5, I demonstrate that they do so on many levels. In this chapter, my purpose is simply to show that no scholarly work I have encountered adequately demonstrates, specifically, how and where yogic scriptures contradict the Bible. My dissertation's unique contribution to this literature, then, is primary-source, original-language substantiation for the claim that yoga contradicts Christianity.

#### **Drawing on Experience or Secondary Sources**

Several commentators have insisted that yoga contradicts Christianity without so much as invoking the title of any yogic scripture. Instead, these anti-yoga voices speak from their own experiences with yoga or draw on secondary sources as they caution

Christians against taking up the practice. Web articles and blog entries of this nature are too abundant to enumerate here. However, Losana Boyd's article on *First Things* exemplifies a thoughtful word to Christians on the counterbiblical aspects of yoga informed by past personal experience.<sup>1</sup> Boyd may be familiar with the works constituting yoga's scriptural corpus, but her piece in the Catholic magazine from 2011 does not mention which of yoga's source materials contain unchristian teachings. Similarly, Paul Gosbee argues from firsthand experience that *hatha* yoga in particular is incompatible with the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Like Boyd, Gosbee builds his case without invoking the name of *HYP* or any other yogic scripture. The internet is full of commentary like that of Boyd and Gosbee, arguing for the incompatibility of yoga and Christianity using personal experience rather than primary-source attestation.

Albert Mohler has been a leading voice in evangelicalism's examination of yoga for more than a decade, pulling together insight from a wide spectrum of experts and scholars. In a well-informed article from 2008, Mohler helpfully draws a distinction between the yogic and the biblical concepts of meditation.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting the expert work of Stefanie Syman in her 2010 book, *The Subtle Body*, Mohler insists on yoga's rootedness in Hinduism and encourages Christians to steer clear.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on one public school district's adjustment to its yoga policy in 2020, Mohler reemphasizes the Hindu roots of the practice, concluding, "If it's Christian, it's not yoga. If it's yoga, it's

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<sup>1</sup> Losana Boyd, "Through Yoga to Christianity," *First Things*, February 2011, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/02/through-yoga-to-christianity>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gosbee, "Hatha Yoga More Than Just Posturing? I Think So," Evangelical Alliance, January 1, 2016, <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/should-christians-do-yoga>.

<sup>3</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Empty Promise of Meditation," Albert Mohler, November 20, 2008, <https://albertmohler.com/2008/11/20/the-empty-promise-of-meditation>.

<sup>4</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Subtle Body: Should Christians Practice Yoga?," Albert Mohler, September 20, 2010, <https://albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-subtle-body-should-christians-practice-yoga>. Mohler published a follow-up article a few days after his "Subtle Body" piece. R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Yahoo, Yoga, and Yours Truly," Albert Mohler, October 7, 2010, <https://albertmohler.com/2010/10/07/yahoo-yoga-and-yours-truly/>.

not Christian.”<sup>5</sup> Mohler helpfully draws on contemporary expertise to caution evangelicals that genuine yoga is incompatible with the Christian life and faith. Outside the scope of his work, though, lies any interaction with yoga’s primary sources.

Douglas Groothuis provides thoughtful analysis of yoga from a Christian perspective in his 1986 book, *Unmasking the New Age*, as well as in its follow-up volume, *Confronting the New Age*. In the earlier work, Groothuis advises Christians to avoid yoga, asserting that “[a]ll forms of yoga involve occult assumptions.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Groothuis does not offer even a cursory survey of yoga’s forms, much less consult any of its primary sources.<sup>7</sup> In the later book, Groothuis cautions that yoga “was not invented by the mystic masters of old simply to cultivate better physiques.”<sup>8</sup> This is certainly true, but to substantiate his claim, Groothuis does not cite any of the mystic masters themselves. Rather, he points to the work of 1960s American yoga enthusiast, Richard Hittleman. Groothuis also describes certain counter-Christian elements of *hatha* yoga in particular, including the *kundalinī* concept and the *chakra* system.<sup>9</sup> Instead of referencing any *hatha* scriptures like *HYP*, however, Groothuis cites a book and an article on occult practices from the 1980s. Like Mohler, Groothuis offers helpful, accurate criticism of yoga from a Christian perspective using secondary sources.

Boyd, Gosbee, Mohler, and Groothuis all caution Christians against participating in yoga, but they do so by drawing on either personal experience or secondary sources, rather than by interacting directly with yoga’s foundational scriptures.

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<sup>5</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Yoga in Alabama’s Public Schools? Why Authentic Yoga Can Never Really Be Just Stretching Exercises,” Albert Mohler, March 13, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/03/13/briefing-3-13-20>.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas R. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 68.

<sup>7</sup> Later, Groothuis quotes a 1957 English translation of the *Chandogya Upanishad*, but this quotation is unrelated to his remarks on yoga. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age*, 141.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas R. Groothuis, *Confronting the New Age: How to Resist a Growing Religious Movement* (1988; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Groothuis, *Confronting the New Age*, 78.

John Piper and Jason Carlson take a similar approach, asserting yoga's incompatibility with Christianity without mentioning any yogic scriptures.<sup>10</sup> In the same vein, Sarah Pavlik cautions Christians against yoga by citing her own past experience as well as some secondary sources.<sup>11</sup> Jonnathan Truong reflects on his earlier days as a young, radical Buddhist in order to warn believers that yoga entails "the worship of false gods."<sup>12</sup> In recent years, anti-yoga voices like these have provided a wealth of helpful guidance to Christians considering whether to participate in yoga. Outside the scope of their work, however, has lain any direct interaction with yoga's primary sources.

Others acknowledge an incompatibility between yoga and Christianity while affirming Christians' participation in some activities currently referred to as yoga. Like the voices cited above, however, these Christian yoga advocates do not substantiate their positions using any of yoga's scriptures. Jean Marie Déchanet was among the first to encourage Christians to practice a modified form of yoga, strategically divested of the tradition's original teachings. The expressed reason the Benedictine monk advocated such drastic Christianization of the practice was because he considered its original precepts to be contrary to the Bible. In alleging these counter-Christian teachings of yoga, though, Déchanet took it upon himself to speak for yoga as a whole. His seminal book, *Christian Yoga*, does not compare any yogic scripture against the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Alli Patterson

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<sup>10</sup> John Piper, "Is Yoga Sinful?," *Desiring God*, July 27, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-yoga-sinful>; Jason Carlson and Ron Carlson, "Warning: Christianity and Yoga Do Not Mix!," Christian Ministries International, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.christianministriesintl.org/warning-christianity-and-yoga-do-not-mix/>.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah E. Pavlik, "Is Yoga Really So Bad?," *Today's Christian Woman* 23, no. 5 (2001): 50–54.

<sup>12</sup> Jonnathan Truong, "Holy Yoga & Christian Yoga," *God Manifest*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.godmanifest.com/holy-yoga-christian-yoga/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Marie Déchanet, *Christian Yoga*, trans. Roland Hindmarsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). On pages 44–5, Déchanet inserts one passage from a 1935 English translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and another from a 1938 English translation of the *Yoga Upanishad*, but he uses these passages to show the difference between genuine Indian yoga and the fitness-focused yogas of the West, rather than to substantiate yoga's incompatibility with Christianity. In neither case does Déchanet contrast the yogic scriptural passage with relevant biblical material.



and Alexandra Davis exemplify Christian yoga advocates in the tradition of Déchanet, affirming the counterbiblical nature of “traditional” or “spiritual” yoga (respectively) without referencing any of the tradition’s primary sources.<sup>14</sup>

The anti-yoga voices above assert that yoga is contrary to Christianity, and proponents of Christianized yoga like Déchanet, Patterson, and Davis agree that much of its original teaching is unbiblical. All of them, however, declare yoga unchristian without even mentioning any of its source texts. This lack of primary-source substantiation for their assertion does not necessarily constitute a failure on the part of these contributors. Rather, original-language analysis of significant portions of yoga’s primary sources has lain well outside the scope of their work as Christian social commentators on yoga. Their assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity is defensible on textual grounds, but it has not been within their purposes to formulate such a defense.<sup>15</sup>

### **Briefly Referencing Yogic Scripture**

Other scholars and social commentators have asserted yoga’s incompatibility with Christianity by interacting, to a very limited extent, with isolated bits pulled from English translations of yogic scriptures. In his 1983 book, *Yoga: A Christian Analysis*, John Allen quotes three English sentences from the *Katha Upanishad (KU)* equating yoga to stillness of mind.<sup>16</sup> However, his footnote does not reveal where in *KU* these lines occur, and Allen does not compare them with biblical teaching. Allen briefly describes Patanjali’s famous eight limbs of yoga, but he neither tells where in the

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<sup>14</sup> Alli Patterson, “Can Christians Do Yoga?,” Crossroads Church, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.crossroads.net/media/articles/can-christians-do-yoga>; Alexandra Davis, “Should Christians Do Yoga?,” Evangelical Alliance, January 1, 2016, <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/should-christians-do-yoga>.

<sup>15</sup> Hindu leader, Rajiv Malhotra, agrees that yoga is unchristian but does not substantiate his assertion with any reference to yogic scriptures. Rajiv Malhotra, “A Hindu View of Christian Yoga,” Huff Post, November 8, 2010, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hindu-view-of-christian-yoga\\_b\\_778501](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hindu-view-of-christian-yoga_b_778501).

<sup>16</sup> John Allen, *Yoga: A Christian Analysis* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1983), 13–14.

scripture the limbs are explained nor contrasts them with the Bible.<sup>17</sup> Allen reports accurately that *PYS*'s third chapter is about "occult powers," but he also writes that Patanjali urged practitioners to "concentrate on advancing beyond them into a deeper experience of *Brahman*."<sup>18</sup> Actually, *PYS* makes no mention of the Vedantic *brahman* concept. Allen invokes *HYP* as a foundational text for physicality-focused yoga, but he quotes none of its content, and his later section on *hatha* mentions no yogic scripture at all.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, Allen quotes an unnamed English translation of *BG* 3:5 to support his description of *karma* yoga.<sup>20</sup> Outside the scope of Allen's book lies any original-language analysis of significant portions of yogic scripture against pertinent biblical passages.

Mike Shreve speaks from years of experience in a particular *hatha* yoga tradition as he warns Christians against yoga of all kinds. Throughout his cautionary memoir from 2011, Shreve cites past personal experience and secondary sources on *kundalinī* yoga in warning Christians to stay away.<sup>21</sup> Missing from Shreve's book is any interaction with the *kundalinī*-related material in *HYP* or any other yogic scripture. In a brief booklet from 2019, Shreve mentions five of *PYS*'s eight limbs and even relays an English rendering of a short phrase from *BG*.<sup>22</sup> In neither case, though, does Shreve point to a reference number within the text or cite any publication of the scripture, much less contrast the primary-source material against biblical teaching. Comparing significant

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<sup>17</sup> Allen, *Yoga*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Allen, *Yoga*, 30–31. Here, Allen also quotes two other short English phrases, implying they are from Patanjali, but leaves them completely unreferenced. In none of Allen's references to a yogic scripture does he cite a specific publication of the text.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, *Yoga*, 16, 20–22.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Yoga*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Mike Shreve, *The Highest Adventure: Encountering God* (Cleveland, TN: Deeper Revelation Books, 2011). On page 12, Shreve attests to having read *BG*, but he does not reference any of its content, much less compare it with any biblical material.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Shreve, *Seven Reasons I No Longer Practice Yoga* (Cleveland, TN: Deeper Revelation Books, 2019), 15–16, 21–22.

portions of yogic scripture against the Bible—especially in their original languages—is not within Shreve’s purposes as a Christian social commentator on yoga.

Dave Hunt, Ross Clifford, Philip Johnson, and Christopher Berg also interact to a limited extent with yogic scriptures as they caution believers against the practice. Hunt mentions *PYS*, *BG*, and *HYP* in alleging yoga’s impermissibility for Christians.<sup>23</sup> He even inserts a patchwork of verses from an unnamed English translation of *PYS*, but his footnote references two whole chapters from Patanjali, and he does not show how the verses contradict the Bible.<sup>24</sup> Clifford and Johnson cite places in the *Rig Veda* and *Katha Upanishad* where yoga is mentioned, but they neither quote the verses nor compare them with biblical teaching.<sup>25</sup> Later, Clifford and Johnson invoke the titles of *PYS* and *BG*, even inserting an infographic of Patanjali’s eight limbs.<sup>26</sup> The authors provide no *PYS* references for the limbs, however, nor contrast them with the Bible. Berg lifts some terms and phrases from a 1978 English translation and commentary on *PYS* by Virginia-based cult leader, Satchidananda.<sup>27</sup> Most of what Berg quotes is from the commentary, and he does not compare any of it with biblical testimony. Anti-yoga voices like Hunt, Clifford, Johnson, and Berg show a basic familiarity with yoga’s scriptural corpus, but they do not analyze significant portions of yoga’s primary sources in light of the Bible.

Dave Williams is another Christian opponent of yoga who demonstrates an awareness of the tradition’s most commonly invoked scriptures. In his 2019 book, *Yoga Craze in the Last Days*, Williams includes what appears to be a direct quote from *HYP*,

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<sup>23</sup> Dave Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ* (Bend, OR: Berean Call, 2013), 18, 37–38, 87, 92, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Hunt, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> Ross Clifford and Philip Johnson, *Taboo or to Do: Is Christianity Complementary with Yoga* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2016), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford and Johnson, *Taboo or to Do*, 23–25, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Berg, *The New Age Trojan Horse: What Christians Should Know about Yoga and the Enneagram* (New York: Beyond, 2021), 225, 231–35.

but its footnote points to a website featuring no scriptural text whatsoever.<sup>28</sup> Williams also lists reference numbers from a 1914 English translation of *PYS*, but instead of quoting the actual verses, Williams gives his own distillation of what they mean to say.<sup>29</sup> For only one of Williams’ sixteen *PYS* citations does he suggest a biblical passage contradicting it. To emphasize the counterbiblical nature of the other passages, Williams asks rhetorically, “Do these [*sūtras*] sound compatible with God’s teaching from the Bible?”<sup>30</sup> In another book, Williams suggests, “If you read *The Yoga Sutras* by Patanjali, you will easily conclude that the end result of all yogic practice is to enter an occult encounter with divination and sorcery through the demonic ‘kundalini’ spirit.”<sup>31</sup> This would be a strange conclusion indeed, since *PYS* does not mention *kundalinī* at all. Williams offers helpful caution to Christians considering yoga, but his books do not compare the content of yoga’s primary sources against the Bible.

Similar to how Williams utilizes *PYS*, Jessica Smith juxtaposes select reference numbers from Patanjali against biblical passages to assert yoga’s incompatibility with Christianity. Her blog, *Truth Behind Yoga*, displays *PYS* references alongside certain Bible verses that she insists contradict each *PYS* teaching.<sup>32</sup> For every biblical reference, Smith quotes an unnamed English translation of the passage, but beside each *PYS* chapter and verse, she simply gives her own summary of what the text means to say without citing any publication of the scripture itself. At one point, Smith reports incorrectly that

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<sup>28</sup> Dave Williams, *Yoga Craze in the Last Days* (Lansing, MI: Decapolis, 2019), 74.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Yoga Craze in the Last Days*, 160–1.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Yoga Craze in the Last Days*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Dave Williams, *24 Reasons to Avoid Yoga If You Are a Christian* (Lansing, MI: Decapolis, 2022), 13.

<sup>32</sup> Jessica Smith, “What Does the Bible Say? The Teachings of Yoga and the Bible Are Antithetical,” *Truth Behind Yoga*, accessed October 9, 2023, <https://www.truthbehindyoga.com/what-does-the-bible-say-about-yoga/>.

*PYS* 1:1–4:34 teaches that yoga’s goal is to “become one with god.”<sup>33</sup> That citation, however, refers to the entire *PYS*. Smith’s side-by-side analysis of *PYS* reference numbers against select Bible verses seems helpful, but it is not a critique of any *PYS* content—much less *PYS* content in Sanskrit—against biblical material.

Laurette Willis is a vocal opponent of yoga and the founder of a popular Christian alternative to the practice called Praise Moves. In an article on the Praise Moves website, Willis relays an English rendering of a brief phrase from *BG*, but she provides neither the verse’s reference nor a citation to any *BG* publication.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Willis does not compare the *BG* quote against any biblical material. In a separate article on *hatha* yoga, Willis gives her explanation of its impermissibility without mentioning *HYP* or any other scripture.<sup>35</sup> Reporting on a 2022 interview with Willis, Laura Bagby of the Christian Broadcasting Network concludes, “Christians should think twice before heading to the local gym for a yoga class.”<sup>36</sup> To substantiate her conclusion, Bagby points to yoga’s “true origins” in Hinduism, but like Willis, she does not go on to show those Hindu origins using the primary sources in question, namely, yoga’s scriptures.<sup>37</sup>

In his 2022 book, *Bowing to Yoga*, Armin Wiedle lists and briefly describes Patanjali’s eight limbs, but he does not say where in *PYS* they are enumerated, and his only citation is to a 1996 encyclopedia on New Age beliefs.<sup>38</sup> Later in the book, Wiedle mentions two reference numbers from *PYS*, but only as he is conveying ideas from

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, “What Does the Bible Say?”

<sup>34</sup> Laurette Willis, “Why a Christian Alternative to Yoga?,” Praise Moves, accessed October 2, 2023, <https://praisemoves.com/about-us-why-a-christian-alternative-to-yoga>.

<sup>35</sup> Laurette Willis, “The True Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” Praise Moves, accessed October 2, 2023, <https://praisemoves.com/blog/3724/the-true-meaning-of-hatha-yoga>.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Bagby, “Should Christians Do Yoga?,” Christian Broadcasting Network, December 10, 2022, <https://www1.cbn.com/health/should-christians-do-yoga>.

<sup>37</sup> Bagby, “Should Christians Do Yoga?”

<sup>38</sup> Armin Wiedle, *Bowing to Yoga: The Truth about the Roots and Fruits of Yoga* (Frankfurt, Germany: Raising the Standard, 2022), 6–7.

German Indologist, Jakob Hauer, and Wiedle never quotes the verses themselves.<sup>39</sup> Wiedle’s bulleted list of the four paths of yoga—traditionally associated with *BG*—features no citation whatsoever,<sup>40</sup> and his only mention of *BG* occurs as he is relaying the scripture’s definition of yoga according to Dominican priest, Louis Hughes.<sup>41</sup> As for *hatha* yoga, Wiedle concludes that even this more body-focused branch of the practice “cannot be considered just physical exercise because it . . . aims to draw people into the spiritual realm.”<sup>42</sup> His conclusion regarding *hatha* yoga is not without textual warrant, but Wiedle does not even mention *HYP* in his attempt to substantiate it. Wiedle’s is a largely accurate book asserting yoga’s impermissibility for Christians, but it does not analyze significant portions of yogic scripture against relevant biblical texts.

Some advocates of strategically Christianized yoga also demonstrate a basic familiarity with yoga’s scriptural corpus without comparing any significant segments of those scriptures against pertinent biblical material. Brooke Boon of the organization Holy Yoga recognizes that certain “original” teachings from “traditional yoga” are unbiblical, insisting, “We must completely co-opt the amazing gift of yoga for Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> In her 2007 book, *Holy Yoga*, Boon lists Patanjali’s eight limbs but does not cite any publication of *PYS* or reveal where in the scripture these limbs are taught.<sup>44</sup> Nor does she contrast Patanjali’s eight-limb teaching with any passage from the Bible. Bizarrely, Boon uses the English term, “physical exercises,” to represent Patanjali’s third limb, *āsana* (आसन),

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<sup>39</sup> Wiedle, *Bowing to Yoga*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Wiedle, *Bowing to Yoga*, 5–6.

<sup>41</sup> Wiedle, *Bowing to Yoga*, 7–8.

<sup>42</sup> Wiedle, *Bowing to Yoga*, 61.

<sup>43</sup> Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul* (New York: FaithWords, 2007), 9, 33–34.

<sup>44</sup> Boon, *Holy Yoga*, 7.

which actually refers to the “seat” or the fixed “posture” one takes in yogic mediation.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Boon gives her description of *hatha* yoga without any mention of *HYP*, and she provides an explanation of *bhakti* yoga—a practice traditionally associated with *BG*—without so much as alluding to the classical scripture itself.<sup>46</sup> Boon seems to recognize *PYS* as one of yoga’s primary sources, but she does not analyze any significant portion of it—or of any other yogic scripture—alongside the Bible.

Also connected to Holy Yoga, Joe Suozzo speaks from years of missionary experience in India as he insists that yoga is not only permissible for Christians but can be used as an evangelism tool.<sup>47</sup> To start with, Suozzo affirms yoga’s “philosophical and cultural moorings in Hinduism,” acknowledging its rootedness in “pantheistic philosophy [and] idolatry.”<sup>48</sup> Suozzo even identifies *PYS* as a key yogic scripture before giving a mostly accurate summary of its core message.<sup>49</sup> What Suozzo does not go on to do, however, is interact with any of *PYS*’s content or compare it against relevant passages from the Bible. Like Boon, Suozzo is an advocate of strategically Christianized yoga who acknowledges *PYS* as one of yoga’s key scriptures without actually assessing the compatibility of what it teaches with biblical doctrine.

Rie Skarhoj and Miranda Jo Davis are two other advocates of Christianized yoga who demonstrate an awareness of yoga’s scriptural corpus. In her 2019 work, *Yoga in the Church*, Skarhoj lists *PYS*’s eight limbs in her own words and relays that *HYP* was

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<sup>45</sup> Boon, *Holy Yoga*, 7; Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1899; repr., Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1986), s.v. *āsana*/आसन, “posture,” 159, Sanskrit Lexicon, <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2014/web/webtc2/index.php>.

<sup>46</sup> Boon, *Holy Yoga*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Joe Suozzo, *Can Yoga Be Embraced for the Glory of God in Christ?* (Self-published), 1, 8–9, 11–12.

<sup>48</sup> Suozzo, *Can Yoga Be Embraced for the Glory of God in Christ?*, 8, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Suozzo, *Can Yoga Be Embraced for the Glory of God in Christ?*, 8.

the first yogic scripture to emphasize bodily postures.<sup>50</sup> She neither provides reference numbers from the two scriptures, cites any particular publication of them, nor quotes any of their content. In her 2020 book, *Christian Girl in a Yoga World*, Davis affirms that “traditional” yoga is rooted in Hindu scriptures and encourages Christians to navigate their practices carefully.<sup>51</sup> She advises that, as long as Christians “adapt yoga to make it God-centered,” the practice can be permissible.<sup>52</sup> Davis mentions the Vedas and *BG* as foundational texts of yoga, but she does not quote them, and her footnotes simply point to websites like yogabasics.com and theyogainstitute.org.<sup>53</sup> Davis testifies to having taught on *PYS* in the past, but she does not interact with its content, and she substantiates her summary of the text’s purpose by citing the publication, *Yoga Journal*.<sup>54</sup> The anti-yoga voices in this section say genuine yoga contradicts Christianity, and these proponents of Christianized yoga agree that much in the tradition is unbiblical. Although they demonstrate a basic familiarity with yoga’s scriptural corpus, any original-language analysis of significant portions of yogic scripture has lain outside the scope of their work.

### **Analyzing Broad Yogic Concepts**

A few Christian scholars have dealt more extensively with some of the broader concepts found in yoga’s revered texts, but they stop short of providing direct analysis of significant portions of yoga’s primary sources in comparison with the Bible—much less using these scriptures’ original languages. Among these scholars who have dealt more seriously with yoga’s scriptural rootedness is Stephanie Corigliano. Though her 2017

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<sup>50</sup> Rie Frilund Skarhoj, *Yoga in the Church: Why and How?* (Self-published, 2019), 7. Skarhoj mistakes the last word of *HYP*’s title—*pradipika*, meaning “illumination”—for the name of its author, and assumes the word *sūtra* in *PYS*’s title refers to Patanjali’s eight “limbs,” when in fact it means “aphorisms.”

<sup>51</sup> Miranda Jo Davis, *Christian Girl in a Yoga World: Biblical Wisdom to Safely Navigate the Practice and Honor Your Faith* (Torrazza Piemonte, Italy: Amazon Italia Logistica, 2020), 24–7.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, *Christian Girl in a Yoga World*, 97.

<sup>53</sup> Davis, *Christian Girl in a Yoga World*, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Davis, *Christian Girl in a Yoga World*, 41.



article in the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* focuses more on the development of yoga during the twentieth century, the piece opens with a quote from *PYS*. The verse is *PYS* 1:14, and Corigliano inserts its Sanskrit lines transliterated in the Roman alphabet, along with the English translation of Edwin Bryant.<sup>55</sup> Only this one verse is quoted, though, and Corigliano's purpose is not to demonstrate its incompatibility with biblical teaching. Her article, therefore, is a helpful commentary on the yoga phenomenon and its intersection with the Christian faith, but it is not a scholarly examination of significant portions of yogic scripture against pertinent biblical passages.

In another article within the same volume of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, Bradley Malkovsky contrasts *PYS*'s concept of divinity with that of Christianity. Admitting he is not an exegete of yogic scripture, Malkovsky argues rightly that *PYS*'s Īshvara figure is starkly different from the Bible's idea of God.<sup>56</sup> In substantiating his position, Malkovsky does not quote *PYS* but instead draws on the work of Indologist, Gerald Larson. Elsewhere in the piece, Malkovsky gives reference numbers for two *PYS* verses and even includes a key phrase from one in English.<sup>57</sup> In neither case, though, does he quote the whole verse or cite any *PYS* publication. Malkovsky's work is an astute Christian critique of *PYS*'s divine Īshvara figure, but it does not directly compare any significant portion of *PYS* against the Bible.

Kalarikkal Aleaz provides a helpful critique of certain Christian yoga advocates who have advanced misunderstandings about yoga's scriptures in their insistence that yoga does not contradict Christianity. Regarding a common mishandling of *PYS*, Aleaz reports in a scholarly article from 2005 that "the distinctiveness of

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<sup>55</sup> Stephanie Corigliano, "Devotion and Discipline: Christian Yoga and the Yoga of T. Krishnamacharya," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 30, no. 4 (2017): 21.

<sup>56</sup> Bradley Malkovsky, "Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 30, no. 5 (2017): 35, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Malkovsky, "Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity," 36.

Patanjali's yoga philosophy as separation of matter from soul is not upheld by Christian thinkers. Rather, they confuse [*PYS*-based] yoga with the union with God."<sup>58</sup> Aleaz's description of *PYS* philosophy as centering on the separation of matter from soul is accurate. However, to substantiate his description, Aleaz turns not to *PYS* itself but to a 1968 textbook on Indian philosophy.<sup>59</sup> His article includes an English rendering of one *PYS* verse, but its citation points to the work of the Christian yoga advocate being critiqued, rather than to any *PYS* publication.<sup>60</sup> Aleaz accurately describes a key concept from one of yoga's central scriptures, but he neither substantiates it from the scripture itself nor compares that concept against the biblical doctrine.

In his three-part study for *Christian Research Journal* from 2008 entitled "The Yoga Boom," Elliot Miller offers an in-depth critique of yoga. He argues that at least classical yoga, largely based on *PYS*, contradicts Christianity, and he urges Christians to stop doing yoga altogether.<sup>61</sup> According to Miller, the main way in which yoga, including *PYS*-based yoga, contradicts Christianity is by teaching practitioners to seek union with Hindu notions of God.<sup>62</sup> The goal of union with God is indeed found in some yogic scriptures like *BG*, but presenting this as the ultimate goal of yoga in general is oversimplified, and as Aleaz has shown, eisegeting the union-with-God concept into Patanjali's writing is flatly mistaken. Nonetheless, Miller does cite reference numbers for

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<sup>58</sup> K.P. Aleaz, "Christian Response to Yoga Philosophy," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 37, no. 1 (June 2005): 192. Jessica Smith's blog exemplifies a contemporary anti-yoga voice promoting the misunderstanding of *PYS* as teaching union with God.

<sup>59</sup> Aleaz, "Christian Response to Yoga Philosophy," 183, 186.

<sup>60</sup> Aleaz, "Christian Response to Yoga Philosophy," 184.

<sup>61</sup> Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2: Yoga in Its Contemporary Western Context," *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (2008): 1; Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response," *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 4 (2008): 1, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context," *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (2008): 2, 6; Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2," 1; Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3," 1, 3.

a few verses from yoga's scriptures as he accurately conveys other yogic concepts.

For instance, in a footnote, Miller references *PYS* 2:40, contrasting its degradation of the physical body with the Bible's declaration in Genesis 1:31 that all creation was originally good.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, he points to *PYS* 1:23–6 in his highly accurate description of Patanjali's Īshvara figure.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Miller is mostly correct in his observation that *PYS* 1:27 encourages yoga practitioners to concentrate on the sacred syllable *ōm*.<sup>65</sup> Finally, he points out that *HYP*'s first few verses introduce *hatha* yoga as a “staircase” to yoga's loftier forms.<sup>66</sup> Miller demonstrates an awareness of yoga's scriptural corpus, and he even refers readers to certain select verses within those scriptures as he accurately conveys some of yoga's core concepts. For none of the verses he references, however, does Miller include a full quotation of the text itself. Ultimately, any direct, original-language analysis of significant portions of yogic scripture against relevant biblical material lies outside the scope of Miller's work.

### Conclusion

Contributors to this body of literature assert that yoga contradicts Christianity. Several insist on this without so much as invoking the title of any yogic scripture, speaking instead from their own experiences or by drawing on secondary sources. Others assert yoga's incompatibility with Christianity by interacting, to a very limited extent, with isolated bits pulled from English translations of yoga's primary sources. These contributors show a general awareness of the works making up yoga's scriptural corpus,

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<sup>63</sup> Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1,” 12.

<sup>64</sup> Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1,” 7.

<sup>65</sup> Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1,” 5. Miller writes that *PYS* 1:27 defines *ōm* as “the voice of God” and instructs practitioners to concentrate on the sound itself. Actually, *PYS* 1:23 and 2:45 direct practitioners to contemplate on Īshvara himself, while *PYS* 1:27 adds that *ōm* is literally the verbalization of him.

<sup>66</sup> Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1,” 11. Miller also relays the common oversimplification of *hatha* as merely physical yoga.

but they do not analyze any significant portions of these sources in light of the Bible. A few Christian scholars deal somewhat more extensively with certain broad concepts found in yoga's foundational texts. However, these contributors also stop short of providing any direct analysis of actual content from yogic scripture in comparison with the Bible—much less using these scriptures' original languages.

This lack of primary-source substantiation for the claim that yoga contradicts Christianity does not constitute a failure on the part of these contributors. Rather, direct comparison of significant portions of yoga's scriptures with the Bible has been outside the scope of their work. Although their assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity is defensible on textual grounds, it has not been within these contributors' purposes to formulate such a defense. This lack of textual proof that yoga contradicts Christianity is the main problem addressed by this dissertation. Original-language, primary-source substantiation for the allegation that yoga is counter-Christian is this dissertation's unique contribution to the literature.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PATANJALI YOGA SŪTRAS AND THE BIBLE

In this chapter, I analyze certain thematically delineated passages of the *Patanjali Yoga Sūtras* (*PYS*) in their original Sanskrit and then compare those passages against relevant biblical texts. I begin with some background information on *PYS*, including an examination of the scripture's dating and authorship, as well as a briefing on the philosophical framework within which *PYS* operates. The chapter then proceeds into a critical analysis of the scriptural passages themselves, organized into two themes. The first theme is *PYS*'s soteriology, in which I offer my own translation and analysis of three passages on how yoga practitioners can be saved. The next theme is theology, and I translate and explain two more segments revealing *PYS*'s view of divinity. The following section reveals in brief how *PYS*'s soteriological and theological teachings are echoed in the much later *HYP*. The chapter ends with a comparison of these two *PYS*-based themes against relevant biblical passages. My conclusion is that, at least as far as their soteriologies and theologies are concerned, *PYS* and the Bible are starkly different.

#### **Background Information on *PYS***

Edwin Bryant notes that the Sanskrit word *sūtra* refers to a succinct verse or an aphorism, not unlike a proverb.<sup>1</sup> The Monier-Williams *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* also affirms this understanding of the word *sūtra*.<sup>2</sup> The *Patanjali Yoga Sūtras*, then, is simply

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin F. Bryant, trans., *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: North Point, 2009), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1899; repr., Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1986), s.v. *sūtra*/सूत्र, "aphorism," 1241, Sanskrit Lexicon, <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2014/web/webtc2/index.php>.

a book of aphorisms on yoga attributed to Patanjali. The work's terse verses are often packed with richer meaning than is explicitly conveyed through the words themselves. Therefore, before analyzing select passages of *PYS* in its original language, a degree of familiarity with its dating, authorship, and philosophical tradition is important.

### **Dating and Authorship of *PYS***

Gerald Larson, along with Bryant, attests that *PYS* was compiled sometime between the first and fifth centuries AD.<sup>3</sup> This dating makes the scripture a rough contemporary of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*BG*) and considerably earlier than the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* (*HYP*). David White admits that it is unclear whether *PYS* influenced *BG* or vice-versa,<sup>4</sup> but Larson argues convincingly that Patanjali's scripture was informative for later *hatha* materials like *HYP*.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, *PYS* is widely regarded as “the foundational scripture of ‘classical yoga,’” with India's classical period ranging from the first few centuries BC to the first few centuries AD.<sup>6</sup>

*PYS* is attributed to an Indian sage named Patanjali about whom little is known. This name is shared by a Sanskrit grammarian from the last few centuries BC, but Larson and White point out that he and *PYS*'s author are likely not the same person.<sup>7</sup> Bryant and White insist that one thing we do know about *PYS*'s Patanjali is that he compiled preexisting materials on yoga and did not author the *sūtra* collection from

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald James Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” in *Yoga in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 73–74; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, xxxiv.

<sup>4</sup> David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 47, 180.

<sup>5</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 73.

<sup>6</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 75; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 36.

scratch.<sup>8</sup> Equally important to the question of *PYS*'s authorship, though, is an understanding of the scripture's early commentarial history.

White and Larson affirm that the first commentary on *PYS* was written within a few years of the scripture's compilation by a philosopher commonly referred to as Vyāsa.<sup>9</sup> Monier-Williams holds that *vyāsa* simply means "compiler" or "author,"<sup>10</sup> and White and Larson suggest the name is an epithet used here for a thinker named Vindhyavasa who lived around the time of *PYS*'s compilation.<sup>11</sup> White also points out that manuscripts of *PYS* are rarely found without Vyāsa's accompanying commentary.<sup>12</sup> In fact, early on, Vyāsa's exposition of the *sūtras* "attained a status almost as canonical as the primary text by Patanjali himself."<sup>13</sup> Bryant and White are right to emphasize Vyāsa's commentary as an essential resource for understanding Patanjali's aphorisms on yoga.<sup>14</sup> Philipp Maas has gone so far as to suggest that Patanjali and Vyāsa were the same person, and that the *sūtras* and their earliest commentary constitute one original work.<sup>15</sup> However, as White and Larson have acknowledged, Maas's hypothesis remains unproven.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, I treat Patanjali's *sūtras* as the primary scripture to be examined and Vyāsa's commentary as a crucial but secondary work.

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<sup>8</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, xxxiii; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 34–35.

<sup>9</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 6, 41, 226; Larson, "Patanjala Yoga in Practice," 74.

<sup>10</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vyāsa/व्यास*, "divider," 1035.

<sup>11</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 227; Larson, "Patanjala Yoga in Practice," 74–75.

<sup>12</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 9–10, 228–29.

<sup>13</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, xxxix.

<sup>14</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, xxxv, xxxviii; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Philipp A. Maas, "A Concise Historiography of Classical Yoga Philosophy," in *Periodization and Historiography of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Eli Franco, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library (Vienna: Sammlung de Nobili, 2013), 57.

<sup>16</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 226–28, 232; Larson, "Patanjala Yoga in Practice," 74–75.

## Sāṅkhya Philosophy and PYS

James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, along with Bryant and White, explain that *PYS* arises from and operates mostly within the bounds of a philosophical system called Sāṅkhya.<sup>17</sup> White and Larson affirm that the most significant extant text of Sāṅkhya philosophy, the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, was written by Īshvara Krishna around the same time as *PYS*'s compilation.<sup>18</sup> Sāṅkhya is a dualistic philosophy. It sees the world as comprised of two realities: the material universe called *prakṛiti* (प्रकृति), and a host of immaterial souls or consciousnesses called *purūshas* (पुरुष).<sup>19</sup> In the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, Krishna teaches that the “*purūshas* [are] many” (*purūsha bahutvam* / पुरुष बहुत्वं), and that each is “merely a witness . . . free of all connections” with anything pertaining to the material world.<sup>20</sup> Mallinson and Singleton explain that the basic problem in the human experience, according to Sāṅkhya, is that all *purūshas* suffer under the delusion that they are part of the material universe unfolding before them.<sup>21</sup> White affirms this understanding of Sāṅkhya, writing that our ultimate goal as persons is to realize that we are merely our *purūshas*, and as such, ontologically isolated from all the material reality—the *prakṛiti*—we see playing out around us.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), xvii; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, xxv, xlvi; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 23; Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 74. The name Īshvara (ईश्वर) is also the generic title used in the *PYS* for the supreme God, and Krishna (कृष्ण) is also the name of the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s most prominently featured deity.

<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that that material world is illusory. In the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, Īshvara Krishna insists that, though difficult to perceive, *prakṛiti* is real. Radhanath Phukan, trans., *The Sāṅkhya Kārikā of Īshvarakṛṣṇa* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960), 79. Daniel Simpson, along with Bryant, Larson, and White, all affirm that Sāṅkhya philosophy is characterized by this *prakṛiti-purūsha* dualism. Daniel Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga: A Comprehensive Guide to Yoga's History, Texts, Philosophy, and Practices* (New York: North Point Press, 2021), 77; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, xxvi, xlvi; Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 76; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 26, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Phukan, *The Sāṅkhya Kārikā of Īshvarakṛṣṇa*, 95–96. Larson underscores this concept of the *purūsha* as found in Sāṅkhya philosophy. Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 76.

<sup>21</sup> Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, xv.

<sup>22</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 27, 31. In his Christian critique of yoga, Elliot Miller also attests that this is the ultimate goal of Patanjali's Sāṅkhya-based yoga system. Elliot Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context,” *Christian Research*



Also crucial for understanding Sāṅkhya is a thorough grasp of what exactly constitutes *prakṛiti*. Krishna explains in the *Kārikā* that the material world is ongoingly generated and constantly altered by three simultaneous, cooperating processes called the three *gunas* (गुण).<sup>23</sup> A. L. Basham writes that the term *guna* literally means “thread” but also connotes a “constituent quality” of the universe.<sup>24</sup> Larson reports that one of these *gunas* is responsible for generating tangible objects such as our bodies and that another stirs up the various energies at work in the universe.<sup>25</sup> He goes on to explain that the third *guna*, however, is what generates those intangible elements of the human experience like intellect, ego, and thought, and that these, too, are considered constituents of *prakṛiti*.<sup>26</sup> This third *guna* is called *sattva* (सत्त्व), and Larson accurately relays Krishna’s consistent teaching throughout the *Kārikā* that, although *sattva* and its products are intangible, both this third *guna* and its outputs are located squarely within the material world of *prakṛiti*.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, Mallinson, Singleton, and White observe that those intangible products of the *sattva guna*—intellect, ego, and thought—are only three of the twenty-four *tattvas* (तत्त्व) that make up *prakṛiti* in the Sāṅkhya framework.<sup>28</sup> In the *Kārikā*, Krishna affirms that there are twenty-four *tattvas*, but since his explanation of these *tattvas* early on in the work covers a collection of just twenty-three, Krishna reveals that *prakṛiti* itself makes up

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*Journal* 31, no. 2 (2008): 1–5. Indeed, in the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, Krishna maintains that *puruṣhas* are actually “never under bondage” to the material world. Phukan, *The Sāṅkhya Kārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Phukan, *The Sāṅkhya Kārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa*, 84–86, 108. Larson and Bryant relay this *sāṅkhyic* teaching on the *gunas*’ role in generating *prakṛiti*. Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 76; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 57–58.

<sup>24</sup> A. L. Basham, *The Origins & Development of Classical Hinduism* (1989; repr., New York: Oxford University, 1991), 87.

<sup>25</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 76.

<sup>26</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 77.

<sup>27</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 76–77. Indeed, Īshvara Krishna’s teaching in the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā* consistently portrays the *sattva guna* and its intangible *tattvas* as part of *prakṛiti*.

<sup>28</sup> Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, xv; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 26.

the twenty-fourth.<sup>29</sup> Apart from intellect, ego, and thought, the other *tattvas*, produced by the other two *guna* processes, include all of earth's tangible elements, as well as the various energies being expended at any given time. The *sattva*-generated *tattvas* of intellect, ego, and thought, however, are particularly important when it comes to understanding the way *PYS* employs the Sāṅkhya philosophical framework.

Larson, Bryant, and Simpson observe that *PYS* combines the three *tattvas* of intellect (*buddhi*/बुद्धि), ego (*ahankāra*/अहंकार), and thought (*manas*/मनस्) into one entity called the *chitta* (चित्त, usually glossed as “mind”).<sup>30</sup> These three scholars, along with White, emphasize that each person's intangible *chitta* is not identifiable with his or her soul (*purūsha*/पुरुष), rather, as a product of the *sattva guna*, this mind is an intrinsic part of the material universe, the *prakriti*.<sup>31</sup> I mentioned above that, according to Sāṅkhya, each of our *purūshas* mistakenly sees itself as part of the material world around it. Larson and Simpson explain more specifically, though, that each *purūsha* is under the delusion that it is identifiable with its *chitta* (its mind), which is in fact a part of the *prakritic*, material universe.<sup>32</sup> Larson concludes that, according to Sāṅkhya, this mistaking of one's *purūsha* for one's *prakritic chitta* is the basic problem of human existence, so the goal of Patanjali's yoga is to realize the stark isolation (*kāvālyā*/कैवल्य) that the *purūsha* actually has from all of *prakriti*, including its own *chitta*.<sup>33</sup>

### Critical Analysis of *PYS*

With that understanding of *PYS*'s dating, authorship, and philosophical

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<sup>29</sup> Phukan, *The Sāṅkhya Kārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa*, 73–74, 154.

<sup>30</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 77; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, lii, 12–13; Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 97.

<sup>31</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 77–78; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, xlv–xlvi, liii; Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 77; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 78. Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 77, 97.

<sup>33</sup> Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 77–78.

tradition in place, we can now proceed to analyze some select passages of the scripture itself. My analysis is organized under two themes. First is *PYS*'s soteriology, and I have selected three passages where Patanjali explains how yoga practitioners can be saved. Here, I give my translation and analysis of these three passages, saving any comparison between them and the Bible for a later section. The other theme is theology, and I translate and comment on two more passages dealing with divinity. Ultimately, this critical analysis presents five passages revealing *PYS*'s soteriology and theology, which will then be compared against relevant biblical texts in the following section.

### **The Soteriology of *PYS***

The goal of Patanjali's yoga is to realize the stark isolation (*kāvālyā/कैवल्य*)<sup>34</sup> that the *purūsha* actually has from all of *prakṛiti*, including its own *chitta*, or mind. However, in the *PYS* system, the practitioner's realization of the *purūsha*'s isolation from *prakṛiti* is preceded by two other states to be attained: stillness (*nirōdha/निरोध*)<sup>35</sup> and meditation (*samādhi/समाधि*).<sup>36</sup> The purpose of Patanjali's yoga is to advance from one of these states to the next, so together they comprise *PYS*'s teleology. Furthermore, progressing from stillness into meditation, and finally to a realization of the *purūsha*'s isolation from *prakṛiti* is what it means to be saved in *PYS*. Thus, this threefold progression is also what constitutes the scripture's soteriology.

The three passages examined below show that realizing the *purūsha*'s isolation from the mind and from the rest of *prakṛiti* entails an emptying of the mind. The first passage teaches that, in *nirōdha*, the mind is utterly stilled. The next shows that, in *samādhi*, the mind meditates on one point and is effectually voided of its own form. The third and final passage examined here reveals that, in *kāvālyā*, the mind successfully

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<sup>34</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *kāvālyā/कैवल्य*, "isolation," 311.

<sup>35</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *nirōdha/निरोध*, "stillness," 553.

<sup>36</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *samādhi/समाधि*, "meditation," 1159.

discriminates between itself and the *purūsha* and loses its power altogether. This stilling, voiding, and disabling of the *chitta* (चित्त) can be understood as an emptying of the mind. Therefore, Patanjali’s soteriology calls for an emptying of the mind, and these passages show how the sage sees this emptiness coming about.<sup>37</sup> In his first few aphorisms, Patanjali presents the initial soteriological goal of his yoga system: *nirōdha*, or stillness.

**Stillness (*Nirōdha*/निरोध) in PYS 1:1–4, 12–16.** The first state to be attained in the practice of Patanjali’s yoga is stillness, or *nirōdha* (निरोध). In PYS 1:1–4, 12–16, the author describes *nirōdha* and explains how to achieve it. The verses read as follows:

(1) अथ योगानुशासनम्। (2) योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः। (3) तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपेऽवस्थानम्। (4) वृत्तिसारूप्यम इतरत्र। . . . (12) अभ्यासवैराग्याभ्यां तन्निरोधः। (13) तत्र स्थितौ यत्नोऽभ्यासः। (14) स तु दीर्घकाल- नैरन्तर्यसत्कारासेवितो दृढभूमिः। (15) दृष्टानुश्रविकविषयवितृष्णस्य वशीकारसंज्ञा वैराग्यम्। (16) तत्परं पुरुषख्यातेर्गुणवैतृष्यम्।<sup>38</sup>

(1) Now, the teachings of yoga. (2) Yoga [is] the stillness of the mind’s churnings. (3) Then, the seer abides in its own [true] form. (4) Otherwise, [it abides] in the form of the churnings. . . . (12) By practice and dispassion, that [churning of the mind is] stilled. (13) Among these, practice [is] effort toward stability. (14) But [only when] dwelt in for a long time, continuously and reverently, [is] it firmly grounded. (15) Dispassion [is] the subdued understanding of one without desire for sensory experiences, [whether] seen or heard. (16) Better than that [is being] without desire [even] for the *gunas*, [which results in] realization of the *purūsha*.<sup>39</sup>

In the scripture’s opening verse, Patanjali announces that he will now<sup>40</sup> be

<sup>37</sup> Miller asserts rightly, then, that Patanjali’s yoga is generally purposed toward “mind control.” Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part I,” 1–4.

<sup>38</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 4–57. Bryant’s book includes Patanjali’s aphorisms in their original Sanskrit, interspersed with Bryant’s corresponding translation and commentary. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Patanjali as they appear in Bryant’s work.

<sup>39</sup> This is my translation of Patanjali’s Sanskrit words as they appear in Bryant’s book. Bryant’s English translation, along with that of Chip Hartranft, served as a helpful resource in my translation of this and the other PYS passages examined below. Chip Hartranft, *The Yoga Sūtra of Patanjali* (2003; repr., Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2019). Appendix 1 features documentation from Zabaan Language Institute that their reviewer affirms the accuracy of my translations.

<sup>40</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, *atha*/अथ, “now,” 17. Hereafter, I will cite specific entries in this dictionary as substantiating my renderings of individual Sanskrit words. As here, I will give my English rendering (in this case, “now”) with a footnote directly attached, citing the dictionary entry for the Sanskrit word (in this case, *atha*/अथ) that lies behind my English rendering.

presenting the teachings<sup>41</sup> of yoga. The next aphorism teaches that yoga essentially amounts to the stillness of the practitioner’s mind. The “stillness” here is *nirōdha* (निरोध), and the “mind” is that infamous *chitta* (चित्त)<sup>42</sup> which Sāṅkhya holds we *purūshas* are always misidentifying ourselves with. Left alone, one’s *chitta* would languish on in its churning,<sup>43</sup> but through yoga, the *chitta* can be stilled. Stillness of mind, then, is the first stage to be attained in PYS’s soteriological system. It is the first step toward making sure the mind is effectually emptied so that the practitioner can realize the *purūsha*’s isolation from that mind and from the rest of *prakṛiti*.

Verses 3 and 4 explicate that this stilling of the mind is what will eventually lead to the practitioner’s *purūsha* being perceived as isolated from its *prakṛitic chitta*. In fact, Vyāsa writes in his commentary that *nirōdha* is very much like yoga’s final goal of *kāvālyā*, the complete realization of the *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakṛiti*.<sup>44</sup> PYS 1:3–4 explain it like this: When one attains *nirōdha*, his or her *purūsha* comes to abide<sup>45</sup> in its own form,<sup>46</sup> otherwise<sup>47</sup> it abides in the form of the mind’s churning. Vyāsa clarifies that the *purūsha* has always been isolated from the *prakṛitic chitta*, but prior to achieving *nirōdha*, the practitioner is unable to perceive it as such.<sup>48</sup> The term Patanjali uses as a synonym for *purūsha* here is “seer” (*drashtṛa/द्रष्टृ*),<sup>49</sup> which harkens back to Sāṅkhya’s

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<sup>41</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anushās/अनुशास*, “teachings,” 39.

<sup>42</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *chitta/चित्त*, “mind,” 395.

<sup>43</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vrata/वृत्त*, “churnings,” 1009.

<sup>44</sup> P. N. Mukerji, trans., *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali: Containing His Yoga Aphorisms with Commentary of Vyāsa*, ed. Swāmi Hariharānanda Āraṇya (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1963), 13. My interaction with Vyāsa’s commentary utilizes Mukerji’s English translation.

<sup>45</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avasthānam/अवस्थानम*, “abide,” 106.

<sup>46</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *rūp/रूप*, “form,” 885.

<sup>47</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *itaratra/इतरत्र*, “otherwise,” 164.

<sup>48</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *drashtṛa/द्रष्टृ*, “seer,” 501. Bryant affirms that “seer” here is synonymous with *purūsha*. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 22.

understanding of the *purūsha* as a witness to the *prakṛiti* unfolding around it. According to *PYS* 1:1–4, *nirōdha*—the stilling of the *chitta*—is the first stage practitioners must attain in order to empty their minds and realize the *purūshas*’ isolation from *prakṛiti*.

Verses 5 through 11 constitute a digression into the subtleties of the mind’s churning. These can include “any sensual impression, thought, idea, cognition, psychic activity, or mental state whatsoever.”<sup>50</sup> Bryant explains that these *vratti* are what keep the *purūsha* under the delusion that it is identifiable with its *prakṛitic chitta* rather than an isolated being.<sup>51</sup> Vyāsa writes that the mind churning with thoughts and experiences is what distracts the *purūsha* and captivates it under the impression that it *is* that mind.<sup>52</sup> Kalarikkal Aleaz, in concert with Bryant, concludes that, according to *PYS*, these mental churning are the cause of humanity’s root problem, so to begin working toward the solution (realizing the *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakṛiti*), they must be stilled.<sup>53</sup>

*PYS* 1:12 announces two means by which a practitioner can attain *nirōdha*, the first state in *PYS*’s soteriological progression. These include practice (*abhyāsa*/अभ्यास)<sup>54</sup> and dispassion (*vārāgya*/वैराग्य).<sup>55</sup> The idea in verse 13 is that yoga practice itself is simply putting forth effort<sup>56</sup> toward the stability<sup>57</sup> of one’s mind.<sup>58</sup> These verses seem to

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<sup>50</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 28.

<sup>51</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 28.

<sup>52</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> K.P. Aleaz, “Christian Response to Yoga Philosophy,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 37, no. 1 (June 2005): 183; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, liv, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *abhyāsa*/अभ्यास, “practice,” 76–77.

<sup>55</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vārāgya*/वैराग्य, “dispassion,” 1025.

<sup>56</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yatnā*/यत्ना, “effort,” 841.

<sup>57</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sthiti*/स्थिति, “stability,” 1264. This is a different word than *nirōdha*, meaning stillness, but here, *sthiti* refers to the same placid state of mind.

<sup>58</sup> *PYS* 1:13 does not include the word for mind (*chitta*/चित्त), but Bryant and Vyāsa affirm that the mind (*chitta*/चित्त) must be the implied object of the stability here. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 48; Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 41.

suggest almost a circular process, as if advising, “One thing that helps still the mind is yoga practice, and yoga practice is just trying to still your mind.” Regardless, Patanjali writes in verse 14 that, to be firmly<sup>59</sup> grounded,<sup>60</sup> one’s yoga practice must be dwelt in<sup>61</sup> for a long<sup>62</sup> time,<sup>63</sup> continuously<sup>64</sup> and reverently.<sup>65</sup> PYS 1:12–14 teaches that diligent yoga practice is one way to reach the first rung of Patanjali’s soteriological ladder.

The other way to achieve *nirōdha* is through dispassion (*vārāgya*/वैराग्य). PYS 1:15 defines dispassion as the subdued<sup>66</sup> understanding<sup>67</sup> of one without desire<sup>68</sup> for sensory experiences,<sup>69</sup> whether seen<sup>70</sup> or heard.<sup>71</sup> Truly dispassionate yoga practitioners have no desire to experience the sensations of those *tattvas* that make up the *prakritic* world all around them. In fact, verse 16 argues an even better<sup>72</sup> type of dispassion<sup>73</sup> is devoid of any desire to experience even the *gunas* that generate those *tattvas* in the first place. A dispassionate lack of desire for any experience of *prakriti*—whether of the *gunas*

<sup>59</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dradha*/दृढ, “firmly,” 490.

<sup>60</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhūmi*/भूमि, “grounded,” 763.

<sup>61</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sevita*/सेवित, “dwelt in,” 1247.

<sup>62</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dīrgha*/दीर्घ, “long,” 481.

<sup>63</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *kāla*/काल, “time,” 278.

<sup>64</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *nārantarya*/नैरन्तर्य, “continuously,” 570.

<sup>65</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *satkāra*/सत्कार, “reverently,” 1134.

<sup>66</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vashikāra*/वशीकार, “subdued,” 929.

<sup>67</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sangyā*/संज्ञा, “understanding,” 1133.

<sup>68</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *trashnā*/तृष्णा, “without desire,” 454.

<sup>69</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vishaya*/विषय, “sensory experiences,” 997.

<sup>70</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *drashta*/दृष्ट, “seen,” 491.

<sup>71</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anushravika*/अनुश्रविक, “heard,” 141.

<sup>72</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *param*/परं, “better, supreme,” 586.

<sup>73</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tad*/तद्, “that,” 432. This demonstrative pronoun refers to the dispassion.

or of their *tattvas*—is the other means Patanjali prescribes for achieving *nirōdha*.

Patanjali also includes in verse 16 the phrase “realization<sup>74</sup> of the *purūsha*.” The terse aphorism does not clarify the relationship between the practitioner’s non-desire for the *prakritic gunas* and the successful realization of his or her *purūsha*. It reads literally, “Better than that, realization of the *purūsha*, non-desire for the *gunas*.” The interpretation that makes sense of Patanjali’s argument and coheres with Sāṅkhya philosophy is that the realization of the *purūsha* results from the practitioner’s disregard for the *gunas*. That is, a non-desire to experience the *prakritic gunas* helps to bring about the eventual realization of one’s *purūsha* as an isolated entity. Vyāsa comments that this dispassion is “inseparable” from *kāvālyā*, the realization of the *purūsha*’s isolation from materiality.<sup>75</sup> Put simply, a dispassion toward *prakriti* and its *gunas* helps one realize that his or her *purūsha* had been isolated from that *prakriti* all along.

*PYS* 1:1–4, 12–16 teach that the diligent practice of yoga, along with a dispassion toward any experience of *prakriti*, can help one achieve *nirōdha*, stillness of mind. This *nirōdha* constitutes the first part of what it means to truly empty one’s mind. In order to be emptied, the mind must first be stilled. Though he neither uses to the term *nirōdha* nor refers to any *PYS* passage on this point, Miller relays accurately in his Christian critique of yoga, “The first goal of yoga practice is to still the mind.”<sup>76</sup> In Patanjali’s soteriology, this stillness of mind is the first step toward our ultimate purpose: realizing the *purūsha*’s isolation from the *chitta* and from the rest of *prakriti*.

**Meditation (*Samādhi*/समाधि) in *PYS* 2:28–29, 3:1–4.** The second state to be attained in Patanjali’s soteriological progression is meditation, or *samādhi* (समाधि). Vyāsa

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<sup>74</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *khyāti*/ख्याति, “realization,” 341.

<sup>75</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 45. Quotes of Vyāsa reflect Mukerji’s translation.

<sup>76</sup> Elliot Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response.” *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 4 (2008): 3.



posits that this state is identifiable with yoga itself.<sup>77</sup> That is, yoga is meditation. However, he said the same of stillness (*nirōdha/निरोध*) back in *PYS* 1:2, and that turned out to be just the first step toward yoga’s ultimate goal of realizing that the *purūsha* is isolated from all of materiality. Patanjali seems to deal similarly with meditation here. *Samādhi* is central to the *PYS* system, but within the scripture’s overall soteriological framework, the state of meditation serves as the second step toward that final realization of the *purūsha*’s isolation from the mind (the *chitta/चित्त*) and from the whole *prakritic* world of which the mind is just a part. Patanjali’s aphorisms most pertinent to his concept of mediation (*samādhi/समाधि*) are *PYS* 2:28–29, 3:1–4. They read as follows:

(2:28) योगाङ्गानुष्ठानाद् अशुद्धिक्षये ज्ञानदीप्तिराविवेकख्यातेः। (2:29) यमनियमासनप्राणायाम प्रत्याहार धारणाध्यानसमाधयोऽष्टाव् अङ्गानि। . . . (3:1) देशबन्धश्चित्तस्य धारणा। (3:2) तत्र प्रत्ययैकतानता ध्यानम्। (3:3) तद् एवार्थमात्रनिर्भासं स्वरूपशून्यम् इव समाधिः। (3:4) त्रयम् एकत्र संयमः।<sup>78</sup>

(2:28) Through the performance of yoga’s limbs and the removal of impurity [comes] a light of knowledge and a discriminative realization. (2:29) The eight limbs [are] restraint, duty, posture, breath control, withdrawal, concentration, focus, and meditation. . . . (3:1) Concentration [is] the fixing of [one’s] mind on a point. (3:2) Focus [is] single-directedness at that idea. (3:3) Meditation [is] the appearance of only that very thing, so that [the mind is] devoid of its own form. (3:4) *Sanyama* [is] the three together.

In *PYS* 2:28–29, Patanjali introduces the famous eight limbs of yoga, where meditation (*samādhi/समाधि*) appears as the final limb. He writes that by performing yoga’s limbs, the practitioner can come to a discriminative realization. The first verse’s use of “performance” (*anushthānād/अनुष्ठानाद्*)<sup>79</sup> differs from earlier references to the “practice” (*abhyāsa/अभ्यास*) of yoga, but Bryant reads Patanjali as elaborating on the same action here.<sup>80</sup> Bryant and Vyāsa both understand Patanjali to be teaching that the

<sup>77</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 1. Mallinson and Singleton reaffirm Vyāsa’s understanding of Patanjali on this point. Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 4, 323.

<sup>78</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 240–310. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Patanjali as they appear in Bryant’s work. The English translation below Patanjali’s text is my own.

<sup>79</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anushthānād/अनुष्ठानाद्*, “performance,” 40.

<sup>80</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 241.

eventual result of performing these limbs will be the realization of the *purūsha*'s isolation from *prakṛiti*.<sup>81</sup> The word Patanjali uses for “realization” here is *khyāte* (ख्याते), the same word he used in *PYS* 1:16 for the successful realization of one's *purūsha* as an isolated entity. Calling this realization “discriminative” (*viveka*/विवेक)<sup>82</sup> denotes that this eureka is what will effectually distinguish *purūsha* from *prakṛiti*.<sup>83</sup> The performance of these eight limbs, which culminate in meditation, will help to actualize the ultimate goal of yoga.

Patanjali goes on to list the eight limbs of yoga in *PYS* 2:29. The word for “eight” is *ashta* (अष्ट),<sup>84</sup> and the word for “limb” is *anga* (अङ्ग).<sup>85</sup> In the following verses, Patanjali offers a briefing on *ashtāṅga*, or “eight-limb” yoga. The first five are restraint,<sup>86</sup> duty,<sup>87</sup> posture,<sup>88</sup> breath control,<sup>89</sup> and withdrawal.<sup>90</sup> Regarding the first limb, Patanjali writes in 2:30 that one type of restraint is renunciation, *aparigraha* (अपरिग्रह),<sup>91</sup> which harkens back to his call in 1:15–16 for non-desirousness toward sensory experiences. In 2:46–47, to explain the third limb, Patanjali writes that one's posture (*āsana*/आसन)

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<sup>81</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 240; Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 228.

<sup>82</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *viveka*/विवेक, “discriminative,” 987.

<sup>83</sup> Bryant agrees with this understanding of Patanjali's use of the term *viveka* elsewhere. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 449.

<sup>84</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ashta*/अष्ट, “eight,” 116.

<sup>85</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anga*/अङ्ग, “limb,” 7.

<sup>86</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yama*/यम, “restrain,” 846.

<sup>87</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *niyama*/नियम, “duty,” 552.

<sup>88</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *āsana*/आसन, “posture,” 159. The posture limb of Patanjali's yoga is the supposed basis for much of today's fitness-focused yoga.

<sup>89</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *prāṇāyāma*/प्राणायाम, “breath control,” 706.

<sup>90</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pratyāhāra*/प्रत्याहार, “withdrawal,” 677.

<sup>91</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *aparigraha*/अपरिग्रह, “renunciation,” 51.

should be steady, comfortable, and relaxed.<sup>92</sup> Vyāsa adds that there are eleven postures, all of which entail sitting relaxed and comfortably.<sup>93</sup> The final limb of *samādhi*, however, is most important in *PYS* soteriology, and the sixth and seventh limbs are onramps to it.<sup>94</sup>

In *PYS* 3:1, Patanjali explains the sixth limb of yoga: concentration, or *dhāranā* (धारणा).<sup>95</sup> This limb is about fixing<sup>96</sup> your mind on one point.<sup>97</sup> The word for “mind” here is *chitta* (चित्त), that feature of the *prakritic* world we *purūshas* keep mistaking ourselves for. Patanjali’s recommendation concerning the mind remains consistent. Just as *PYS* 1:2–4 said the *chitta* must be stilled (*nirōdha*/निरोध), here in 3:1, Patanjali encourages practitioners to fix their now-stilled minds on one point. His process leading toward the emptying of the mind continues. Bryant observes that the sage does not prescribe what this point of concentration should be,<sup>98</sup> but in his commentary, Vyāsa suggests concentrating “on the navel . . . or on such like spots in the body, or on any external object.”<sup>99</sup> To perform yoga’s sixth limb, *dhāranā*, the yoga practitioner must fix his or her progressively emptying mind on any one point.

Patanjali presents yoga’s seventh limb in *PYS* 3:2. He calls this limb *dhyāna*

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<sup>92</sup> Though he does not cite *PYS* 2:46–47, Miller relays that Patanjali calls for postures that are “steady and easy.” Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1,” 5.

<sup>93</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 253–54. This brief elaboration on yogic posture by Vyāsa, along with the short description of *āsana* from Patanjali himself, shows that *PYS*’s concept of yogic posture is starkly different from much of today’s fitness-focused yoga.

<sup>94</sup> Patanjali uses the term *sanyama* in *PYS* 3:4 to refer to these final three limbs together. Vyāsa, Bryant, Mallinson, and Singleton all highlight this fusing of the three limbs into one concept. Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 281; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 301, 310–11; Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 284, 289.

<sup>95</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dhāranā*/धारणा, “concentration,” 515.

<sup>96</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bandha*/बन्ध, “fixing,” 720.

<sup>97</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *desha*/देश, “point,” 496.

<sup>98</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 302.

<sup>99</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 277.

(ध्यान), meaning “focus.”<sup>100</sup> While performing this limb, practitioners are to keep focusing on that<sup>101</sup> idea,<sup>102</sup> which is a reference back to the same point of concentration from 3:1. The single-directedness<sup>103</sup> that Patanjali calls for here is about avoiding interruptions. Bryant writes that, in the *dhyāna* state, a yoga practitioner’s focus should be without any distraction,<sup>104</sup> and Vyāsa’s commentary emphasizes that this focus ought to be continuous and uninterrupted.<sup>105</sup> Only then is it truly *dhyāna*.

*Dhāranā* and *dhyāna* are just precursors to meditation (*samādhi*/समाधि), which Bryant identifies as the culmination of Patanjali’s eight-limb system.<sup>106</sup> *Samādhi* is also the second stage of *PYS*’s overall soteriological progression. Patanjali writes in *PYS* 3:3 that meditation is the appearance of only that<sup>107</sup> very<sup>108</sup> thing.<sup>109</sup> Here is another reference to the same concentration point from the sixth and seventh limbs. Now, though, this object is the only<sup>110</sup> thing that appears<sup>111</sup> in the practitioner’s perception. Even his or her

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<sup>100</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dhyāna*/ध्यान, 521. This lexicon offers a semantic range for *dhyāna* that certainly encompasses the idea of “focus.” So, while this lexical entry does not list “focus” as an English gloss for *dhyāna*, “focus” is nonetheless the best rendering here, since Patanjali’s own definition of *dhyāna* is when the mind is singularly directed upon one idea, i.e. focused.

<sup>101</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tatra* from *tad*/तद्, “that,” 432.

<sup>102</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pratyaya*/प्रत्यय, “idea,” 673.

<sup>103</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ekatān*/एकतान, “single-directedness,” 228.

<sup>104</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 303.

<sup>105</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 279.

<sup>106</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 306–7.

<sup>107</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tad*/तद्, “that,” 432.

<sup>108</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eva*/एव, “very,” 232.

<sup>109</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *arth*/अर्थ, “thing,” 90.

<sup>110</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mātra*/मात्र, “only,” 804.

<sup>111</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *nirbhā*/निर्भा, “appears,” 556.

mind<sup>112</sup> has become devoid<sup>113</sup> of its own form<sup>114</sup> and has faded from view.<sup>115</sup> Just as *PYS* 1:2–3 taught that in *nirōdha* the *purūsha* begins to abide in its own form, here in *PYS* 3:3 Patanjali writes that in *samādhi* one’s *prakriti chitta*, or “mind,” becomes devoid of its own form. Here is the climax of Patanjali’s teaching on the emptying of the mind. *PYS* 3:3 teaches that, in *samādhi*, the mind is literally devoid or empty (*shūnya/शून्य*) of any form. Ultimately, both *nirōdha* and *samādhi* bring the yoga practitioner closer to what Bryant sees as *PYS*’s ultimate goal, that state wherein the form of the *purūsha*, rather than that of the *prakriti chitta*, occupies the yoga practitioner’s entire field of perception.<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, Aleaz points out that insofar as meditation (*samādhi/समाधि*) is the culmination of Patanjali’s eight-limb system, this second phase of *PYS* soteriology also helps bring about the actual realization of the *purūsha*’s isolation from the mind and from the rest of *prakriti*.<sup>117</sup> *PYS* 2:28 taught that performing yoga’s limbs initiates that realization (*khyāte/ख्याते*) that all yoga practitioners strive for: the realization of their *purūsha*’s isolation (*kāvalya/कैवल्य*) from the *prakriti* world. As the apex of Patanjali’s *ashtāṅga* system, then, meditation (*samādhi/समाधि*) is the next step toward that salvific realization. *Samādhi* effects the emptying of the mind, and ultimately, the realization of the *purūsha*’s isolation (*kāvalya/कैवल्य*) from *prakriti*.

**Isolation (*Kāvalya/कैवल्य*) in *PYS* 3:50, 55 and 4:25–26, 34.** Near the end of

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<sup>112</sup> Though Patanjali does not explicitly inform readers what becomes devoid of its own form here in 3:3, the passage’s context and its coherence with Sāṅkhya philosophy demand that the practitioner’s mind, or *chitta* (चित्त), carried over from 3:1, is the implied subject here. Bryant’s translation affirms “mind” as the implicit subject of the voiding here in *PYS* 3:3. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 306.

<sup>113</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shūnya/शून्य*, “devoid,” 1085.

<sup>114</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *rūp/रूप*, “own form,” 885.

<sup>115</sup> Bryant’s commentary affirms this understanding of *PYS* 3:3. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 307.

<sup>116</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 71–72.

<sup>117</sup> Aleaz, “Christian Response to Yoga Philosophy,” 186.

chapter 3, Patanjali explicitly introduces his concept of isolation, or *kāvālyā* (कैवल्य).<sup>118</sup> Sāṅkhya philosophy holds that the realization of this isolation is the highest goal of human existence. When yoga practitioners attain *kāvālyā*, they have effectually emptied their minds and have finally realized that their *purūsha* is isolated from the whole *prakritic* universe, including their now-emptied minds. Alistair Shearer, along with Aleaz, Mallinson, and Singleton, emphasize that this is the whole goal of Patanjali’s system: realizing that your *purūsha* is isolated (*kāvālyā*/कैवल्य) from *prakriti*.<sup>119</sup> All of Patanjali’s fourth and final chapter is dedicated to *kāvālyā*, but his most illuminating aphorisms on isolation are *PYS* 3:50, 55 and 4:25–26, 34. They read as follows:

(3:50) तद्वैराग्यादपि दोषबीजक्षये कैवल्यम्। . . . (3:55) सत्त्वपुरुषयोः शुद्धिसाम्ये कैवल्यम् इति। . . .  
 (4:25) विशेषदर्शिन आत्मभावभावनाविनिवृत्तिः। (4:26) तदा विवेकनिम्नं कैवल्यप्राग्भारं चित्तम्। . . .  
 (4:34) पुरुषार्थशून्यानां गुणानां प्रतिप्रसवः कैवल्यं स्वरूपप्रतिष्ठा वा चित्तिशक्तिरिति।<sup>120</sup>

(3:50) By dispassion even toward that, along with the destruction of the seeds of guilt [comes] isolation. . . . (3:55) Thus, [when] *sattva* and *purūsha* [are] equally pure, [then comes] isolation. . . . (4:25) The one who sees the distinction turns back from reflecting on the nature of the self. (4:26) Then the mind, deep in discrimination, [is] inclined toward isolation. . . . (4:34) Thus, isolation [is when] the *gunas* [have become] devoid of any purpose, [such that] the *purūsha* abides in its own true form, and indeed, the mind’s power is suspended.

Most of chapter 3 is about the mystical powers available through yoga. One of the last powers mentioned is omnipotence, and verse 50 initiates a transition into the last chapter by explaining that, when the yoga practitioner develops a dispassion<sup>121</sup> toward

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<sup>118</sup> *PYS* 2:25 contains a passing reference to *kāvālyā*. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras*, 234. However, here at the end of chapter 3 is where Patanjali’s explicit teaching on *kāvālyā* begins in earnest.

<sup>119</sup> Alistair Shearer, *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West* (London: Hurst, 2020), 47; Aleaz, “Christian Response to Yoga Philosophy,” 189; Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 397.

<sup>120</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 392–457. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Patanjali as they appear in Bryant’s work. The English translation below Patanjali’s text is my own.

<sup>121</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vārāgya*/वैराग्य, “dispassion,” 1025.

even<sup>122</sup> that,<sup>123</sup> true isolation (*kāvālyā/कैवल्य*) begins to ensue. Bryant explains that the term *kāvālyā* can mean anything along the lines of “aloneness [or] oneliness,”<sup>124</sup> but he also affirms that Patanjali tends to use *kāvālyā* to refer specifically to the isolation of the *purūsha* from material *prakṛiti*.<sup>125</sup> In turning our attention to *kāvālyā*, *PYS* 3:50 introduces what Bryant (in agreement with Shearer, Aleaz, Mallinson, and Singleton) understands as the ultimate soteriological aim of Patanjali’s entire yoga system.<sup>126</sup>

*PYS* 3:55 explains in Sāṅkhya’s terms what happens in the moments leading up to *kāvālyā*. The verse teaches that this isolation occurs—or more precisely, that the practitioner’s realization of this isolation occurs—when *sattva* and *purūsha* are equally<sup>127</sup> pure.<sup>128</sup> Of the three *gunas* constantly generating the *prakṛitic* universe, *sattva* is the one that manifests the intangible *tattvas* of intellect, ego, and thought, which in turn constitute every person’s *chitta*, or mind. According to Vyāsa, it is the other two *gunas* that make *sattva* impure to begin with.<sup>129</sup> When Patanjali writes that the *sattva* *guna* becomes as pure as the *purūsha*, Bryant understands him to mean that *sattva*, along with its intangible products like the intellect and the *chitta*, “almost starts to resemble” the *purūsha* and has become “a perfect reflection” of it.<sup>130</sup> As in the earlier phases of *PYS* soteriology, here in

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<sup>122</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *api/अपि*, “even,” 55.

<sup>123</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tad/तद्*, “that,” 432.

<sup>124</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 457.

<sup>125</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 393.

<sup>126</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 393. *PYS* 3:50 also teaches that “a destruction of the seeds of guilt” comes along with *kāvālyā*. A comparison of this guilt-destroying concept against biblical soteriology would be an important contribution to the Christian understanding of yoga. Such a specific comparison, however, lies outside the scope of my study. Here I am strategically examining *PYS*’s threefold soteriological macrosystem of stillness, meditation, and isolation.

<sup>127</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sama/सम*, “equally,” 1152.

<sup>128</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shuddhi/शुद्धि*, “pure,” 1082.

<sup>129</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 376.

<sup>130</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 403.

*kāvālyā*, the *purūsha* rather than the *chitta* begins to occupy the practitioner's perception. In colloquial terms, the mind is emptied and is no longer perceived.

In *PYS* 4:25, Patanjali writes that those who see the distinction between *purūsha* and *prakriti* no longer need to wonder who they are. The subject here is “the one who sees,” or the *darshin* (दर्शिन),<sup>131</sup> which is different from the *drashtra* (द्रष्टृ) of *PYS* 1:3, which was a synonym for the *purūsha*. Vyāsa and Bryant both understand that what the *darshin* sees here in 4:25 is the distinction, or the *visheshā* (विशेष),<sup>132</sup> between the *purūsha* and *prakriti*.<sup>133</sup> This distinction, then, is another way of talking about that discrimination (*viveka*/विवेक) mentioned in 2:28. When practitioners see this distinction, Patanjali writes that they turn back<sup>134</sup> from reflecting<sup>135</sup> on the nature<sup>136</sup> of the self.<sup>137</sup> They no longer need to wonder who they are. They have seen that they are their *purūsha*.

*PYS* 4:26 goes on to confirm that seeing the distinction between *purūsha* and *prakriti* is indeed the same phenomenon as the discriminative realization Patanjali talked about in 2:28. He writes in 4:26 that, when the practitioner sees the *purūsha-prakriti* distinction (*visheshā*/विशेष), his or her *chitta* is deep<sup>138</sup> in discrimination (*viveka*/विवेक), and it is then<sup>139</sup> that the mind is inclined<sup>140</sup> toward isolation, or *kāvālyā*. *PYS* 4:26 drives home the point Patanjali has been building toward all along: When yoga practitioners can

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<sup>131</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *darshin*/दर्शिन, “one who sees,” 471.

<sup>132</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *visheshā*/विशेष, “distinction,” 990.

<sup>133</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 428; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 448.

<sup>134</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vinivrat*/विनिवृत्, “turn back,” 971.

<sup>135</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhāvanā*/भावना, “reflecting,” 755.

<sup>136</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhāva*/भाव, “nature,” 754.

<sup>137</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman*/आत्मन्, “self,” 135.

<sup>138</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *nimn*/निम्न, “deep,” 551.

<sup>139</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tadā*/तदा, “then,” 434.

<sup>140</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *prāgbhāra*/प्राग्भार, “inclined,” 704.



discriminate between their emptied *chitta* and their *purūsha*, then a complete realization of their *purūsha*'s isolation (*kāvālyā*/कैवल्य) from *prakriti* is at hand.<sup>141</sup>

Patanjali's final aphorism, *PYS* 4:34, begins by stating that *kāvālyā* occurs when the *gunas* have become devoid<sup>142</sup> of any purpose.<sup>143</sup> According to Sāṅkhya, the *gunas* are what generate the material universe of *prakriti*. Simpson points out that, once yoga practitioners have realized that they, as *purūshas*, are isolated from *prakriti*, these *gunas* and all the materiality they produce are left without purpose.<sup>144</sup> It is here in *kāvālyā* that the *purūsha* effectually becomes "independent of the *gunas* and their products."<sup>145</sup> Vyāsa comments that, in *kāvālyā*, the *gunas* "recede to [an] unmanifest state . . . [and] cease to function."<sup>146</sup> *Kāvālyā*, then, is not only an isolating of one's *purūsha* from material *prakriti*, but also a shutting down (in the practitioner's perception) of the *gunas* that generate that *prakriti* in the first place.

Verse 34 goes on to teach that, when the yoga practitioner attains isolation, his or her *purūsha* is finally seen as abiding<sup>147</sup> in its own true form. Here is Patanjali's final use of the term *svarūpa* (स्वरूप), meaning "one's own form." Consistent with his teaching in *PYS* 1:3–4 and 3:3, the idea here is that the *purūsha*'s own true form, rather than the form of the *prakritic chitta*, is what the yoga practitioner now sees and identifies with. Simpson and Bryant explain that, since the *gunas* and all of *prakriti* have been shut off from the practitioner's perception, the *purūsha*—that is, the seer—is left witnessing only

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<sup>141</sup> The commentaries of both Vyāsa and Bryant affirm this understanding of *PYS* 4:26. Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 429; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 449.

<sup>142</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shūnya*/शून्य, "devoid," 1085.

<sup>143</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *arth*/अर्थ, "purpose," 90.

<sup>144</sup> Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 50.

<sup>145</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 393.

<sup>146</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 364, 440–41.

<sup>147</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pratishthā*/प्रतिष्ठा, "abiding," 671.

itself.<sup>148</sup> For the practitioner who has achieved *kāvalya*, his or her *purūsha* is now “established in [its] own self”<sup>149</sup> and is “absorbed exclusively in its own nature.”<sup>150</sup> Indeed, Vyāsa and Bryant understand Patanjali to be teaching that, upon realizing its isolation, the *purūsha* is left to shine forth in its own true form.<sup>151</sup>

The scripture’s last aphorism ends by announcing that, in *kāvalya*, when the *gunas* are devoid of purpose and the *purūsha* abides in its own true form, the power<sup>152</sup> of the *chitta*, the mind, is finally suspended.<sup>153</sup> The mind having already been emptied, its power is now totally undone. Simpson and Bryant understand Patanjali to be teaching that, with its power rendered latent, the mind can now be done away with all together.<sup>154</sup> Since the *chitta* is part of the *prakritic* world and not identifiable with the *purūsha* as it once seemed, this shutting down of one’s already emptied mind is exactly what the yoga practitioner had been striving for. Vyāsa announces that, here in *kāvalya*, the *purūsha* is finally “unrelated to or unconcerned with the [*chitta*’s] intellect.”<sup>155</sup> Bryant writes that the *purūsha* is now “uncoupled” and “unconnected” from the practitioner’s mind and from the rest of *prakriti*.<sup>156</sup> The ultimate soteriological goal of Patanjali’s yoga has been accomplished. The practitioner has realized the isolation (*kāvalya*/कैवल्य) that his or her *purūsha* has from all of *prakriti*, including its own successfully emptied *chitta*.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 83; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 394, 457–58.

<sup>149</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 441.

<sup>150</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 457.

<sup>151</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 377; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 404.

<sup>152</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shakti*/शक्ति, “power,” 1044.

<sup>153</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pratiprasava*/प्रतिप्रसव, “suspended,” 668.

<sup>154</sup> Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 103; Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 458.

<sup>155</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 441.

<sup>156</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 457–58.

<sup>157</sup> Bryant acknowledges that, having accomplished his task of explaining how to attain

**Conclusion.** Patanjali’s soteriology in the *Yoga Sūtras* progresses according to three sequential states: stillness (*nirōdha*/निरोध), meditation (*samādhi*/समाधि), and isolation (*kāvalya*/कैवल्य). The passages examined above reveal that the first two states are not simply prerequisites to the third, rather, each is a partial attainment of yoga’s ultimate goal: emptying the mind to realize the *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakriti*. *PYS* 1:16 posits that true stillness of mind initiates a realization of the *purūsha* for what it really is, and 1:3 explains that in *nirōdha* the *purūsha* begins to abide in its own true form.<sup>158</sup> *PYS* 2:28 posits that reaching yoga’s eighth limb of *samādhi* effects a realization of the *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakriti*, and 3:3 explains that in meditation the *prakritic* mind becomes devoid of its own form.<sup>159</sup> In Patanjali’s overall soteriological framework, then, the three states work together to help yoga practitioners empty their minds and thereby realize that their *purūsha* is different from that mind and completely isolated from all of the *prakritic*, material universe that surrounds them every day.

### The Theology of *PYS*

Patanjali’s theology centers around a figure referred to as Īshvara. Īshvara is the generic term used consistently throughout *PYS* for the supreme God.<sup>160</sup> The two passages offering the most insight into Patanjali’s view of Īshvara are *PYS* 1:23–27 and *PYS* 2:32, 44–45. In these aphorisms, one reads that Īshvara is a special *purūsha* who has always realized his isolation from *prakriti*. As a *purūsha*, Īshvara is not the creator of the

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*kāvalya*, Patanjali does not go on to describe what this state of isolation actually looks like. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 458–59.

<sup>158</sup> In fact, Larson understands *nirōdha* and *kāvalya* to function as synonyms in *PYS*. Larson, “Patanjala Yoga in Practice,” 84.

<sup>159</sup> In fact, Bryant understands the final phase of *samādhi* as actually bringing about the “ultimate uncoupling” of *purūsha* from any connection with *prakriti* or the *chitta*, which is exactly what *kāvalya* is. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 68.

<sup>160</sup> I capitalize “God” when referring to Īshvara in keeping with Patanjali’s use of the term as a generic, supreme divinity, distinct from lesser deities (*devatās*, explained below). As will become clear, I do not believe that Patanjali’s Īshvara is identifiable with the one true God of the Bible.

material world, despite being both omniscient and timeless. Patanjali reveals in these passages that the sacred syllable *ōm* is the aural expression of Īshvara himself, and this is our strongest indication that Īshvara is the author’s generic term for the supreme God. Not only is Īshvara a generic title, but Patanjali also affirms here in these verses that practitioners may connect with this supreme God in the forms of other various lower deities. Finally, *PYS* also teaches that contemplating Īshvara is one way for practitioners to attain the ultimate goal of yoga: emptying their minds and realizing their *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakriti*. According to *PYS* theology, then, Īshvara is an object of contemplation, not the active, necessary effector of anyone’s salvation.

**Īshvara’s identity in *PYS* 1:23–27.** The first passage providing significant insight into the Īshvara figure and thereby into Patanjali’s theology is *PYS* 1:23–27. Here, Īshvara is presented as the supreme yet generic God, a timeless *purūsha* completely untouched by and uninvolved with material *prakriti*, and therefore not the creator of the world. The passage reads as follows:

(1:23) ईश्वरप्रणिधानाद् वा। (1:24) क्लेशकर्मविपाकाशयैरपरामृष्टः पुरुषविशेष ईश्वरः। (1:25) तत्र  
निरतिशायं सर्वज्ञबीजम्। (1:26) पूर्वेषाम् अपि गुरुः कालेनानवच्छेदात्। (1:27) तस्य वाचकः  
प्रणवः।<sup>161</sup>

(1:23) Or, [*nirōdha* is attainable] by contemplation on Īshvara. (1:24) Īshvara [is] a special *purūsha*, untouched by the afflictions or by the stock or effect of *karma*. (1:25) In him, the seed of omniscience [is] unsurpassed. (1:26) Not cut off by time, [he was] also the *gurū* of the ancients. (1:27) The expression of him [is] the *pranava*.

Back in *PYS* 1:1–4, 12–16, Patanjali had described *nirōdha* and explained how to achieve it. On the heels of that explanation, the first verse in this passage offers another means of reaching the stillness state: *īshvara-pranidhāna* (ईश्वरप्रणिधान), contemplation on Īshvara. *PYS* 1:24 goes on to identify Īshvara as a special<sup>162</sup> *purūsha*. Nineteenth-century

<sup>161</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 81–105. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Patanjali as they appear in Bryant’s work. The English translation below Patanjali’s text is my own.

<sup>162</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *visheshha*/विशेष, “special,” 990.

Indologist, Max Müller, correctly understood Patanjali’s Īshvara to be “no more than one of the many souls [*purūshas*]” in the Sāṅkhya system, “supreme in every sense, yet of the same kind as all other [*purūshas*].”<sup>163</sup> Sāṅkhya posits twenty-four *tattvas* constituting the *prakritic* world. *Purūshas* together make up a twenty-fifth, and the Sāṅkhya framework leaves no room for anything outside these twenty-five *tattvas*. Knut Jacobsen and Jonathan Dickstein, along with White, agree that Patanjali classifies Īshvara as another *purūsha*, a member of the universe’s twenty-fifth principle.<sup>164</sup>

In *PYS* 1:24, Patanjali further explains that Īshvara is untouched<sup>165</sup> by the afflictions<sup>166</sup> or by the stock<sup>167</sup> or effect<sup>168</sup> of *karma*.<sup>169</sup> In the scripture’s second chapter, Patanjali lists five afflictions (*kleshas/क्लेश*) as impediments to *samādhi* and explains the role they play in the stockpiling and effects of *karma*. For the purpose of identifying Īshvara here, though, all of this can be seen as the machinations of *prakriti*. The point is that Īshvara, as special *purūsha*, is wholly untouched by it all. According to Sāṅkhya, this means Īshvara cannot be the creator. T. S. Rukmani points out that *PYS* consistently presents *prakriti* as responsible for the world’s creation.<sup>170</sup> In a sense, materiality creates itself, since the whole world is ongoingly generated by the three *gunas*, which are

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<sup>163</sup> Max Müller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (New York: Longmans Green, 1899), 426.

<sup>164</sup> Knut A. Jacobsen, “Songs to the Highest God (Isvara) of Samkhya-Yoga,” in *Yoga in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 325; Jonathan Dickstein, “Īśvara As He Is: Devotional Theism in the Pātañjala Yogaśāstra” (MA thesis, University of Colorado, 2015), 38–39; White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 177–78.

<sup>165</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *aparāmrashṭa/अपरामृष्ट*, “untouched,” 51.

<sup>166</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *klesha/क्लेश*, “affliction,” 324.

<sup>167</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *āshaya/आशय*, “stock,” 157.

<sup>168</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vipāka/विपाक*, “effect,” 973.

<sup>169</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *karma/कर्म*, “action,” 258.

<sup>170</sup> T. S. Rukmani, “Vijñānabhikṣu’s Approach to the Īśvara Concept in Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras*,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 25, no. 5 (2012): 14–15.

themselves a part of *prakṛiti*. Rukmani reasons that, as a *purūsha*, Patanjali's Īshvara has nothing to do with any of this.<sup>171</sup> Larson goes so far as to write that, according to *PYS* philosophy, "the very notion of God [Īshvara] as creator is fundamentally incoherent."<sup>172</sup> Marzenna Jakubczak, along with Malkovsky and Jacobsen, concurs that Patanjali's Īshvara is not a creator.<sup>173</sup> *PYS* 1:24 teaches that Īshvara is a special *purūsha*, uninvolved with *prakṛiti* and therefore not the creator of the world.<sup>174</sup>

*PYS* 1:25–26 add that Īshvara is omniscient and timeless. The first of these aphorisms teaches that in him<sup>175</sup> the seed<sup>176</sup> of omniscience<sup>177</sup> [is] unsurpassed.<sup>178</sup> Īshvara knows everything. The next verse explains that, since he is not cut off<sup>179</sup> by time,<sup>180</sup> Īshvara was also<sup>181</sup> the *gurū*<sup>182</sup> of the ancients.<sup>183</sup> Vyāsa emphasizes in his commentary that, unlike even those *purūshas* who have finally realized their *kāvalya*, Īshvara was

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<sup>171</sup> Rukmani, "Vijñānabhikṣu's Approach to the Īśvara Concept," 14–15.

<sup>172</sup> Gerald Larson, "Yoga's 'A-Theistic'-Theism: A New Way of Thinking about God," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 25, no. 6 (2012): 22.

<sup>173</sup> Marzenna Jakubczak, "The Purpose of Non-Theistic Devotion in the Classical Indian Tradition of Sāṃkhya-Yoga," *Argument* 4, no. 1 (2014): 63; Bradley Malkovsky, "Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 30, no. 5 (2017): 35–36; Jacobsen, "Songs to the Highest God (Isvara) of Samkhya-Yoga," 325. Bryant is a minority voice asserting Īshvara's creatorship. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 108.

<sup>174</sup> Citing but not quoting *PYS* 1:23–26, Miller comes to the same conclusion on Patanjali's view of Īshvara's identity. Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1," 7.

<sup>175</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tad*/तद्, "that one," 432.

<sup>176</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bīja*/बीज, "seed," 732.

<sup>177</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarvagya*/सर्वज्ञ, "omniscience," 1185.

<sup>178</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *atishāyan*/अतिशयन, "excelled" 15.

<sup>179</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avacheda*/अवच्छेद, "cut off," 98.

<sup>180</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *kāle*/काले, "time," 278.

<sup>181</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *api*/अपि, "also," 55.

<sup>182</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *gurū*/गुरु, "respected instructor," 359.

<sup>183</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pūrva*/पूर्व, "ancients," 643.

always in full realization of his isolation.<sup>184</sup> Georg Feuerstein, along with Jacobsen, acknowledges that which makes Īshvara special (*visheshā*/विशेष) is that he has always realized his *kāvālyā*.<sup>185</sup> Īshvara is a *purūsha*, completely uninvolved with *prakṛiti*, but his omniscience and his timeless state of *kāvālyā* set him apart.

In *PYS* 1:27, Patanjali teaches that the aural expression<sup>186</sup> of him (Īshvara)<sup>187</sup> is the *pranava*, indicating that Īshvara is *PYS*'s generic term for the supreme God. Monier-Williams defines *pranava* as a reference to “the mystical or sacred syllable ओम् [*ōm*].”<sup>188</sup> In Indian religion generally, *ōm* is understood as an aural expression of generic, supreme divinity. Bryant, Simpson, and Dickstein agree that Patanjali sees Īshvara as just such a divinity, generic yet supreme. Bryant insists Īshvara is “the generic name for God” and calls him the “Supreme Being.”<sup>189</sup> Simpson echoes that Īshvara refers to the “Supreme Being” and holds it is “not a sectarian title.”<sup>190</sup> Dickstein argues that Īshvara is the “Supreme God” of *PYS* and that Patanjali sees him as “all encompassing.”<sup>191</sup> The equation of Īshvara with the *pranava*, the *ōm*, in verse 27 indicates that Patanjali uses Īshvara as his generic term for the supreme God.<sup>192</sup> *PYS* 1:23–27 presents Īshvara as the supreme yet generic God, though still a *purūsha* and therefore not the creator.

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<sup>184</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 65–66. Bryant highlights this emphasis in Vyāsa's commentary. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 88.

<sup>185</sup> Georg Feuerstein, “The Concept of God (Īśvara) in Classical Yoga,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 15 (1987): 386; Jacobsen, “Songs to the Highest God (Isvara) of Samkhya-Yoga,” 325.

<sup>186</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vāchaka*/वाचक, “expression,” 937.

<sup>187</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tad*/तद्, “that one, him” 432.

<sup>188</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pranava*/प्रणव, “the mystical or sacred syllable ओम्,” 660.

<sup>189</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 108.

<sup>190</sup> Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 99.

<sup>191</sup> Dickstein, “Īśvara As He Is,” 64, 58.

<sup>192</sup> Miller oversimplifies Patanjali's teaching in *PYS* 1:27 by writing that Patanjali describes *ōm* as “the voice of God.” Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1,” 5.

**Contemplation on Īshvara in PYS 2:32, 44–45.** *PYS* 1:23 announced that *nirōdha* is attainable through *īshvara-pranidhāna*, contemplation on Īshvara. In the scripture’s next chapter, Patanjali teaches that *īshvara-pranidhāna* is one of the duties (*niyama/नियम*) making up the second limb of *ashtānga* yoga, and that as such, it can help bring about *samādhi*. Though sequential, *nirōdha* and *samādhi* are both partial attainments of yoga’s ultimate goal: emptying the mind to realize the *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakriti*. Taken together, these two passages teach that contemplation on Īshvara can bring about the soteriological end of yoga. Important to *PYS* theology, though, is the fact that Īshvara simply serves as an optional, passive object of contemplation by which yoga practitioners may achieve that end for themselves. The aphorisms presenting *īshvara-pranidhāna* as a means to *samādhi* are *PYS* 2:32, 44–45. They read as follows:

(2:32) शौचसंतोषतपःस्वाध्यायेश्वरप्रणिधानानि नियमाः। . . . (2:44) स्वाध्यायाद् इष्टदेवतासंप्रयोगः।  
 (2:45) समाधिसिद्धिरीश्वरप्रणिधानात्।<sup>193</sup>

(2:32) The duties are cleanness, contentedness, austerity, study, and contemplation on Īshvara. . . . (2:44) From study [comes] a connection with [one’s] desired deity.  
 (2:45) From contemplation on Īshvara [comes] the complete attainment of *samādhi*.

In the second chapter of *PYS*, Patanjali expounds on the eight limbs of yoga. The second limb in his *ashtānga* system is duty (*niyama/नियम*).<sup>194</sup> *PYS* 2:32 lists the five duties as: cleanness,<sup>195</sup> contentedness,<sup>196</sup> austerity,<sup>197</sup> study, and contemplation on Īshvara. Verses 33 through 43 describe the first three duties in detail, but the last two, study and contemplation on Īshvara, are particularly important to *PYS*’s theology. These final two duties, as well as their results, are explained in verses 44 and 45.

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<sup>193</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 252–79. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Patanjali as they appear in Bryant’s work. The English translation below Patanjali’s text is my own.

<sup>194</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *niyama/नियम*, “duty,” 552.

<sup>195</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shaucha/शौच*, “cleanness,” 1092.

<sup>196</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *santōsha/संतोष*, “satisfaction,” 1142.

<sup>197</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tapa/तप*, “heat, austerity,” 436.



In verse 44, Patanjali writes that study brings about a connection<sup>198</sup> with the practitioner’s desired deity. Monier-Williams allows that study (*svādhyāya*/स्वाध्याय) here includes both the study of written scriptures and the verbal recitation of their contents.<sup>199</sup> In fact, Vyāsa writes in his commentary that *svādhyāya* entails studying the scriptures (*shāstra*/शास्त्र) and repeating the *pranava*.<sup>200</sup> Bryant reveals that, etymologically, *svādhyāya* just means “self-study,” but he also attests that the term “commonly refers to the study of sacred texts.”<sup>201</sup> Whatever Patanjali envisioned this study entailing, important to *PYS*’s theology is his assertion that it leads to connection with one’s desired<sup>202</sup> deity. The term for these deities is *devatā* (देवता),<sup>203</sup> and they are different from Īshvara. Vyāsa lists the *devatās* alongside “sages” and lower “celestials.”<sup>204</sup> Bryant reports that other Indian religious texts refer to their myriad little-G gods as *devatās*,<sup>205</sup> and Georg Feuerstein explains in an introductory chapter of his *BG* translation, “Although the word ‘god’ is commonly used to translate *deva*, these are akin to the angelic beings of the Judeo-Christian and Muslim religions, who also are stationed far below God. The deities are unquestionably ‘higher’ or ‘subtler’ entities than human beings.”<sup>206</sup> Patanjali’s theology affirms the existence of multiple deities called *devatās*

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<sup>198</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *samprayōga*/संप्रयोग, “connection,” 1176. Describing this connection, Vyāsa comments that these deities merely “become visible” to those who study. Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 251. My chapter analyzing the *Bhagavad Gītā* explores the concept of connecting with divinity more thoroughly. My specific purpose in this section, however, is to investigate how this reference to deities informs the theology of the *PYS*.

<sup>199</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *svādhyāya*/स्वाध्याय, “study,” 1277.

<sup>200</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 238.

<sup>201</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 273.

<sup>202</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ishṭa*/इष्ट, “desired,” 169.

<sup>203</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *devatā*/देवता, “deity,” 495.

<sup>204</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 251.

<sup>205</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 94.

<sup>206</sup> Georg Feuerstein, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2011), 41.

that hover somewhere below Īshvara on a broad spectrum of divinity.

Nonetheless, the theology of *PYS* clearly centers around the Īshvara figure, the generic, supreme God. In fact, Bryant and Dickstein argue that the *devatās* of *PYS* 2:44 are simply forms or manifestations of Īshvara. Bryant writes, “Given Patanjali’s goals . . . *devatā* here must therefore refer to the forms of *Īśvara*.”<sup>207</sup> Dickstein argues similarly that “these desired deities can only represent manifestations or aspects of that supreme God.”<sup>208</sup> The name of the lower *devatā* with whom practitioners may connect by means of study is left by Patanjali to the practitioner’s prerogative. However, it is contemplation on Īshvara—the supreme yet generic God, a God of many forms and manifestations—which Patanjali teaches can bring about the ultimate goal of yoga.

*PYS* 2:45 teaches that contemplation<sup>209</sup> on Īshvara, *īshvara-pranidhāna*, can bring about the complete attainment<sup>210</sup> of *samādhi*. In his commentary on *PYS* 2:45, Vyāsa writes that whoever “devotes all his thoughts to [Īshvara] attains *samādhi*.”<sup>211</sup> Dickstein is right to describe as “bewildering” the fact that *samādhi*, being such a major part of yoga’s soteriology, is here said to be achievable through just one of the five duties making up just one of yoga’s eight limbs.<sup>212</sup> Be that as it may, *PYS* 1:23 had introduced

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<sup>207</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 274.

<sup>208</sup> Dickstein, “Īśvara As He Is,” 58.

<sup>209</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pranidhāna*/प्रणिधान, “contemplation,” 660. Graham Schweig affirms that “contemplation” is an accurate gloss for *pranidhāna*. Graham M. Schweig, “Toward a Fusion of Theological Horizons: Constructivist Reflections and Responses to the Question of Theism in the Yoga Sutra,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 25, no. 7 (2012): 31. Dickstein refers to *īshvara-pranidhāna* as “mere contemplation of *īśvara*.” Dickstein, “Īśvara As He Is,” 56. Jakubczak and Bryant refer to *pranidhāna* in terms of “concentration.” Jakubczak, “The Purpose of Non-Theistic Devotion,” 63; Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 279–80. Larson, Jacobsen, and Malkovsky describe *pranidhāna* using the language of “focus.” Larson, “Yoga’s ‘A-Theistic’-Theism,” 19; Jacobsen, “Songs to the Highest God (Isvara) of Samkhya-Yoga,” 325; Malkovsky, “Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity,” 36. The semantic range of *pranidhāna* centers around mental contemplation on an object.

<sup>210</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *siddhi*/सिद्धि, “complete attainment,” 1216.

<sup>211</sup> Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 252.

<sup>212</sup> Dickstein, “Īśvara As He Is,” 58.

*īshvara-pranidhāna* as one way to effect *nirōdha*, and *PYS* 2:45 announces that this contemplation can bring about *samādhi*. Since these two stages are partial attainments of yoga’s ultimate goal, the unified message is clear: Contemplation on Īshvara can help practitioners empty their minds and realize their *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakṛiti*.<sup>213</sup>

However, Patanjali teaches that contemplation on Īshvara is only one way practitioners may attain this highest of yoga’s goals. Bryant and Rukmani agree that Patanjali presents *īshvara-pranidhāna* as the most efficient way of attaining yoga’s goal, but by no means the only way.<sup>214</sup> This is obviated by the fact that Patanjali opens *PYS* 1:23 with the word “or” (*vā/वा*)<sup>215</sup> before suggesting contemplation on Īshvara as yet another tool in his long list of ways to attain *nirōdha*. Not to mention that, in *PYS* 2:32, *īshvara-pranidhāna* is reintroduced as just one of the five duties comprising just one of yoga’s eight limbs. According to Patanjali, contemplation on Īshvara is the best way to achieve the ultimate soteriological end of yoga, but it is not the only way of doing so.

Furthermore, even when yoga practitioners choose *īshvara-pranidhāna* as their method for emptying their minds and realizing their *purūshas*’ isolation from *prakṛiti*, Īshvara plays no active role in making it happen. Jakubczak insists that, throughout *PYS*, Īshvara is defined “primarily as an object of meditative practice.”<sup>216</sup> Malkovsky observes that Īshvara is an aid to practitioners, “not because [Īshvara] actively does anything,” but simply because contemplating on him calms the mind.<sup>217</sup> Jacobsen writes that Īshvara “plays no active part” in people’s salvation, concluding that he is “neither a creator god

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<sup>213</sup> In fact, White understands Patanjali and Vyāsa to be presenting *īshvara-pranidhāna* as simultaneously a means to both “the stoppage of the turnings of thought [*nirōdha*]” and “isolation [*kāvalya*] of the [*purūsha*] from [*prakṛiti*].” White, *The Yoga Sūtra of Patanjali*, 48.

<sup>214</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*, 81–83, 85, 279; Rukmani, “Vijñānabhikṣu’s Approach to the Īśvara Concept in Patañjali’s Yogasūtras,” 15–16.

<sup>215</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vā/वा*, “or,” 934.

<sup>216</sup> Jakubczak, “The Purpose of Non-Theistic Devotion,” 65.

<sup>217</sup> Malkovsky, “Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity,” 36.

nor a savior god.”<sup>218</sup> Dickstein concurs that any activity on the part of Īshvara is unnecessary for practitioners to attain yoga’s ultimate goal, insisting that it can also be reached “through self-effort.”<sup>219</sup> As far as *PYS*’s theology is concerned, then, Īshvara is not a necessary, active savior.<sup>220</sup>

**Conclusion.** Patanjali’s theology centers on Īshvara. *PYS* identifies Īshvara as a special *purūsha* who has always realized his *kāvalya*. Though omniscient and timeless, Īshvara is untouched by and uninvolved with *prakṛiti* and therefore not the world’s creator. Patanjali writes that the aural expression of Īshvara is the sacred *ōm*, showing that Īshvara is his generic term for the supreme God. Being generic and nonsectarian, Īshvara—through study—can be connected with in the forms of various other deities. Contemplating on Īshvara is presented in *PYS* as one way for practitioners to attain the ultimate goal of yoga: emptying their minds and realizing their *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakṛiti*.<sup>221</sup> So *PYS*’s theology identifies Īshvara primarily as an optional, passive object of contemplation, not as the active, necessary effector of people’s salvation.

### ***PYS* Teachings Echoed in *HYP***

*HYP* adheres to and passes along much of *PYS*’s teaching. Having a more practical focus, the medieval text is not primarily a work of soteriology or theology, and

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<sup>218</sup> Jacobsen, “Songs to the Highest God (Ishvara) of Samkhya-Yoga,” 325.

<sup>219</sup> Dickstein, “Īshvara As He Is,” 10–11, 48. Miller echoes this assessment, describing yoga in general as “strictly an autosoteric (i.e., salvation by self-effort) system.” Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3,” 10.

<sup>220</sup> In his commentary on *PYS* 1:23, Vyāsa inserts the concept—wholly foreign to Patanjali—of devotion (*bhakti*/भक्ति), suggesting that Īshvara may incline toward his devotees, granting a kind of grace (*anugraha*/अनुग्रह) resulting in *samādhi* and *kāvalya*. Mukerji, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, 63. Even within Vyāsa’s novel notion of an active, grace-granting Īshvara, the practitioner’s devotion to him is what initiates salvation, and in any case, devotion to Īshvara would still be one of many soteriological options.

<sup>221</sup> Important to note here is that contemplating on Īshvara does not bring about some ontological union or oneness between the practitioner and Īshvara. It can garner a sense of connection with Īshvara through one’s chosen lower deities, but the purpose of *īshvara-pranidhāna* is to effect *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakṛiti*.

given its late dating, cannot be counted among yoga’s most foundational scriptures. However, *HYP* does rely on and relay some of the main theological and soteriological concepts found in *PYS*, and since the medieval text is commonly invoked as another authoritative basis for yoga, some of the more prominent instances of *HYP* echoing *PYS* deserve elucidation here. Though it uses some different terms, *HYP* generally upholds Patanjali’s three-part soteriological system aimed at an emptied mind. That is to say, within *HYP*, Patanjali’s stillness-meditation-isolation framework is discernable.

*HYP* maintains that stillness of mind—what *PYS* called *nirōdha*—is a positive step toward the goal of having a mind that is effectually emptied and ultimately undone. For instance, *HYP* 4:21–25 idealizes a state wherein the mind (*manas/मनस*) is first bound (*bandh/बन्ध*), then dissolves (*lī/ली*), and then ultimately perishes (*vinash/विनश*).<sup>222</sup> Furthermore, *HYP* 4:50 directs yoga practitioners, “Make the mind (*manas/मनस*) supportless (*nirālambam/ निरालम्बम*). Don’t think of anything,” and the surrounding verses describe the resultant state as one wherein the mind attains stillness (*sthira/स्थिर*) and then dissolves (*lī/ली*).<sup>223</sup> Similarly, *HYP* 4:57 instructs yoga practitioners, “Abandon all thoughts (*chintā/चिन्ता*), then don’t think of anything,” and the following verses describe a state wherein the mind eventually dissolves (*lī/ली*).<sup>224</sup> *HYP* echoes *PYS*’s call for stillness of mind, and just as in the case of Patanjali’s *nirōdha* idea, the whole point is that the mind would be emptied and ultimately done away with.

Echoing Patanjali even further, *HYP* also teaches that meditation and isolation—*samādhi* and *kāvālya*—are part of what it means to empty the mind and ultimately discard it. Just as *PYS* 3:3 posited that *samādhi* is when the mind (*chitta/चित्त*)

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<sup>222</sup> Brian Dana Akers, trans., *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (New York: YogaVidya, 2002), 89–90. Akers’ publication includes a critical edition of the Sanskrit text along with his own English translation. My quotations here are from Aker’s translation, and my summaries rely on his translation as well. The Sanskrit terms in parentheses are pulled from the critical edition as it appears in Aker’s book.

<sup>223</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 96–97.

<sup>224</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 98–99.

is devoid (*shūnya/शून्य*) of its own form, *HYP* 4:6–7 reiterates that true *samādhi* is when all thoughts (*sankalpa/संकल्प*) disappear (*pranashta/प्रनष्ट*) and the mind (*manas/मनस*) dissolves (*lī/ली*).<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, just as *PYS* 4:34 taught that in *kāvālyā* the power of the mind (*chitta/चित्त*) is utterly suspended (*pratiprasava/प्रतिप्रसव*), *HYP* 4:62 maintains that it is there in *kāvālyā* that the mind (*manas/मनस*) is dissolved (*lī/ली*).<sup>226</sup> Ultimately, *HYP* upholds Patanjali’s *nirōdha-samādhi-kāvālyā* system aimed at an emptied mind.

### Comparative Study of *PYS* and the Bible

Here, I compare *PYS*’s soteriology and theology against relevant material from the Bible. Patanjali’s soteriology progresses according to three sequential states: stillness, meditation, and isolation, each of which is a partial attainment of yoga’s ultimate goal: emptying the mind to realize the *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakriti*. Important to *PYS* soteriology is the fact that meditation is about emptying the mind. The theology of *PYS* centers around *Īshvara*. Crucial here are the facts that *Īshvara* is not a creator, that he can be connected with in the form of other deities, and that he is an optional, passive object of contemplation by which people may achieve salvation for themselves. Below, these points of *PYS* soteriology and theology are compared against relevant biblical teaching.

### Soteriological Comparisons

The soteriological aim of *PYS* is that yoga practitioners would, largely through meditation, empty their minds and realize their souls’ isolation from the material world. In this section, I will highlight two elements of *PYS*’s soteriology and compare them against relevant passages from the Bible. First, whereas *PYS*’s concept of meditation is aimed at emptying the mind, biblical mediation centers around certain content, namely, the Word of God. Second, whereas an emptied mind is the ideal in *PYS*’s soteriological

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<sup>225</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 85.

<sup>226</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 100.

framework, the Bible teaches that salvation entails being filled with the Holy Spirit. This comparison of *PYS* soteriology against relevant biblical material reveals stark differences between Patanjali’s teachings and the Bible.

**Meditating to empty the mind versus meditating on the Word of God.** The *PYS*’s concept of meditation (*samādhi*/समाधि) is aimed at emptying the mind, whereas the biblical notion of mediation (ἡσυχία) is all about gaining wisdom and insight from the Word of God.<sup>227</sup> The Christian yoga organization, Grace + Strength, acknowledges, “Biblical references to ‘meditation’ always infer the filling up of God’s Word and NOT the emptying of our minds.”<sup>228</sup> For his part, Albert Mohler explains more thoroughly,

The biblical concept of meditation is not without reference to thought and content. To the contrary, it is about thinking that is directed by the Word of God—scripturally saturated thought. This is almost the exact opposite of Eastern meditation, which sets the emptying of the mind as its goal. The Eastern concept of emptying the mind is just not anything close to the biblical vision of filling the mind with the Word of God.<sup>229</sup>

Mohler highlights the difference between Eastern meditation for an emptied mind and the biblical notion of meditating on God’s Word. Patanjali’s *samādhi* is an Eastern meditation aimed at emptying the mind and therefore substantiates Mohler’s analysis. Biblical meditation, on the other hand, is oriented around certain content, the Word of God. As Mohler shows, nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Psalm 119:97–99. The pertinent passages from the *PYS* and from the Bible read as follows:

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<sup>227</sup> While *samādhi* is a major part of what it means to be saved in *PYS*, the Bible does not present meditation on God’s word as necessarily effectual toward salvation. I examine the biblical ἡσυχία concept here only because I am comparing it with *samādhi*, which is a major element of *PYS*’s soteriology.

<sup>228</sup> Grace + Strength, “Should Christians Do Yoga,” *Grace + Strength*, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.gracexstrength.com/should-christians-do-yoga/>.

<sup>229</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Empty Promise of Meditation,” Albert Mohler, November 20, 2008, <https://albertmohler.com/2008/11/20/the-empty-promise-of-meditation>. Mohler reiterates this distinction between biblical and yogic meditation in two other articles. R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Subtle Body: Should Christians Practice Yoga?,” Albert Mohler, September 20, 2010, <https://albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-subtle-body-should-christians-practice-yoga/>; R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Yoga in Alabama’s Public Schools? Why Authentic Yoga Can Never Really Be Just Stretching Exercises,” Albert Mohler, March 13, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/03/13/briefing-3-13-20>.

(PYS 3:3) Meditation [is] the appearance of only that very thing, so that [the mind is] devoid of its own form.

How I love your instruction! It is my meditation all day long. Your command makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me. I have more insight than all my teachers because your decrees are my meditation (Ps 119:97–99 CSB).<sup>230</sup>

The two depictions of meditation seen in these two passages are starkly different from one another. In PYS 3:3, Patanjali teaches that, once the yoga practitioner reaches meditation (*samādhi*/समाधि), his or her mind is devoid (*shūnya*/शून्य) of its own form. The mind has been emptied, and this was the practitioner’s meditational goal all along. In Psalm 119, however, David sings of gaining wisdom and insight from God’s Word. The psalmist’s term for meditation is *הַיָּשׁוּב*, the semantic range of which includes such English glosses as meditation, musing, and even study.<sup>231</sup> The biblical term for meditation itself, then, implies some content about which to think. Furthermore, David announces unambiguously here what the object of his *הַיָּשׁוּב* is, listing God’s instruction,<sup>232</sup> command,<sup>233</sup> and decrees.<sup>234</sup> Whereas Patanjali’s meditation empties the mind, biblical mediation fills one’s mind with insight from God’s Word.<sup>235</sup>

**Emptying the mind versus being filled with the Holy Spirit.** Patanjali’s soteriological ideal of an emptied (*shūnya*/शून्य) mind opposes the biblical notion of being filled (*πλήθω*) with the Holy Spirit. PYS posits that the mind is stilled in *nirōdha*, voided

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<sup>230</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the CSB.

<sup>231</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), s.v. *הַיָּשׁוּב*, “meditation” (967), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/bdbbrownriverbriggshebrewandenglishlexiconoldtestament>. Hereafter, this source will be abbreviated *BDB*.

<sup>232</sup> *BDB*, s.v. *תּוֹרָה*, “instruction” (435).

<sup>233</sup> *BDB*, s.v. *מִצְוָה*, “commandment” (846).

<sup>234</sup> *BDB*, s.v. *עֲדוּת*, “the code of law in gen.” (730).

<sup>235</sup> Mohler draws the same conclusion about biblical meditation based on this same passage of Psalms. Mohler, “The Empty Promise of Meditation.” Furthermore, Miller makes the same distinction between yogic and biblical meditation based on other passages from Psalms. Elliot Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2: Yoga in Its Contemporary Western Context,” *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (2008): 8.



in *samādhi*, and disabled in *kāvālyā*. This three-part soteriological progression can be understood as an emptying of the mind. Important to the Bible’s concept of salvation, however, is the idea of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Gregg Allison explains that the Bible presents being filled with the Holy Spirit as something that accompanies initial salvation by faith, something that empowers saved Christians for a particular task, and something that characterizes regenerate believers who live an exemplary lifestyle.<sup>236</sup> Overall, Patanjali’s idea of salvation envisions an emptied mind, while according to the Bible, being saved means being filled with the Holy Spirit.

In particular, Acts teaches that to be filled (πλήθω) with the Holy Spirit, rather than empty of mind, is a major part of what it means to be saved. George Abbott-Smith reports in his lexicon that several uses of πλήθω in Acts refer to the action of “that which fills or takes possession of the mind.”<sup>237</sup> Allison points out that Acts 2:4 records the disciples being “filled with the Holy Spirit” and sees this as synonymous with their being “baptized with the Holy Spirit” and therefore a reference to their initial salvation.<sup>238</sup> Allison also observes several instances in Acts of regenerate Christians being “filled with the Holy Spirit” and thereby empowered for certain ministries. Such instances include Peter proclaiming the gospel in Acts 4:8, other believers preaching in Acts 4:31, and Paul rebuking the sorcerer in Acts 13:9.<sup>239</sup> Allison also highlights portions of Acts where being “full of the Holy Spirit” describes Christians of exemplary character. It is what qualified Stephen to serve in Acts 6:3–5 and what made Barnabas a suitable visitor to

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<sup>236</sup> Gregg R. Allison, “Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 16, no. 4 (2012): 10–11, 14.

<sup>237</sup> George Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: T. & T. Clark, 1937), s.v. πλήθω, “to fill,” 360, emphasis mine, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/manualgreeklexic0000gabb/page/360/mode/2up>.

<sup>238</sup> Allison, “Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit,” 6, 10.

<sup>239</sup> Allison, “Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit,” 10–11, 14.

Antioch in Acts 11:24.<sup>240</sup> The Bible presents being filled with the Holy Spirit as a major feature of its soteriology, and this is diametrically opposed to *PYS*'s core teaching that being saved is all about emptying one's mind.<sup>241</sup>

### **Theological Comparisons**

*PYS* presents Īshvara as the supreme yet generic, non-creating God of many manifestations, who serves as an optional, passive object of contemplation by which yoga practitioners may achieve salvation for themselves. Here, I will highlight three elements of *PYS*'s theology and compare them against relevant biblical passages. First, whereas *PYS* presents Īshvara as a *purūsha* and therefore not the creator, the Bible reveals that creatorship is central to who God is. Second, whereas *PYS* teaches that Īshvara is generic and can be connected with in the form of lower deities, the Bible insists that God is a particular and jealous God. Third, whereas *PYS* maintains that Īshvara is an optional, passive object of contemplation by which people can attain salvation for themselves, the Bible presents God as the necessary, active worker of salvation. Malkovsky is right in reasoning that, since *PYS*'s depiction of Īshvara is so different from what Christians (and many others for that matter) mean when they speak of God, any similarities between Īshvara and the God of the Bible are difficult to identify.<sup>242</sup>

**A special *purūsha* versus the divine Creator.** As a *purūsha*, Īshvara is not the creator of the world, while central to the identity of the God of the Bible is his role as Creator. In *PYS* 1:24, Patanjali teaches that Īshvara is a *purūsha* and therefore has nothing to do with the creation of the material universe. On the other hand, in Nehemiah 9:6, the

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<sup>240</sup> Allision, "Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit," 11, 14.

<sup>241</sup> Though this is not a direct analysis of *PYS* 3:3 against the Bible, Miller asserts rightly that, unlike yoga practitioners, believers in Christ "are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and do not need to go 'out of their minds' to experience God." Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3," 7.

<sup>242</sup> Malkovsky, "Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity," 37.

prophet praises God for creating (ἡΨΨ) everything from the depths of the sea to the stars in the heavens. In Colossians 1:16, Paul extends this creatorship to Jesus the Son, attesting that everything was created (κτίζω) by him. Even back in Genesis 1:1–2, it is clear that the Holy Spirit was also present and active in the world’s creation. Unlike Īshvara, God’s identity is bound up with his role as Creator. Indeed, as John Frame points out, “Creation is the act by which the Bible introduces us to God,” and this divine act “tells us much about who God is.”<sup>243</sup> The pertinent verses read as follows:

(PYS 1:24) Īshvara [is] a special *purūsha*, untouched by the afflictions or by the stock or effect of *karma*.

You, Lord, are the only God. You created the heavens, the highest heavens with all their stars, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them, and all the stars of heaven worship you (Neh 9:6).

For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him (Col 1:16).

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters (Gen 1:1–2).

Patanjali teaches in PYS 1:24 that, as a *purūsha*, Īshvara is untouched by the afflictions or the effects of *karma*. In other words, he is uninvolved with any of *prakriti*’s machinations. Since the material world, according to Sāṅkhya, is ongoingly generated by its own *prakritic gunas*, no *purūsha* including Īshvara has anything to do with creating it. In Nehemiah, however, we read of a God renown for creating the world. The term Nehemiah uses for God’s creative work in 9:6 is ἡΨΨ, the same word employed repeatedly in Genesis 1 to narrate God’s creation of the world.<sup>244</sup> Just as Nehemiah identifies God as the creator of the stars, earth, and seas, Colossians presents Jesus as the one who created (κτίζω) everything “in heaven and on earth.” Abbott-Smith includes

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<sup>243</sup> John M. Frame, “God the Creator,” *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/god-the-creator/>.

<sup>244</sup> *BDB*, s.v. ἡΨΨ, “God’s making (creating)” (794).

Paul’s use of *κτίζω* in Colossians 1:16 as a reference to *God* creating the world.<sup>245</sup> At the very start of the creation account itself, we read that the Holy Spirit was there hovering over the waters. Malkovsky concludes that “God, according to all Christian theologies, is creator of the world,” and goes on to attest that *Īshvara*, according to *PYS*, is not.<sup>246</sup>

**A generic God of many forms versus a particular, jealous God.** For Patanjali, though *Īshvara* is supreme, he is also generic and can be connected with in the form of lower deities. The God of the Bible, on the other hand, is jealous and forbids the worship of any other supposed gods. Miller insists rightly, “The God of the Bible has made it quite clear that He does not identify with the gods of other religions or receive their worship as His worship.”<sup>247</sup> Pertinent passages from these two diverging texts include *PYS* 1:27 and 2:44, along with Exodus 20:2–5a. They read as follows:

(*PYS* 1:27) The expression of him [is] the *pranava*. . . . (*PYS* 2:44) From study [comes] a connection with [one’s] desired deity.

I am [Yahweh] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery. Do not have other gods besides me. Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, [Yahweh] your God, am a jealous God (Exod 20:2–5a).

*PYS* 1:27 identifies *Īshvara* with the *pranava*, the sacred syllable *ōm* (ओम्), indicating that *Īshvara* is Patanjali’s generic, nonsectarian title for the supreme God. *Īshvara* is not the God of a particular Indian religious sect. He is supreme divinity in general, and therefore, by definition, not jealous. *PYS* 2:44 teaches that yoga practitioners may connect with their preferred deity (*devatā*/देवता) through study. These lower deities, though real, are actually just forms or manifestations of *Īshvara*. Ultimately, it is *Īshvara*

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<sup>245</sup> Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. *κτίζω*, “to create,” 260.

<sup>246</sup> Malkovsky, “Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity,” 35–36.

<sup>247</sup> Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2,” 8.

whom yoga practitioners may connect with through study. The theology of *PYS* presents Īshvara as a supreme yet generic God who can be connected with in the forms of various other deities. That is to say, Īshvara is neither particular nor jealous.

The God of the Bible, however, exhibits both these features. In Exodus 20:2, God identifies himself as Yahweh (יהוה), the God (אלהים) who delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Here is a particular God, identified by one of his historical acts. Yahweh goes on to command his people in verse 3, “Do not let there be (יהי) <sup>248</sup> other gods (אלהים) <sup>249</sup> for you besides me.” The passage does not acknowledge the existence of other gods and then prohibit Yahweh’s people from worshipping them. Rather, it commands that there are not to be (יהי) any other supposed gods for the Israelites to begin with, and as a matter of course, they are not to worship any such gods in the form of idols. Yahweh goes on to explain in verse 5 that the reason his people are not to worship other gods is because he is jealous (קנן). <sup>250</sup> Nissim Amzallag insists that God’s קנן as central to his very identity. <sup>251</sup> Yahweh is not a generic God to be connected with in the form of lower deities, rather, he is a particular, jealous God who forbids the worship of other gods categorically. <sup>252</sup>

### **An optional object of contemplation versus the necessary, active savior.**

Īshvara is an optional, passive object of contemplation (*pranidhāna*/प्रणिधान) by which

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<sup>248</sup> *BDB*, s.v. יהוה, “be in existence” (226–27).

<sup>249</sup> *BDB*, s.v. אלהים, “pl. god” or “God” (43–44).

<sup>250</sup> *BDB*, s.v. קנן, “jealous” (888).

<sup>251</sup> Nissim Amzallag, “Furnace Remelting as the Expression of YHWH’s Holiness: Evidence from the Meaning of *qannā* (קנן) in the Divine Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 2 (2015): 233–52.

<sup>252</sup> Christian speakers of Hindi (a derivative of Sanskrit) commonly refer to the God of the Bible as Parameshvara, a title comprised of the name Īshvara with the prefix *param* (परम), emphasizing his supremacy. This Christian usage of Parameshvara makes sense given that Īshvara is a generic title for the supreme God, not particular to any Indian religion or sect. A Christian’s use of Parameshvara for the God of the Bible does not necessarily ascribe to Yahweh any characteristics of Īshvara as he is presented in *PYS* or elsewhere. The Christian use of Parameshvara simply applies to the one true God of the Bible a generically available term for the supreme God from an Indian language.

yoga practitioners may attain salvation for themselves, while the God of the Bible grants saving grace (χάρις) and is therefore our necessary, active savior. Pertinent passages include *PYS* 1:23 and 2:45, along with Ephesians 2:4–9 and Galatians 4:4–7.

(*PYS* 1:23) Or, [*nirōdha* is attainable] by contemplation on Īshvara. . . . (*PYS* 2:45) From contemplation on Īshvara [comes] the complete attainment of *samādhi*.

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast (Eph 2:4–9).

When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then God has made you an heir (Gal 4:4–7).

*PYS* 1:23 and 2:45 teach that *nirōdha* and *samādhi* are attainable through contemplation on Īshvara. *Nirōdha* and *samādhi* are both partial attainments of yoga’s goal: to empty the mind and realize the *purūsha*’s isolation from *prakṛiti*. Contemplation on Īshvara, then, is one of many ways to bring about the soteriological end of yoga. Even when yoga practitioners choose *īshvara-pranidhāna* as their way of achieving salvation, Īshvara plays no active role in bringing it about. He simply serves as a passive object on which to contemplate. *PYS* theology identifies Īshvara as an optional, passive object of contemplation by which yoga practitioners may achieve salvation for themselves.

In Ephesians 2:4–9, however, Paul teaches that God is the one who grants us saving grace (χάρις) and is therefore our necessary, active savior. John Piper observes from these verse that “life from the dead is given to you by grace . . . and the hope of eternal kindness is given to you by grace.”<sup>253</sup> The clear message of the passage is that this saving grace is something God must actively grant as a gift since salvation cannot be

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<sup>253</sup> John Piper, “But God,” *Desiring God*, December 22, 1985, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/but-god>.

attained by our own works. Affirming “grace” as an appropriate gloss for *χάρις*, Abbott-Smith goes on to explain in his lexicon that the term is especially used in the New Testament to refer to “divine favor . . . with an emphasis on its freeness.”<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, Galatians 4:4–7 elucidates that this salvation by grace involves the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Salvation by grace is a trinitarian act. Whereas *Īshvara* is one of many passive objects on which yoga practitioners may contemplate to bring about their own soteriological goal, the God of the Bible is the one necessary, active accomplisher of people’s salvation by his granting of grace.

### Conclusion

This comparison of Patanjali’s soteriology and theology against relevant biblical material has revealed five major points of divergence between *PYS* and the Bible. First, *PYS*’s concept of meditation is aimed at emptying the mind, whereas the biblical notion of mediation is all about gaining wisdom and insight from the Word of God. Second, Patanjali’s soteriological ideal of an emptied mind opposes the biblical notion of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Third, as a *purūsha*, the supreme God figure in *PYS* (*Īshvara*) is not the creator of the world, while central to the identity of the God of the Bible is his role as Creator. Fourth, Patanjali’s supreme God is generic and can be connected with in the form of lower deities, whereas the God of the Bible is particular and jealously forbids the worship of any other supposed gods. Fifth, *PYS*’s *Īshvara* is an optional, passive object of contemplation by which yoga practitioners may attain salvation for themselves, while the God of the Bible grants saving grace and is therefore our necessary, active savior. At least as far as their soteriologies and theologies are concerned, *PYS* and the Bible are starkly different.

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<sup>254</sup> Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. *χάρις*, “grace,” 479.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ AND THE BIBLE

The *Bhagavad Gītā* (*BG*) is one of yoga's two foundational scriptures. Though the word yoga does not appear in its title, *BG* employs the Sanskrit term over a hundred times and offers clear teaching on what yoga is. In this chapter, I will analyze certain thematically delineated passages of *BG* in their original Sanskrit and then compare those passages against relevant biblical texts. I begin with some background information on *BG*, including an examination of the scripture's dating and authorship, as well as a briefing on two concepts central to its message: Hindu theism and *bhakti* yoga. The chapter then proceeds into a critical analysis of the scriptural passages themselves, organized into two themes. The first theme is *BG*'s theology, in which I offer my own translation and analysis of three passages revealing the scripture's view of divinity. The next theme is soteriology, and I translate and explain three more segments on how *BG* says yoga practitioners can be saved. The following section tracks how *BG*'s teachings are echoed in *HYP*. The chapter ends with a comparison of these two *BG*-based themes against relevant biblical passages. My conclusion is that, at least as far as their theologies and soteriologies are concerned, *BG* and the Bible are starkly different.

#### **Background Information on *BG***

A. L. Basham called the *Bhagavad Gītā* "the most important and influential religious text of India."<sup>1</sup> Though it ranks among Hinduism's most popular writings, *BG* is not a complete scripture in itself. Rather, the famous literary work is a segment from the

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<sup>1</sup> A. L. Basham, *The Origins & Development of Classical Hinduism* (1989; repr., New York: Oxford University, 1991), 82.



world’s longest religious tome, the *Mahābhārata*. For context, Georg Feuerstein relays that the whole epic is “almost three times as long as the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> He explains that the *Mahābhārata* and its *BG* segment belong to a second tier of Hindu scriptures called the *smṛiti* (स्मृति) texts, meaning those which have been “remembered” through the ages.<sup>3</sup> Though *smṛiti* literature is generally seen as less authoritative than Hinduism’s *śruti* (श्रुति) works—those, including the four *Vedas*, which were “heard” directly by the sages—Feuerstein attests that *BG* has long been regarded as an authoritative piece of Hindu scripture.<sup>4</sup> The vast narrative of the *Mahābhārata* features an epic conflict commonly referred to as the Bhārata War or the Kurūkshetra War. The *Gītā* segment is a key episode of the story, taking place just on the cusp of battle. The entire *BG* consists of a dialogue between a military leader named Arjuna and the divine figure, Krishna (कृष्ण), who is serving as his charioteer. One of yoga’s most commonly invoked scriptural bases, *BG* constitutes an important piece of Hindu sacred writing.

### **Dating and Authorship of *BG***

Richard Davis reports that majority scholarship dates the *Gītā* within India’s classical period, placing its composition sometime between the enthronement of King Ashoka in 269 BC and the end of the Gupta dynasty in AD 547.<sup>5</sup> Daniel Simpson specifies further that *BG* “was probably composed less than two thousand years ago.”<sup>6</sup> For comparison, David White calculates that the scripture’s compilation happened around

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<sup>2</sup> Georg Feuerstein, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2011), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 56–58.

<sup>4</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 56–58.

<sup>5</sup> Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2015), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga: A Comprehensive Guide to Yoga’s History, Texts, Philosophy, and Practices* (New York: North Point Press, 2021), 60.

the same time as *PYS*'s.<sup>7</sup> White cautions that it is not clear which of the two scriptures predates the other, much less whether one influenced its counterpart to any significant degree.<sup>8</sup> For their part, Mallinson and Singleton date *BG* to the third century AD and *PYS* to the fourth.<sup>9</sup> Sufficient for our purposes is the understanding that, like *PYS*, the *Gītā* is a product of India's classical period, most likely dating to the first few centuries AD.<sup>10</sup>

Feuerstein relays that the traditionally named author of *BG* is one Vyāsa Dvaipayana.<sup>11</sup> The term *vyāsa* is simply an epithet meaning “compiler” or “author,”<sup>12</sup> a designation shared by the first commentator on *PYS*. Feuerstein hypothesizes that “there were many such *vyāsas* who contributed to the formation of [the *Mahābhārata* and its *BG* segment], and a certain Vyāsa Dvaipayana was ostensibly the most important or best remembered of these individuals.”<sup>13</sup> For our purposes, Vyāsa Dvaipayana serves as a functional designation for the person primarily responsible for the writing of *BG* sometime during the first few centuries AD.

### **Hindu Theism and *BG***

The section below on *BG* theology will demonstrate that the *Gītā* is a work of Hindu theism, revering Krishna—an *avatāra* of Vishnu and a concrete manifestation of the more generic Īshvara figure—as the supreme, personal God. Important at this juncture

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<sup>7</sup> David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 180.

<sup>8</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 47, 180.

<sup>9</sup> James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), xxxix.

<sup>10</sup> Basham suggests *BG* was completed by the start of the first century BC. Basham, *The Origins & Development of Classical Hinduism*, 97. Feuerstein takes an even earlier stance, locating *BG*'s compilation between the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 14, 16, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1899; repr., Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1986), s.v. *vyāsa*/व्यास, “divider,” 1035, Sanskrit Lexicon, <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2014/web/webtc2/index.php>.

<sup>13</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 47.

is situating *BG*'s Krishna-centered theology within Hindu theism more broadly. Any discussion of Hindu theism must begin with *brahman* (ब्रह्मन्).<sup>14</sup> Arvind Sharma explains that *brahman* is “the Hindu designation for the ultimate reality.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to report that classical Hindu thinkers understood *brahman* as “the ultimate ground of the universe.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, much of classical Hinduism agrees with *BG* that *brahman* encompasses the whole universe or is somehow constituted by it. Sharma explains that one current of Hindu philosophy envisions a *brahman* that is without any attributes (*nirguna*/निर्गुण) and therefore like an impersonal principle, while another strand conceptualizes *brahman* as a person with attributes (*saguna*/सगुण).<sup>17</sup> Clear from the *BG* text itself is that Dvaipayana's *Gītā* lies squarely within the latter camp.

Sharma identifies the personal, *saguna brahman* with the Īshvara figure of *PYS* fame.<sup>18</sup> Since Īshvara is merely a generic term for the supreme God, it makes sense to conceive of Īshvara as *brahman* personified. Up to this point, Hindu theism mostly aligns with the Īshvara-oriented theology of *PYS*. However, Sharma goes on to explain that broader Hindu theism—unlike Patanjali's theology—leaves room for Īshvara to exercise three sovereign functions: the creation, preservation, and destruction of the world.<sup>19</sup> Sharma and Feuerstein report that these three roles have often been assigned to the more sectarian gods, Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva, respectively.<sup>20</sup> The two scholars,

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<sup>14</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *brahman*/ब्रह्मन्, “[the] one divine essence and source from which all created things emanate or with which they are identified and to which they return. . . the Self-existent, the Absolute, the Eternal,” 737.

<sup>15</sup> Arvind Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 2, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 20–21, 63, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 5, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 5, 21; Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 65.

along with A. L. Basham, acknowledge, however, that the worship of this trinity-like entity as a whole was never prominent in lived Hinduism.<sup>21</sup> Rather, Sharma, Feuerstein, and Basham explain that Vāshnavism, Shāivism, and to a lesser extent Brahmā-worship, each acknowledged its own principal god as supreme.<sup>22</sup> As for *BG*, Feuerstein observes that its encompassing *Mahābhārata* epic is Vāshnavist through and through.<sup>23</sup>

According to Hindu theism, it is primarily Vishnu who descends into the world in the form of *avatāras* (अवतार).<sup>24</sup> Feuerstein attests that the term *avatāra* “usually refers specifically to incarnations of Vishnu,” and Sharma identifies the *avatāra* concept as a “special feature” of Vāshnavism.<sup>25</sup> It is to carry out his role as preserver that Vishnu manifests himself serially in the forms of *avatāras*. Sharma and Feuerstein explain that, whenever the universe is “threatened with destruction” or has “become subject to chaos,” that is when Vishnu descends in tangible form.<sup>26</sup> They agree that it is to ensure the world’s existence and restore order that Vishnu’s *avatāras* come down at certain times.<sup>27</sup> Most pertinent to our examination of *BG*, though, is Sharma’s note: “Sometimes it is an incarnation [*avatāra*] of Viṣṇu which is worshipped rather than Viṣṇu himself.”<sup>28</sup> The *Gītā* is a work of Vāshnavist Hindu theism, calling for worshipful devotion to Vishnu’s eighth *avatāra*, Krishna, as the supreme, personal God.

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<sup>21</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 73; Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 65; Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 310–11.

<sup>22</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 82; Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 57, 66; Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 309.

<sup>23</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 22, 59, 60, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avatāra*/अवतार, “descent (especially of a deity from heaven), appearance of any deity upon earth . . . but more particularly the incarnations of Viṣṇu in ten principal forms . . . [including] Kṛṣṇa,” 99.

<sup>25</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 38; Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 84; Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 6; Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 21.

## Bhakti Yoga and BG

In the *Gītā*, Vyāsa Dvaipayana lays out three paths (*mārgas*/मार्ग) for reaching life's ultimate soteriological goal: union (*yōga*/योग)<sup>29</sup> with Krishna. Within *BG* and elsewhere, each of these paths to union—that is, each of these *mārgas* to yoga—is alternatively referred to simply as a yoga. Sharma reports that these include the path of knowledge (*gyāna*/ज्ञान), the path of work (*karma*/कर्म), and the path of devotion (*bhakti*/भक्ति).<sup>30</sup> Vivekananda, a late nineteenth-century contextualizer of Hindu philosophy for the Western world, popularized a four-path yoga framework, adding to *BG*'s three *mārgas* what he called “royal” (*rāja*/राज) yoga, associating it rather arbitrarily with Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras*.<sup>31</sup> Yoga's traditional three paths, however, are those taught in the *Gītā*: the knowledge *mārga*, the work *mārga*, and the devotion *mārga*.

Just as with the other two paths, *BG* presents *gyāna* or knowledge-driven yoga as a means for accomplishing life's soteriological objective, uniting with Krishna. Pavulraj Michael attests that *BG*'s concept of *gyāna* yoga primarily has to do with the knowledge of God, namely, Krishna.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Michael shows that the *Gītā* presents *gyāna* as a path into “union with the Divine,” and as a means of having “a deep mystical experience of oneness with the Divine.”<sup>33</sup> Each of the *mārgas*, after all, is a path to union. Since *BG* is a Vāshnavist text featuring Krishna as the supreme, personal God, union with the Divine here is union with Krishna. Put simply, the *Gītā*'s *gyāna* yoga

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<sup>29</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yōga*/योग, “any junction, union, combination,” 856. This noun is built from the verb root *yuj*; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yuj*/युज्, “to yoke, join, unite,” 853.

<sup>30</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 16, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Vivekananda, “Four Paths of Yoga,” in *The Complete Works Of Swami Vivekananda*, 7th ed., vol. 8 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1958), 152–55; Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga* (1896; repr., New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1982).

<sup>32</sup> Pavulraj Michael, “Jñāna Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita—The Path for Self-Realization,” *The Asia Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (2015): 203–4, 207.

<sup>33</sup> Michael, “Jñāna Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita,” 209, 211–12.

system encourages practitioners to know Krishna and thereby attain union with him. This is the yoga of knowledge, or more precisely, the *mārga* of *gyāna* leading to yoga.

The *Gītā* also presents *karma* or work-based yoga as a way of arriving at life's soteriological end. The premise of *BG*'s *karma* yoga program is that doing one's duty without any attachment to the rewards thereof can bring about union with Krishna. Michael relays that the *Gītā* consistently advocates for action over inaction, and Sharma points out that the basic idea of *karma* yoga is that "salvation can be achieved through action."<sup>34</sup> The type of action or work a *karma* yoga practitioner should carry out is that which aligns with his duty or *dharma* (धर्म).<sup>35</sup> Michael affirms that the *karma mārga* is a path calling for "dutiful action," that is, action adhering to one's *dharma*.<sup>36</sup> A thorough unpacking of Hinduism's *dharma* concept lies outside the scope of this work, but sufficiently for our purposes, Sharma explains that what matters here is doing the duties befitting of one's caste (*varna*/वर्ण) and life-stage (*āśrama*/आश्रम).<sup>37</sup> R. C. Zaehner describes *dharma* as "the rules of the game," explaining, "However wrong the *dharma* imposed on you by your caste and by circumstances may appear to you, you are none the less in duty bound to do it."<sup>38</sup>

So, *karma* yoga is about doing the work appropriate to one's *dharma*, but only when done without any attachment to the potential rewards does this work successfully bring about one's union with Krishna. Michael and Sharma emphasize that *karma* yoga calls for performing the work of one's *dharma* in a way that totally disregards any of the

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<sup>34</sup> Pavulraj Michael, "Karma Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita: Way for all to Self-Realization," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 205; Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dharma*/धर्म, "prescribed conduct, duty," 510.

<sup>36</sup> Michael, "Karma Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita," 204.

<sup>37</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 127–28.

<sup>38</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, 2nd ed. (1962; repr. Oxford: Oxford University, 1966), 103.

eventual results or fruits that might come from that work.<sup>39</sup> When lived out in this way, Michael explains, *karma yoga* is “a way to realize God,” or rather, it is “the way that leads to the attainment of God.”<sup>40</sup> Since *BG* features Krishna as the supreme, personal God, to realize or attain God in the *Gītā* means to achieve union with Krishna. Ultimately, *BG*’s *karma yoga* system prescribes doing the work of one’s *dharma* while disregarding its results in order to attain union with Krishna. This is the yoga of work, or more precisely, the *mārga* of *karma* leading to yoga.

Most prominently, *BG* champions *bhakti* or devotional yoga as the ideal way to be saved and achieve union with Krishna. Basham goes so far as to write, “The most important new doctrine in the *Bhagavad-gītā* is *bhakti*, devotion to God.”<sup>41</sup> John Allen explains, “The word *bhakti* means ‘devotion,’ and in this form of yoga the adherent is supposed to achieve union with ultimate reality by giving his love and worship unremittingly to one of the personal forms of God.”<sup>42</sup> Michael, in agreement with Elliot Miller, emphasizes that the *bhakti* path is all about showing devotion to a particular, personal God.<sup>43</sup> In *BG*, Krishna is supreme, so it is to him that the *bhakti* yoga practitioner should show devotion. Michael puts it succinctly: “*Bhakti* in the *Bhagavad Gita* . . . means devotion and loyalty to Krishna, the personal God.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Michael writes that the *Gītā*’s idea of *bhakti* yoga envisions the practitioner loving and having a

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<sup>39</sup> Michael, “Karma Yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita*,” 204–6, 208; Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 127–28.

<sup>40</sup> Michael, “Karma Yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita*,” 203–4.

<sup>41</sup> Basham, *The Origins & Development of Classical Hinduism*, 91.

<sup>42</sup> John Allen, *Yoga: A Christian Analysis* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1983), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Pavulraj Michael, “*Bhakti* Yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita*—An Easy Way for All to Search and Find the Will of God,” *The Asia Journal of Theology* 25, no. 2 (2011): 252; Elliot Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context,” *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (2008): 7.

<sup>44</sup> Michael, “*Bhakti* Yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita*,” 252–53.

relationship with Krishna.<sup>45</sup> Zaehner agrees, explaining that “in the *Gītā* [*bhakti*] means devotion and loyalty to Krishna, the personal God, trust in Him and love of Him.”<sup>46</sup> As far as *BG* is concerned, the yoga of devotion begins and ends with devotion to Krishna.

As the ideal path to yoga, this devotion *mārga* has the same soteriological goal as the other two paths: union with Krishna. Michael explains that *bhakti* involves “a ‘sharing’ in the divine object of one’s devotion,” that is, a sharing in Krishna.<sup>47</sup> Michael and Zaehner point out various places where the *Gītā* speaks of *bhakti* practitioners attaining, entering, participating in, and abiding in God.<sup>48</sup> In the context of *BG*, of course, God is none other than Krishna, so Michael gets right down to the point in stating that, according to *BG*, the successful *bhakti* yoga practitioner “enters into Krishna the Lord forever to enjoy the unbroken union.”<sup>49</sup> Basham explains that this type of union is what is normally envisioned by the *bhakti* concept itself, writing, “[T]he concept of *bhakti* has this deep undertone of participation in the divine, not merely the worshipping of a god at a great distance.”<sup>50</sup> The union attained through the *bhakti* path is not merely a close relationship. It is an ontological oneness of being. This is the goal of *bhakti* yoga, *BG*’s ideal *mārga* for attaining union with Krishna.

Though it offers a rich description of each of these three *mārgas* to union, *BG* clearly idealizes *bhakti*, the yoga of devotion. Simpson estimates that at least two-thirds of *BG* is purposed toward “presenting yoga in devotional terms,” and he concludes,

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<sup>45</sup> Michael, “Bhakti Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita,” 255.

<sup>46</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā with a Commentary Based on the Original Sources* (New York: Oxford University, 1973), 26.

<sup>47</sup> Michael, “Bhakti Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita,” 257.

<sup>48</sup> Michael, “Bhakti Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita,” 251, 253; Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Michael, “Bhakti Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita,” 266. Michael also emphasizes this same idea on pages 258 and 265.

<sup>50</sup> Basham, *The Origins & Development of Classical Hinduism*, 91.



“However one interprets the *Gita*, its message is devotional.”<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Corigliano agrees, arguing that *bhakti* is “the primary means and focus for Yoga in the context of the Bhagavad Gita.”<sup>52</sup> For this reason, the examination of *BG* soteriology below will focus on those passages that present the scripture’s ideal means of salvation: *bhakti*. Ultimately, *BG* is a classical-era, Vāshnavist text prescribing devotion to Krishna, the supreme God, as the ideal path for attaining real, ontological union with him. Oriented so decidedly around this goal of union (*yōga*/योग), *BG* is a yogic scripture at its very core. As the *Gītā* teaches practitioners how to achieve union with God, it is teaching them yoga.

### **Critical Analysis of *BG***

With this understanding of *BG*’s background in place, we can now proceed to analyze some select passages of the *Gītā* itself. My analysis is organized under two themes. The first is *BG*’s theology, and I have selected three passages where Dvaipayana lays out his concept of divinity. The other theme is soteriology, and I examine three more passages explaining how yoga practitioners can be saved. In this section, I give my translation and analysis of the *BG* passages themselves, saving any comparison between them and the Bible for later in the chapter. This critical analysis presents six passages conveying *BG*’s theology and soteriology, which will then be compared against relevant biblical texts in the following section.

### **The Theology of *BG***

Feuerstein points out that the central character of the *Mahābhārata* and of its *BG* segment is Krishna, going so far as to call *BG* a work of “Krishnaism.”<sup>53</sup> On the cusp of battle, Krishna—the eighth *avatāra* of Vishnu—is serving as charioteer for the great

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<sup>51</sup> Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 67–68.

<sup>52</sup> Stephanie Corigliano, “Devotion and Discipline: Christian Yoga and the Yoga of T. Krishnamacharya,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 30, no. 4 (2017): 28.

<sup>53</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 22, 57.

military leader, Arjuna. As part of his counsel to Arjuna, Krishna reveals that he is Vishnu, that he is Īshvara, that he is *brahman*, and that by embodying all these entities at the same time, he is essentially identifiable with the universe itself. Ultimately, *BG* is a work of Hindu theism, presenting Krishna as all-encompassing yet undeniably personal. Put simply, the theology of *BG* puts forth Krishna as the supreme, personal God with whom yoga practitioners should seek to unite.

**Krishna is Vishnu according to *BG* 10:20b–21a and 11:24b, 30b.** The *Gītā* makes clear that, as an *avatāra*, Krishna is not merely an emissary sent into the world by Vishnu, rather, a divine embodiment of Vishnu himself. Feuerstein highlights *BG* 10:21 as an example of our main character, Krishna, explicitly identifying himself with the world-preserving god, Vishnu.<sup>54</sup> The passage surrounding this verse reads as follows:

(10:20b) अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च। (10:21a) आदित्यानामहं विष्णुर्ज्योतिषां  
रविरंशमान्। . . . (11:24b) दृष्ट्वा हि त्वां प्रव्यथितान्तरात्मा धृतिं न विन्दामि शमं च विष्णो। . . .  
(11:30b) तेजोभिरापूर्य जगत्समग्रं भासस्तवोग्राः प्रतपन्ति विष्णो।<sup>55</sup>

(10:20b) I [am] the beginning, the middle, and even the end of beings. (10:21a) Of the initial deities, I [am] Vishnu. Of the celestial lights, [I am] the radiant sun. . . . (11:24b) Just seeing you, [my] internal self trembling, I find neither fortitude nor tranquility, oh Vishnu! . . . (11:30b) Filling the whole universe with [their] brilliance, your consuming rays shine forth, oh Vishnu!<sup>56</sup>

These verses feature both Krishna and Arjuna testifying that the former is none other than the world-preserving god, Vishnu. In verse 20, Krishna declares, “I [am] the

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<sup>54</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 208–32. Feuerstein’s book includes Dvaipayana’s verses in their original Sanskrit, interspersed with Feuerstein’s corresponding transliteration and English translation. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Dvaipayana as they appear in Feuerstein’s work.

<sup>56</sup> This is my translation of Dvaipayana’s Sanskrit words as they appear in Feuerstein’s book. Feuerstein’s English translation, along those of Winthrop Sargeant and R. C. Zaehner, served as a helpful resource in my translation of this and the other *BG* passages below. Winthrop Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gītā* (1984; repr., Albany, NY: SUNY, 2009); Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*. Appendix 1 features documentation from Zabaan Language Institute that their reviewer affirms the accuracy of my translations.

beginning,<sup>57</sup> the middle,<sup>58</sup> and even the end<sup>59</sup> of beings.” Throughout much of the *Gītā*, Krishna’s relationship to the world’s beings (*bhūta/भूत*)<sup>60</sup> is a major factor in his supreme divinity. Important to note now is what Krishna says next. In verse 21, he continues, “Of the initial deities, I [am] Vishnu.” The term used for “initial deities” here is *āditya* (आदित्य).<sup>61</sup> This word is built from the root, *ādi*, meaning “beginning,” and Monier-Williams reports that the *ādityas* form a distinct class of Hindu deities.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the lexicon specifies that the *ādityas* are commonly seen as residing in the heavens and that the designation is especially applicable to the sun god, Surya.<sup>63</sup> It makes sense, then, that Krishna goes on to say in the same verse, “Of the celestial lights,<sup>64</sup> [I am] the radiant<sup>65</sup> sun.”<sup>66</sup> In *BG* 10:20b–21a, Krishna claims to be Vishnu, one of Hinduism’s three principal gods, counted among the initial celestial deities.

In the verses that follow, Krishna, the *avatāra* serving as Arjuna’s charioteer, gives the soldier a glimpse of his raw, divine form. In response, Arjuna declares in verse

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<sup>57</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ādi*/आदि, “beginning,” 136.

<sup>58</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *madhyam*/मध्यं, “middle,” 781.

<sup>59</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anta*/अन्त, “end,” 42.

<sup>60</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhūta*/भूत, “any living being, reality, that which is or exists, the world,” 761.

<sup>61</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *āditya*/आदित्य, “deity,” 137.

<sup>62</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *āditya*/आदित्य, “deity,” 137.

<sup>63</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *āditya*/आदित्य, “deity,” 137.

<sup>64</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *jyōtish*/ज्योतिष, “light,” 427.

<sup>65</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anshumat*/अंशुमत्, “radiant,” 1.

<sup>66</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ravi*/रवि, “sun,” 869.

24, “Just seeing<sup>67</sup> you,<sup>68</sup> [my] internal self<sup>69</sup> trembling,<sup>70</sup> I find<sup>71</sup> neither fortitude<sup>72</sup> nor tranquility,<sup>73</sup> oh Vishnu!” Arjuna is reeling from the divine revelation, and the experience leaves him sure that Krishna is Vishnu. In verse 30, the soldier goes on to proclaim, “Filling the whole<sup>74</sup> universe with [their] brilliance,<sup>75</sup> your consuming<sup>76</sup> rays<sup>77</sup> shine forth,<sup>78</sup> oh Vishnu!” The image of Krishna filling<sup>79</sup> the universe<sup>80</sup> is prominent in other *Gītā* passages about his divinity. What should not be missed here is that Arjuna refers to the chariot-driving *avatāra* as Vishnu himself. While later subsections will show the importance of these declarations that Krishna is the end of all beings and that he fills the universe, what is crucial to note now is that Krishna is Vishnu.

**Krishna is Īshvara according to BG 11:3–4, 8–9.** Simpson points out that the term *īshvara* (ईश्वर) basically means powerful, but goes on to explain that “it also signifies ‘Lord,’ ‘God,’ and ‘master.’”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, Īshvara is a generic term for the supreme,

<sup>67</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *drash*/दृश्, “to see,” 491.

<sup>68</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tva*/त्व, “you,” 463.

<sup>69</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *antarātman*/अन्तरात्मन्, “internal feelings,” 43.

<sup>70</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pravyath*/प्रव्यथ, “to tremble,” 694.

<sup>71</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vid*/विद्, “to find,” 964.

<sup>72</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dhrati*/धृति, “firmness,” 519.

<sup>73</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sham*/शम, “tranquility,” 1053.

<sup>74</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *samagra*/समग्र, “entire, whole,” 1153.

<sup>75</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tejas*/तेजस्, “brilliance,” 454.

<sup>76</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *graha*/ग्रह, “seizing,” 372.

<sup>77</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhāsas*/भासस्, “brightness, light,” 756.

<sup>78</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tapati*/तपति, “to shine,” 436.

<sup>79</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *purv*/पूर्व, “to fill,” 638.

<sup>80</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *jagat*/जगत्, “world, universe,” 408.

<sup>81</sup> Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga*, 56; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *īshvara*/ईश्वर, “able to do, capable of . . . master, lord, prince, king, God, the Supreme Being,” 171.

personal God, so by assuming epithets built from the *īshvara* root, Krishna unmistakably identifies himself as precisely that God. In *BG* 4:6 and 9:11, Krishna claims to be the *Īshvara*—even the great *Īshvara*—over all beings. In *BG* 5:29 and 10:3, he claims to be the great *Īshvara* of the worlds, the *lōka-mah-eshvara*. The *BG* passage most illustrative of Krishna’s *Īshvara* identity, though, is found at what Zaehner calls “the climax of the *Gītā*.”<sup>82</sup> Here is the aforementioned dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, where the divine *avatāra* reveals to the soldier his raw and majestic form. More precisely, the passage narrates Krishna revealing to Arjuna his *Īshvara* form, his *rūpam-eshvaram*. Some of the scene’s key verses read as follows:

(11:3) एवमेतद्यथात्थ त्वमात्मानं परमेश्वर। द्रष्टुमिच्छामि ते रूपमेश्वरं पुरुषोत्तम। (11:4) मन्यसे यदि तच्छक्यं मया द्रष्टुमिति प्रभो। योगेश्वर ततो मे त्वं दर्शयात्मानमव्ययम्। . . . (11:8) न तु मां शक्यसे द्रष्टुमनेनैव स्वचक्षुषा। दिव्यं ददामि ते चक्षुः पश्य मे योगमेश्वरम्। (11:9) एवमुक्त्वा ततो राजन्महायोगेश्वरो हरिः। दर्शयामास पार्थाय परमं रूपमेश्वरम्।<sup>83</sup>

(11:3) Thus, you have described yourself in this way, oh supreme *Īshvara*. I desire to see your *Īshvara* form, oh ultimate *purūsha*. (11:4) If you think [it is] possible for me to see it thus, oh Lord, oh *Īshvara* of yoga, then show me your imperishable self. . . . (11:8) But you aren’t able to see me with merely your own eye. I am giving you a divine eye. Behold, my *Īshvara* constitution. (11:9) Then, having spoken thus, oh King, Hari, the great *Īshvara* of yoga, showed Pārthāya [his] supreme *Īshvara* form.

Before the climactic revelation takes place, Arjuna refers to his charioteer as *Īshvara*. Much of the tenth chapter had featured Krishna lauding himself as supremely divine, and here in *BG* 11:3, Arjuna responds, “Thus,<sup>84</sup> you<sup>85</sup> have described<sup>86</sup> yourself<sup>87</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 305.

<sup>83</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 220–22. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Dvaipayana as they appear in Feuerstein’s work. The English translation below Dvaipayana’s text is my own.

<sup>84</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *evam/एवम्*, “thus,” 232.

<sup>85</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tva/त्वं*, “you,” 463.

<sup>86</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ah/अह्*, “to say, signify,” 124.

<sup>87</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman/आत्मन्*, “individual soul, self,”

in this way,<sup>88</sup> oh supreme<sup>89</sup> Īshvara.” Arjuna already identifies Krishna as the supreme, personal God—as the *param-eshvara* (परमेश्वर)—but the soldier also submits a request: “I desire<sup>90</sup> to see<sup>91</sup> your<sup>92</sup> Īshvara form.” Acknowledging that this *avatāra* is none other than Īshvara, Arjuna wants to behold him as such. He asks to see Krishna’s *rūpam-eshvaram* (रूपमेश्वरं),<sup>93</sup> literally, his Īshvara form. Arjuna’s extra vocative here, “oh ultimate<sup>94</sup> *purūsha*,” reinforces the understanding of Īshvara as a special *purūsha*. Unlike *PYS*, though, *BG* chapter 11 teaches that, as Īshvara, Krishna is also much more.

In verse 4, Arjuna continues his inquiry, saying, “If<sup>95</sup> you think<sup>96</sup> [it is] possible<sup>97</sup> for me to see<sup>98</sup> it thus, oh Lord, oh Īshvara of yoga, then show<sup>99</sup> me your imperishable self.” Here, Arjuna refers to Krishna’s Īshvara form alternatively as his imperishable self, or his *ātman-avyaya* (आत्मनव्यय).<sup>100</sup> Being the supreme God, Krishna is imperishable (*avyaya/अव्यय*), and the concept of his self (*ātman/आत्मन्*) features

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<sup>88</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *etad/एतद्*, “this,” 231; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yathā/यथा*, “way,” 841.

<sup>89</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *param/परम्*, “supreme,” 586. This prefix is attached to *īshvara/ईश्वर* here to make the term *parameshvara/परमेश्वर*. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *parameshvara/परमेश्वर*, “the supreme God,” 588.

<sup>90</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ish/इषु*, “to desire,” 169.

<sup>91</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *drash/दृशु*, “to see,” 491.

<sup>92</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tva/त्वं*, “you,” 463.

<sup>93</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *rūp/रूप*, “form,” 885. This prefix is attached to *īshvara/ईश्वर* here to make the term *rūpam-eshvaram/रूपमेश्वरं*, meaning “Īshvara form.”

<sup>94</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *antam/अन्तम्*, “limit, as far as,” 42. This suffix is attached to *purūsha/पुरुष* here to make *purūshōttama/पुरुषोत्तम*. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *purūshōttama/पुरुषोत्तम*, “highest being,” 637.

<sup>95</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yadi/यदि*, “if,” 844.

<sup>96</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *man/मन्*, “to think,” 777.

<sup>97</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shakya/शक्य*, “able, possible,” 1045.

<sup>98</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *drash/दृशु*, “to see,” 491.

<sup>99</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *drash/दृशु*, “to see,” 491.

<sup>100</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avyaya/अव्यय*, “imperishable,” 111; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman/आत्मन्*, “individual soul, self,” 135.

prominently in other descriptions of his divine nature. More importantly, Arjuna refers to Krishna here as the Īshvara of yoga, the *yōg-eshvara* (योगेश्वर).<sup>101</sup> Feuerstein renders this instance of *yōg-eshvara* as “Lord of Yoga,”<sup>102</sup> understanding this particular use of *īshvara* (ईश्वर) in its mundane sense. Such a translation, however, does not convey the fulness of the verse’s teaching. The whole passage emphasizes Krishna’s identity as Īshvara, the supreme personal God. Furthermore, Arjuna had already called his charioteer *prabhu* (प्रभु),<sup>103</sup> using the mundane term for a lord or master. The best understanding of *BG* 11:4, then, is that Arjuna acknowledges Krishna as his lord (his *prabhu*/प्रभु) and also goes on to identify him as the supreme personal God—the Īshvara—over all yoga.

Just before granting Arjuna’s request, in *BG* 11:8, Krishna cautions the soldier, “But you aren’t able<sup>104</sup> to see<sup>105</sup> me with merely<sup>106</sup> your own eye. I am giving<sup>107</sup> you a divine eye.” In giving Arjuna a divine eye, or a *divya chakshu* (दिव्य चक्षु),<sup>108</sup> Krishna grants the soldier the ability to see what he otherwise could not. Then, our main character makes one of the most varying translated pronouncements in all of the *Gītā*: “Behold,<sup>109</sup> my Īshvara constitution.” In Sanskrit, Krishna’s phrase is, “*Pashaya me yōgam-āshvaram* (पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम्).” The object to behold is denoted by a compound word comprised of *yōga* (योग) and *īshvara* (ईश्वर), each in the accusative case. The verse’s context helps elucidate the meaning of this difficult term. The passage is purposed toward

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<sup>101</sup> The compound term *yōg-eshvar*/योगेश्वर is comprised of *yōga*/योग plus *īshvara*/ईश्वर.

<sup>102</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 221.

<sup>103</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *prabhu*/प्रभु, “a master, lord,” 684.

<sup>104</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shakya*/शक्य, “able, possible,” 1045.

<sup>105</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *drash*/दृश्, “to see,” 491.

<sup>106</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eva*/एव, “merely, indeed, very,” 232.

<sup>107</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dadāti*/ददाति, “to give,” 473.

<sup>108</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *divya*/दिव्य, “divine, heavenly,” 479; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *chakshu*/चक्षु, “the eye,” 382.

<sup>109</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pash*/पश्, “behold, look at,” 611.

identifying Krishna with Īshvara, the supreme God. So, *īshvara* (ईश्वर) is best left transliterated here. The understanding of *yōga* (योग) that makes the most sense of the verse employs a minority sense the Sanskrit word. Monier-Williams attests that the term *yōga* (योग) sometimes denotes a fixing, a putting together, or an arrangement of some kind.<sup>110</sup> In this moment, Krishna is revealing his raw, divine form. He is exhibiting his arrangement, his constitution, as Īshvara. Ultimately, Krishna’s *yōgam-eshvaram* (योगमैश्वरम्) is a functional synonym for his *rūpam-eshvaram* (रूपमैश्वरम्). In his commentary on these *BG* verses, the renown ninth-century philosopher, Ādi Shankara, emphasized that, whatever else Krishna’s *yōgam-eshvaram* is exactly, it is “that which belongs to [him] as Isvara.”<sup>111</sup> The point of the passage is clear: Krishna is about to show Arjuna his form and constitution as Īshvara.

Finally, in *BG* 11:9, the narrator reports, “Then, having spoken<sup>112</sup> thus,<sup>113</sup> oh King,<sup>114</sup> Hari, the great Īshvara of yoga, showed Pārthāya [his] supreme Īshvara form.” The first verses of the *Gītā* indicate that its storyline is narrated by a royal minister named Sanjaya to the great King Dhratarāshtra. Here in *BG* 11:9, Sanjaya refers to Krishna using one of his alternate names, Hari,<sup>115</sup> and identifies him as the great Īshvara of yoga, the *mahā-yōg-eshvara* (महायोगेश्वर).<sup>116</sup> This epithet echoes Arjuna’s designation for Krishna

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<sup>110</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yōga*/योग, “fixing, putting together, arrangement,” 856.

<sup>111</sup> Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, 7th ed.(Madras, India: Samata Books, 1963), 279. My interaction with Ādi Shankara’s commentary utilizes Sastry’s English translation.

<sup>112</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vach*/वच्, “to speak, say,” 912.

<sup>113</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *evam*/एवम्, “thus,” 232.

<sup>114</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *rājan*/राजन्, “a king, sovereign,” 874.

<sup>115</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *hari*/हरि, “Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa,” 1289.

<sup>116</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mah*/मह्, “great,” 794. This prefix is attached to the compound *yōg-eshvara*/योगेश्वर here to make *mahā-yōg-eshvara*.



back in verse 4. Then, Sanjaya uses another name for Arjuna, Pārtha,<sup>117</sup> in narrating that Krishna showed the soldier his supreme Īshvara form, his *param rūpam-āshvaram* (परमं रूपमैश्वरम्).<sup>118</sup> The following verses describe Krishna’s magnificent form in vivid detail, but the main theological point of the passage is already made. In showing Arjuna his majestic form and rawest constitution, Krishna has revealed himself to be Īshvara.

By way of review, the *Gītā* is clear that, as an *avatāra* of Vishnu, Krishna is identifiable with the preserver god himself. Furthermore, being a staunchly Vāshnavist scripture, *BG* sees Vishnu as supreme, so it makes sense that the text would tout the preserver’s manifestation here as the supreme, personal God. That is, *BG* is perfectly coherent in identifying Krishna with Īshvara in *BG* 11:3–4, 8–9. Furthermore, this is only one of several passages in the *Gītā* that identify Krishna with Īshvara. In *BG* 11:16, Krishna describes himself as *vishv-eshvara* (विश्वेश्वर), Īshvara of all.<sup>119</sup> In *BG* 15:17, he describes himself as the *avyaya īshvara* (अव्यय ईश्वर), the imperishable Īshvara.<sup>120</sup> Though his terminology is foreign to the scripture itself, Basham relays accurately that, in *BG*, Krishna shows himself to be “the godhead incarnate.”<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Alistair Shearer observes that “the whole narrative is coloured by the irresistible charm of the supreme personality of the Godhead, Lord Krishna.”<sup>122</sup> The *Gītā* leaves no room for doubt: As

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<sup>117</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pārtha*/पार्थ, “Arjuna,” 621.

<sup>118</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *param*/परम्, “supreme,” 586. This adjective stands before the compound *rūpam-āshvaram*/रूपमैश्वरम् here to make *param rūpam-āshvaram*.

<sup>119</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 224; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vishva*/विश्व, “all, every . . . all-pervading or all-containing, omnipresent (applied to Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa),” 992. This prefix is attached to *īshvara*/ईश्वर here to make *vishv-eshvara*/विश्वेश्वर, “Īshvara of all.”

<sup>120</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 276; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avyaya*/अव्यय, “imperishable,” 111. This adjective stands before *īshvara*/ईश्वर here to make “the imperishable Īshvara.”

<sup>121</sup> Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 301.

<sup>122</sup> Alistair Shearer, *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West* (London: Hurst, 2020), 43.

Īshvara, Krishna is the supreme, personal God.<sup>123</sup>

**Krishna is *brahman* according to BG 9:4–6, 17a.** Since Īshvara is essentially a name for the *saguna brahman*—for *brahman* personified—it is no surprise that Krishna also identifies himself in *BG* with *brahman* itself. Sharma and Zaehner affirm that, throughout the *Gītā*, Krishna is presented as the highest *brahman*.<sup>124</sup> Mostly, Dvaipayana accomplishes this by describing Krishna and *brahman* in the same ways. Both are depicted in *BG* as encompassing the whole universe, and both are identified with the sacred syllable *ōm*. Chapter 9 contains the richest example of a *BG* segment presenting Krishna as the universal, all-encompassing *ōm*. Zaehner explains that, in this chapter, our chariot-driving *avatāra* effectually reveals “that He is God in every sense of the word: He is the highest Brahman.”<sup>125</sup> The following key verses from chapter 9 emphasize that all beings exist in Krishna, as he is the all-encompassing *ōm*. They read as follows:

(9:4) मया ततमिदं सर्वं जगदव्यक्तमूर्तिना। मत्स्थानि सर्वभूतानि न चाहं तेष्वस्थितः। (9:5) न च मत्स्थानि भूतानि पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम्। भूतभृन्न च भूतस्थो ममात्मा भूतभावनः। (9:6) यथाकाशस्थितो नित्यं वायुः सर्वत्रगो महान्। तथा सर्वाणि भूतानि मत्स्थानीत्युपधारय। . . . (9:17a) पिता हमस्य जगतो माता धाता पितामहः। वेद्यं पवित्रमोकार।<sup>126</sup>

(9:4) This entire universe [is] spread out by me [in my] unmanifest form. All beings exist in me, but I [am] not contained in them. (9:5) But [some] beings do not exist in me. Behold, my Īshvara constitution. Sustaining beings while not existing in beings, my self [is what] manifests [the universe’s] beings. (9:6) Concentrate on this: As the great, omnipresent wind exists eternally in space, so all beings exist in me. . . . (9:17a) I [am] the father of this universe, the mother, the establisher, the grandfather, the one to be known, the purifier, [and] the *ōmkāra*.

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<sup>123</sup> In BG 11:39–40, following this climactic theophany, Arjuna says to Krishna, “Reverential salutations to You!” as he acknowledges the divinity of his charioteer. In Sanskrit, Arjuna’s exclamation is, “*namō namaste!*” (नमो नमस्ते). The popularity of this passage may have contributed to *namaste* being translated today into long, theistically-charged phrases like, “I acknowledge the divinity in you.” In this *BG* passage, Krishna’s divinity is exactly what Arjuna was acknowledging. The word *namaste* itself, however, is simply a reverential Sanskrit salutation, connoting submission and deference, but not necessarily ascriptive of any divinity to the addressee.

<sup>124</sup> Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, 53; Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 38.

<sup>125</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 273.

<sup>126</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 190–94. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Dvaipayana as they appear in Feuerstein’s work. The English translation below Dvaipayana’s text is mine.

Krishna begins by explaining in *BG* 9:4a, “This entire<sup>127</sup> universe<sup>128</sup> [is] spread out by me<sup>129</sup> [in my] unmanifest form.<sup>130</sup>” When he says the universe is spread out (*tatam/ततम्*) by him, what Krishna seems to mean in this context is that the world somehow exists in him, as the following verses explicate. Monier-Williams affirms that other glosses for *tatam*’s root verb include “to manifest” and “to compose.”<sup>131</sup> Krishna’s spreading out of the universe was not a one-time creation. Rather, the world is in an ongoing state of existence in or composition of him. Furthermore, Krishna says that the universe is spread out by him in his unmanifest, or *avyakta* (अव्यक्त)<sup>132</sup> form. The lexicon relays that *avyakta*’s noun form can refer to the “productive principle whence all the phenomena of the material world are developed.”<sup>133</sup> Essentially, *BG* 9:4a teaches that the whole universe exists in or is constituent of Krishna’s most basic form.

In *BG* 9:4b–5a, Krishna says paradoxically, “All<sup>134</sup> beings exist in me, but<sup>135</sup> I [am] not contained in them. But [some] beings do not exist in me.” Important to note here is that the term *bhūta* (भूत) refers to individual living beings while also to the existent universe as a whole.<sup>136</sup> Confusingly, Krishna states first that all *bhūtas*—that is, the

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<sup>127</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarvam/सर्वम्*, “whole, entire,” 1184.

<sup>128</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *jagat/जगत्*, “world, universe,” 408.

<sup>129</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *aham/अहम्*, “I,” 124.

<sup>130</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mūrti/मूर्ति*, “form, idol, statue,” 824. This noun is functioning here as a synonym for *rūp/रूप*.

<sup>131</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tan/तन्*, “to spread, manifest, compose,” 435.

<sup>132</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avyakta/अव्यक्त*, “not manifest,” 111.

<sup>133</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avyakta/अव्यक्त*, “not manifest,” 111.

<sup>134</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarva/सर्व*, “all, every,” 1184.

<sup>135</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *cha/च*, “and, but,” 380.

<sup>136</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhūta/भूत*, “any living being, reality, that which is or exists, the world,” 761.

whole universe—exist<sup>137</sup> in him, and next that some *bhūtas* do not exist<sup>138</sup> in him. Winthrop Sargeant acknowledges this as an “apparent paradox” in Krishna’s teaching.<sup>139</sup> Even Ādi Shankara admitted in his commentary that these verses present a “Divine Mystery.”<sup>140</sup> Other commentators’ suggestions, such as Mohini Chatterji’s that the universe’s existence in Krishna was an illusion all along,<sup>141</sup> or Roy Davis’s that people’s souls exist in Krishna while their bodies and minds do not,<sup>142</sup> find no basis in the text itself. Given Krishna’s emphatic claim throughout this passage that all beings do exist in him, that they are all sustained and manifested by him, my understanding of Krishna’s latter statement here is that some beings do not yet realize they exist in him. The point in these verses is that Krishna is not contained<sup>143</sup> within the world or its beings, rather, the manifest universe, including all its beings, exists (*stha/स्थ*) in him.

In the latter half of verse 5, Krishna goes on to say, “Behold,<sup>144</sup> my Īshvara constitution.<sup>145</sup>” This is exactly the phrase he will repeat verbatim in *BG* 11:8. While most of this passage is aimed at portraying Krishna as the all-encompassing *brahman*, Dvaipayana does not miss the chance to emphasize the *avatāra*’s Īshvara identity here as

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<sup>137</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *stha/स्थ*, “existing or being in,” 1262.

<sup>138</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *stha/स्थ*, “existing or being in,” 1262.

<sup>139</sup> Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 381.

<sup>140</sup> Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, 242.

<sup>141</sup> Mohini Mohun Chatterji, *The Bhagavad Gītā or the Lord’s Lay* (Boston: Ticknor, 1887), 147, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/bhagavadgtor00bostuoft/page/n3/mode/2up>.

<sup>142</sup> Roy Eugene Davis, *The Eternal Way: The Inner Meaning of the Bhagavad Gita* (Lakemont, GA: CSA, 2009), 155.

<sup>143</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *avasthit/अवस्थित*, “contained in,” 106. This term is built from the root, *stha/स्थ*, “existing or being in.” Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *stha/स्थ*, “existing or being in,” 1262.

<sup>144</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pash/पश्*, “behold, look at,” 611.

<sup>145</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yōga/योग*, “fixing, putting together, arrangement,” 856. This minority sense of *yōga/योग* is combined with *īshvara/ईश्वर* here to make *yōgam-āshvaram/योगमेश्वरम्*.

well. Krishna goes on to say in *BG 9:5b*, “Sustaining beings<sup>146</sup> while<sup>147</sup> not existing<sup>148</sup> in beings, my self [is what] manifests [the universe’s] beings.” Here we have a few key verbs. Krishna says that his very self (his *ātman*/आत्मन्)<sup>149</sup> sustains (*bhra*/भृ)<sup>150</sup> and manifests (*bhāvana*/भावन)<sup>151</sup> the world and its beings. Combined with the earlier notion that the whole universe exists (*stha*/स्थ) in Krishna, the overall idea here is obvious: The universe and its beings are constituent of Krishna’s very self, of his *ātman*. That is, as the supreme God, Krishna is universally all-encompassing.

In *BG 9:6*, Krishna offers a metaphor for understanding this all-encompassing nature of his. He advises Arjuna, “Concentrate<sup>152</sup> on this:<sup>153</sup> As<sup>154</sup> the great,<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhūta*/भूत, “any living being, reality, that which is or exists, the world,” 761.

<sup>147</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *cha*/च, “and, but,” 380.

<sup>148</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *stha*/स्थ, “existing or being in,” 1262.

<sup>149</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman*/आत्मन्, “individual soul, self,” 135.

<sup>150</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhra*/भृ, “to support, maintain,” 764.

<sup>151</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhāvana*/भावन, “causing to be, manifesting,” 755.

<sup>152</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dhā*/धा, “to put, set, establish,” or more specifically, “to direct or fix the mind or attention upon,” 513.

<sup>153</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *iti*/इति, “in this manner, thus,” 165.

<sup>154</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yathā*/यथा, “in which way, as,” 841.

<sup>155</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mah*/मह, “great,” 794.

omnipresent<sup>156</sup> wind<sup>157</sup> exists<sup>158</sup> eternally<sup>159</sup> in space,<sup>160</sup> so<sup>161</sup> all<sup>162</sup> beings<sup>163</sup> exist<sup>164</sup> in me.” Ultimately, these verses in the early part of chapter 9 emphasize that the whole universe and its beings are constituent of Krishna. Using another epithet for himself, Krishna had proclaimed back in *BG* 7:19 that “Vāsudeva [is] all,”<sup>165</sup> and in *BG* 10:8 he will reiterate, “I [am] the origin of all. All [things] proceed from me.”<sup>166</sup> Expressing his point in all these various ways, Vyāsa Dvaipayana could not be more clear in his assertion that Krishna is the supreme, all-encompassing God.<sup>167</sup>

Now, by claiming to be all-encompassing in these ways, Krishna is asserting here in the *Gītā* that he is *brahman*. Squarely within the bounds of classical Hinduism, *BG* envisions *brahman* as the ultimate reality, as the ground of the universe, and as that which encompasses the world and its beings. Most explicitly, *BG* 13:12–13, 15–16, and 27–28 describe *brahman* as encompassing the entire universe. Zaehner observes that, in

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1189. <sup>156</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarvatra*/सर्वत्र, “everywhere, always,”

<sup>157</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vāyu*/वायु, “wind, air,” 942.

<sup>158</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *stha*/स्थ, “existing or being in,” 1262.

<sup>159</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *nitya*/नित्य, “perpetual, eternal,” 547.

<sup>160</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ākāsha*/आकाश, “space, sky,” 127.

<sup>161</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tathā*/तथा, “in that manner, so,” 433.

<sup>162</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarva*/सर्व, “all, every,” 1184.

<sup>163</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhūta*/भूत, “any living being, reality, that which is or exists, the world,” 761.

<sup>164</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *stha*/स्थ, “existing or being in,” 1262.

<sup>165</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 174. This is my rendering of Dvaipayana’s Sanskrit words as they appear in Feuerstein’s text.

<sup>166</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 204. This is my rendering of Dvaipayana’s Sanskrit words as they appear in Feuerstein’s text.

<sup>167</sup> *BG*’s view of Krishna as the all-encompassing God could be labelled using the etic term, pantheism (etymologically, “all in God”). Within Hindu theism, *vishishtādvāta* (literally, “qualified nondualism”), codified by the eleventh-century philosopher, Rāmānuja, envisions a supreme, personal God who is encompassing of the whole universe. Zaehner attest that Rāmānuja’s *vishishtādvāta* aligns closely with *BG* theology. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.

verses like these, “Brahman receives attributes which elsewhere in the Gītā fall to Krishna,” concluding that “the ‘highest Brahman’ seems to be identical with Krishna Himself.”<sup>168</sup> An axiom of classical Hinduism is that *brahman* is all, and especially here in *BG* chapter 9, Krishna is described in precisely this way. Just as surely as Krishna is identifiable with Vishnu and Īshvara, he is also identifiable with *brahman*.

Perhaps even more revealing of Krishna’s *brahman* identity, though, is the *avatāra*’s claim in *BG* 9:17a to be the *ōmkāra*. The verse reads, “I [am] the father<sup>169</sup> of this universe,<sup>170</sup> the mother,<sup>171</sup> the establisher,<sup>172</sup> the grandfather,<sup>173</sup> the one to be known,<sup>174</sup> the purifier,<sup>175</sup> [and] the *ōmkāra*.” In claiming to be the *ōmkāra*, Krishna is identifying himself as the very pronunciation of the sacred syllable *ōm*. Etymologically, *ōmkāra* (ओंकार, consisting of *ōm*/ओम्, plus *kra*/कृ<sup>176</sup>) just means “the doing of *ōm*.”<sup>177</sup> In *BG* 7:8, Krishna had claimed to be the *pranava*, another term for the sacred syllable itself.<sup>178</sup> In *BG* 10:25, he will assert this again by saying he is the *ekam-aksharam* (एकमक्षरम्), the one syllable.<sup>179</sup> Using various expressions at these key points in the *Gītā*,

<sup>168</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 37.

<sup>169</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pitra*/पितृ, “father,” 626.

<sup>170</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *jagat*/जगत्, “world, universe,” 408.

<sup>171</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mātra*/मातृ, “mother,” 807.

<sup>172</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dhā*/धा, “to put, set, establish,” 513.

<sup>173</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pitāmaha*/पितामह, “grandfather,” 627.

<sup>174</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vedya*/वेद्य, “to be known,” 1017.

<sup>175</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pavitra*/पवित्र, “a means of purification,” 611.

<sup>176</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *kra*/कृ, “to do, perform,” 300.

<sup>177</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ōmkāra*/ओंकार, “the sacred and mystical syllable ओम्, the exclamation ओम्, pronouncing the syllable ओम्,” 236.

<sup>178</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 172; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pranava*/प्रणव, “the mystical or sacred syllable ओम्,” 660.

<sup>179</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 210; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eka*/एक, “one, solitary, single,” 227; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *akshara*/अक्षर,

Krishna identifies himself as the pronouncement of *ōm* and as the *ōm* itself.

This is important to *BG* theology because, in the *Gītā* and across classical Hinduism, the *ōm* is identifiable with *brahman*. Commenting on Krishna’s claim to be the one syllable (the *ekam-aksharam/एकमक्षरम्*) in *BG* 10:25, Zaehner affirms that this syllable, the *ōm*, is none other than *brahman*.<sup>180</sup> In explaining a later *BG* verse dealing with *ōm* and *brahman*, *BG* 17:23, Zaehner concludes, “Om, then, is the representation in sound of the total Brahman.”<sup>181</sup> Most explicitly, in *BG* 8:13, Krishna instructs Arjuna to “pronounce the *ōm*, the one syllable, *brahman*” in order to come into the supreme mode of existence.<sup>182</sup> Clearly, *BG* equates the *ōm* with *brahman*. The *Katha Upanishad (KU)* is a *shruti* scripture of classical Hinduism. *KU* 1:2:15–16 reads, “What word all the Vedas rehearse<sub>[,]</sub> . . . I say to thee compendiously: [T]hat is *om*,” before going on to explain, “That syllable is indeed *brahman*<sub>[,]</sub> . . . the supreme syllable.”<sup>183</sup> The *ōm* is the aural expression of generic, supreme divinity, and as such, it is identifiable with *brahman*. Krishna’s claim to be the *ōmkāra* in *BG* 9:17 is an unmistakable claim to be *brahman*.

Here in *BG* 9:4–6, 17a, Dvaipayana identifies Krishna with *brahman* by describing them both in the same ways. Both are depicted in *BG* as encompassing of the whole universe, and both are identified with the sacred syllable *ōm*. As if this were not enough to prove the *Gītā*’s understanding of Krishna as *brahman*, *BG* 10:12 features Arjuna proclaiming directly to the divine *avatāra*, “You [are] the supreme *brahman* . . . the all-pervading one.”<sup>184</sup> Overall, the *Gītā* teaches that Krishna encompasses the whole

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“syllable,” 3.

<sup>180</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 298.

<sup>181</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 381.

<sup>182</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 184. This is my rendering of Dvaipayana’s Sanskrit words as they appear in Feuerstein’s text.

<sup>183</sup> W. D. Whitney, “Translation of the Katha-Upanishad,” in *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 21 (Boston: Ginn, 1890), 100–101.

<sup>184</sup> This is my translation of Dvaipayana’s Sanskrit words as they appear in Feuerstein’s text.



universe and is identifiable with the sacred syllable *ōm*. By describing Krishna in these ways, the yogic scripture unmistakably asserts that, as surely as he is Vishnu and Īshvara, Krishna is also identifiable as *brahman*.<sup>185</sup>

**Conclusion.** The central character of the *Mahābhārata* and of its *BG* segment is Krishna. The *Gītā* reveres Krishna as Vishnu, as Īshvara, and as the all-encompassing yet lucidly personal *brahman*. As part of his pre-battle counsel to Arjuna, Krishna identifies himself as the preserver god, Vishnu. Additionally, at the climax of the narrative, the divine *avatāra* reveals to Arjuna his majestic Īshvara form. That is, he shows himself to be the supreme, personal God of Hindu theism. No less definitively, *BG* teaches that this Krishna figure is none other than *brahman*. He is the all-encompassing *ōm*, essentially identifiable with the universe itself. Davis concludes that throughout *BG*, Krishna “lays claim to all the terms that philosophers in classical India had employed to point the Absolute.”<sup>186</sup> Ultimately, *BG* is a work of Hindu theism, presenting Krishna as the supreme God who is all-encompassing yet undeniably personal. The theology of *BG* puts forth Krishna as the supreme, personal God with whom yoga practitioners should seek to unite, ideally through the path of devotion.

### **The Soteriology of *BG***

According to the *Gītā*, union with the supreme God, namely Krishna, should be each yoga practitioner’s final soteriological goal. *BG*’s teachings on how to be saved, then, are necessarily teachings on yoga, since union (*yōga/योग*) with God is what it means

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Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 204.

<sup>185</sup> If Krishna is the father of the universe, as claimed in *BG* 9:17a, and if the universe is that which constitutes *brahman*, then there is a sense in which Krishna is not only identifiable with *brahman* but actually superior to it. Other parts of *BG*, too, seem to present Krishna as somehow beyond *brahman*. In *BG* 11:37, Arjuna lauds Krishna as better than *brahman*. In chapter 14, Krishna says he is the inseminator of *brahman*’s womb and the foundation on which *brahman* rests. Zaehner acknowledges Krishna’s apparent supra-*brahman* identity in certain parts of the *Gītā*. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.

<sup>186</sup> Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 24.

to be saved in the first place. Zaehner writes that, according to *BG*, “Man’s ultimate end is to be united to God.”<sup>187</sup> Commenting on a particular verse of the *Gītā*, Shearer glosses the term yoga itself as “union with the Divine.”<sup>188</sup> Inarguably, *BG* soteriology is aimed at union, or *yōga* (योग),<sup>189</sup> with its supreme God, who is Krishna. Furthermore, the union envisioned here in the *Gītā* is not merely an intimate relationship between Krishna and his devotees. Rather, the scripture describes this union as an existence in Krishna and as an entrance into his being. Mallinson and Singleton write that, in theistic yoga systems like that of *BG*, the union being aimed at is one wherein “aspirant and deity are one,”<sup>190</sup> and Michael asserts that what the *Gītā* really presents is a means of “ascent into the Divine.”<sup>191</sup> In other words, this union—this yoga—is a real, ontological oneness of being between Krishna and his devotees.

The *Gītā*’s soteriological goal of union (*yōga*/योग) with God is completely different from *PYS*’s aim at the isolation (*kāvālyā*/कैवल्य) of one’s *purūsha* from the world of *prakṛiti*. Indeed, one envisions a merger, and the other a separation. White relays that *BG* defines yoga “not as the ‘stoppage of the turnings of thought,’” as *PYS* primarily does, “but rather as union with God.”<sup>192</sup> Zaehner also highlights the stark difference between *PYS*’s Sāṅkhya-based soteriology aimed at isolating one’s *purūsha* from *prakṛiti* and *BG*’s union-oriented salvation system geared toward realizing the unity of oneself with God.<sup>193</sup> Whereas *PYS* soteriology called upon yoga practitioners to isolate

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<sup>187</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 40.

<sup>188</sup> Shearer, *The Story of Yoga*, 45.

<sup>189</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yōga*/योग, “any junction, union, combination,” 856. This noun is built from the verb root *yuj*. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yuj*/युज्, “to yoke, join, unite,” 853.

<sup>190</sup> Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 395.

<sup>191</sup> Michael, “Jñāna Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita,” 197.

<sup>192</sup> White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 45.

<sup>193</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 31, 141.

their real selves from everything else, the *Gītā*'s soteriological goal is an ontological union between practitioners and the object of their devotion: Krishna, the supreme God. Assertions that yoga is purposed toward union with God, then, while not accurately representative of yoga as a whole, do find substantiation in the *Gītā*.<sup>194</sup>

The path of devotion, or *bhakti* (भक्ति),<sup>195</sup> is the ideal means prescribed in the *Gītā* for effecting the soteriological goal of union (*yōga*/योग) with Krishna. The *Gītā*'s soteriological teachings are yogic teachings, and *bhakti* is the scripture's ideal means of attaining that salvation which is union with God. Zaehner explains that it is through *bhakti* that *BG* teaches yoga practitioners can abide and participate in God.<sup>196</sup> Throughout *BG*, Dvaipayana portrays true *bhakti* as knowing, worshipping, and taking refuge in Krishna. *BG* soteriology presents *bhakti*, devotion, as the ideal path for attaining union with God, and the three passages examined below show that this path entails knowing, worshipping, and taking refuge in Krishna for salvation.

***Bhakti as knowing Krishna in BG 7:17–19, 23c.*** Much of *BG* chapter 7 is about knowing Krishna. In verse 16, the chariot-driving *avatāra* explains to Aruna that there are four kinds of benevolent people: the afflicted, the desirers of knowledge, the desirers of wealth, and the knowledgeable.<sup>197</sup> In the verses that follow, Krishna reveals

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<sup>194</sup> Albert Mohler was affirmed by Shearer when he suggested this during a 2020 interview. R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Battle Over Yoga: History, Theology, and Popular Culture in a Conversation with Historian Alistair Shearer," Albert Mohler, May 20, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/05/20/alistair-shearer>. Elliot Miller repeatedly asserts the same in his three-part article series from 2008. Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1," 2; Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2: Yoga in Its Contemporary Western Context," *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (2008): 1; Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response," *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 4 (2008): 1.

<sup>195</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhakti*/भक्ति, "attachment, devotion (as a religious principle or means of salvation, together with कर्मन्, 'works', and ज्ञान, 'spiritual knowledge')," 743.

<sup>196</sup> Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 285.

<sup>197</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 174. These are my rendering of Dvaipayana's Sanskrit words as they appear in Feuerstein's text.

that the knowledgeable ones, the *gyānī* (ज्ञानी),<sup>198</sup> are those who know him for who he truly is. Most pertinent to our examination of *BG* soteriology is Krishna’s teaching here in chapter 7 that only those who practice exclusive devotion (*bhakti*/भक्ति) to him truly know him and thereby attain union with him. Here is an example of the overlap that sometimes occurs between the *Gītā*’s three *mārgas* to union. Devotion (*bhakti*/भक्ति) entails knowledge (*gyāna*/ज्ञाना), and vice-versa. *BG* 7:17–19, 23c read as follows:

- (7:17) तेषां ज्ञानी नित्ययुक्त एकभक्तिर्विशिष्यते। प्रियो हि ज्ञानिनोऽत्यर्थमहं स च मम प्रियः।  
 (7:18) उदाराः सर्व एवैते ज्ञानी त्वात्मैव मे मतम्। आस्थितः स हि युक्तात्मा मामेवानुत्तमां गतिम्।  
 (7:19) बहूनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान्मां प्रपद्यते। वासुदेवः सर्वमिति स महात्मा सुदुर्लभः। . . .  
 (7:23c) मदभक्ता यान्ति मामपि।<sup>199</sup>

- (7:17) Of them, the knowledgeable one, eternally united [and] singly devoted, stands out. I [am] exceedingly dear to the knowledgeable one, and he [is] dear to me.  
 (7:18) All of these [are] indeed noble, but the knowledgeable one [is] understood as my very self. United to [my] self, he exists in me, the very best mode of existence.  
 (7:19) At the end of many births, the knowledgeable one enters me. [Knowing] that Vāsudeva is all, this great a self [is] hard to find. . . . (7:23c) My devotees surely come to me.

In *BG* 7:17, Krishna explains to Arjuna that, of the four aforementioned types of benevolent people, “the knowledgeable one, eternally united [and] singly devoted, stands out.” Right away, Arjuna is told that the one who is truly knowledgeable, the *gyānī* (ज्ञानी), is the one who is singly devoted (*eka-bhakti*/एकभक्ति)<sup>200</sup> to him. As Krishna goes on to talk about how special these knowledgeable ones are in the following verses, he has already established that these *gyānī* are his exclusive devotees. Furthermore, Krishna gives the soldier a clue that such knowledgeable, exclusive devotees are the ones who

<sup>198</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *gyā/ज्ञा*, “to know, to have knowledge,” 425.

<sup>199</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 174–76. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Dvaipayana as they appear in Feuerstein’s work. The English translation below Dvaipayana’s text is mine.

<sup>200</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eka/एक*, “one, solitary, single,” 227. This prefix is attached to *bhakti*/भक्ति here to make *eka-bhakti*/एकभक्ति.

end up eternally<sup>201</sup> united (*yukta/युक्त*)<sup>202</sup> to him. Effectually, then, Krishna has already made clear why these knowledgeable devotees stand out<sup>203</sup> among the other three types of people. They are singly devoted to him and will therefore end up in union with him forever. It is no surprise, then, that Krishna closes verse 17 by saying, “I [am] exceedingly<sup>204</sup> dear<sup>205</sup> to the knowledgeable one, and he [is] dear to me.”

In *BG 7:18*, Krishna continues, “All<sup>206</sup> of these [are] indeed<sup>207</sup> noble, but the knowledgeable one [is] understood as my very<sup>208</sup> self.” While all four types of benevolent people are acknowledged by Krishna here as being noble,<sup>209</sup> only the *gyānī*, he says, are to be understood<sup>210</sup> as identifiable with his *ātman* (आत्मन्), with his self.<sup>211</sup> Using alternate name for Krishna, Ādi Shankara emphasizes in his commentary that such a devotee is “firm in the faith that he himself is the Lord Vasudeva.”<sup>212</sup> Krishna goes on to describe the state of such a knowledgeable yoga practitioner who is one with his own *ātman*. “United (*yukta/युक्त*) to [my] self (*ātman/आत्मन्*),” the supreme God explains, “he

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<sup>201</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *nitya/नित्य*, “perpetual, eternal,” 547.

<sup>202</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yukta/युक्त*, “yoked, joined, united,” 853. This participle is built from the same verb root from which we get the noun *yōga*, namely *yuj*. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yuj/युज्*, “to yoke, join, unite,” 853.

<sup>203</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vishish/विशिष*, “to distinguish, excel, be best among,” 990.

<sup>204</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *atyartham/अत्यर्थम्*, “exceedingly,” 17.

<sup>205</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *priya/प्रिय*, “beloved, dear,” 710.

<sup>206</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarva/सर्व*, “all, every,” 1184.

<sup>207</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eva/एव*, “merely, indeed, very,” 232.

<sup>208</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eva/एव*, “merely, indeed, very” 232.

<sup>209</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *udāra/उदार*, “exalted, noble,” 185.

<sup>210</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mata/मत*, “thought, understood,” 783.

<sup>211</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman/आत्मन्*, “individual soul, self,” 135.

<sup>212</sup> Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, 215.

exists in me, the very best<sup>213</sup> mode of existence.<sup>214</sup>” Krishna teaches that, technically not unlike all beings, this knowledgeable devotee exists (*stha/स्थ*)<sup>215</sup> in him. The passage’s soteriological teaching is becoming clear: Knowledgeable, exclusive devotees of Krishna will be united to him, and indeed, will exist in him.

In *BG 7:19*, Krishna teaches Arjuna, “At the end<sup>216</sup> of many<sup>217</sup> births,<sup>218</sup> the knowledgeable one enters me. [Knowing] that Vāsudeva is all, this great<sup>219</sup> a self<sup>220</sup> [is] hard to find.” A departure into the Hindu concept of reincarnation, or *sansāra* (संसार),<sup>221</sup> lies outside the scope of this work. What should not be missed here is that a devotee’s entrance into Krishna is something that may take several lifetimes to attain. In this verse, Krishna says that, eventually, the *gyānī* enters (*prapad/प्रपद*) into him. This is not merely a spatial entering into Krishna, rather, *prapad* implies becoming the entered object and assuming its form.<sup>222</sup> Functionally similar to the ideas of existing (*stha/स्थ*) in Krishna and being united (*yukta/युक्त*) to his *ātman*, this is another way of saying knowledgeable devotees achieve union with God. Krishna then reveals to Arjuna what it is that the

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<sup>213</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anuttama/अनुत्तम*, “the best,” 33.

<sup>214</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *gati/गति*, “state, condition, mode of existence,” 347.

<sup>215</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *stha/स्थ*, “existing or being in,” 1262.

<sup>216</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *anta/अन्त*, “end,” 42.

<sup>217</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bahu/बहु*, “many, numerous,” 724.

<sup>218</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *janman/जन्मन्*, “birth, life,” 411.

<sup>219</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mah/मह*, “great,” 794.

<sup>220</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman/आत्मन्*, “individual soul, self,” 135.

<sup>221</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sansāra/संसार*, “passing through a succession of states, circuit of mundane existence, transmigration,” 1119.

<sup>222</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *prapad/प्रपद*, “to attain, enter, become, assume a form,” 682.

knowledgeable ones know: Vāsudeva<sup>223</sup> [Krishna] is all.<sup>224</sup> That is, being a *gyānī* means understanding that Krishna is the supreme, all-encompassing God. Devotees who truly grasp this, Krishna says, are hard to find.<sup>225</sup>

In *BG* 7:23c, Krishna concludes, “My<sup>226</sup> devotees surely come to me.” This time, the verb Krishna uses to describe what happens to his devotees is *yānti*, from the root *yā* (या), meaning “to come.” Practitioners who are exclusively devoted to Krishna, who have gained knowledge of his all-encompassing nature, eventually come to him. Similar to *prapad* (प्रपद), this verb root, *yā* (या), implies that its subject somehow becomes its object.<sup>227</sup> In other words, as Krishna’s devotees come to him, they—in a sense—become him. This verse makes even more sense of Ādi Shankara’s earlier comment that the knowledgeable devotee understands that he himself is Vāsudeva.<sup>228</sup> The soteriological picture Dvaipayana is painting here in *BG* chapter 7 is now clear: Yoga practitioners who know Krishna and practice exclusive devotion (*bhakti*/भक्ति) to him surely come to him (*yā*/या), they enter him (*prapad*/प्रपद), they exist in him (*stha*/स्थ), and they are ultimately united (*yukta*/युक्त) to his very *ātman*. That is, they achieve union with God.<sup>229</sup>

***Bhakti* as worshipping Krishna in *BG* 9:29–31, 34.** According to *BG*, following the path of devotion to attain union with God entails not only knowing Krishna

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<sup>223</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *Vāsudeva*/वासुदेव, “patronymic of Kṛṣṇa,” 948.

<sup>224</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarvam*/सर्वम्, “entire, all,” 1184.

<sup>225</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sudurlabha*/सुदुर्लभ, “very difficult to be attained,” 1225.

<sup>226</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mad*/मद्, “first pers. sg. pron.,” 777. This prefix is attached to *bhaktā*/भक्ता here to make *mad-bhaktā*/मद्भक्ता.

<sup>227</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yā*/या, “to come to, enter, become,” 849.

<sup>228</sup> Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, 215.

<sup>229</sup> Additionally, *BG* 11:54 reinforces the idea that only by exclusive devotion can yoga practitioners truly know Krishna and enter into him.

but also worshipping him. Certain verses in chapter 9 of the *Gītā* show that an essential part of being Krishna’s devotee, bound for union with him, is worshipping and sacrificing to this divine *avatāra* as the supreme God. Here, Krishna teaches that devotees who worship him are sure to be found in him. In fact, even those who are wicked, as long as they worship Krishna with exclusive devotion, are on the right track. Ultimately, we read in chapter 9 that devotees who worship and set their minds on Krishna end up united to his very self. The key verses are *BG* 9:29–31, 34. They read as follows:

(9:29) समोऽहं सर्वभूतेषु न मे द्वेष्योऽस्ति न प्रियः। ये भजन्ति तु मां भक्त्या मयि ते तेषु चाप्यहम्। (9:30) अपि चेत्सुदुराचारो भजते मामनन्यभाक्। साधुरेव स मन्तव्यः सम्यग्व्यवसितो हि सः। (9:31) क्षिप्रं भवति धर्मात्मा शश्वच्छान्तिं निगच्छति। कौन्तेय प्रतिजानीहि न मे भक्तः प्रणश्यति। . . . (9:34) मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु। मामेवैष्यसि युक्तैवमात्मानं मत्परायणः।<sup>230</sup>

(9:29) I [am] the same toward all beings. For me there is neither a hated one nor a dear one. But those who worship me with devotion, they [are] surely in me, and I [am surely] in them. (9:30) Surely, if a wicked person worships me with exclusive devotion, even he [will be] regarded as righteous. He [is], of course, rightly resolved. (9:31) He quickly becomes a dutiful self and goes to perpetual peace. Know this, oh Kaunteya, no devotee of mine is lost. . . . (9:34) Become me-minded, my devotee, my sacrificer. Do reverential salutations to me. Thusly united to [my] self, with me as [your] final aim, you will indeed come to me.

In *BG* 9:29, Krishna says to Arjuna, “I [am] the same toward all<sup>231</sup> beings.<sup>232</sup> For me there is neither a hated one nor a dear one.” Just two chapters earlier, the supreme God had told the soldier that those who know his true nature and practice exclusive devotion to him are especially dear (*priya*/प्रिय) to him. Now, Arjuna is told that there is no one hated<sup>233</sup> nor dear (*priya*/प्रिय)<sup>234</sup> to Krishna, since he has the same<sup>235</sup>

<sup>230</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 198–200. Here, I am citing the words of Dvaipayana as they appear in Feuerstein’s work. The English translation below Dvaipayana’s text is my own.

<sup>231</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sarva*/सर्व, “all, every,” 1184.

<sup>232</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhūta*/भूत, “any living being, reality, that which is or exists, the world,” 761.

<sup>233</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dveshya*/द्वेष्य, “to be hated,” 507.

<sup>234</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *priya*/प्रिय, “beloved, dear,” 710.

<sup>235</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sama*/सम, “same, equal,” 1152.



disposition toward everyone. This statement seems to be an attempt to reiterate what Krishna had taught in *BG* 7:18, that all beings are noble by default. Then, Krishna gives the thesis statement of this chapter 9 passage, “Those who worship me with devotion, they [are] surely<sup>236</sup> in me, and I [am surely] in them.” Ādi Shankara’s commentary emphasizes that this phenomenon of being in one another is something that happens only between Krishna and his worshipful devotees:

[J]ust as fire does not ward off cold from those who are at a distance and wards it off from those who go near it, so [Krishna] bestow[s] [his] grace on [his] devotees, [but] not on others. Those who worship [Krishna], the Lord, with devotion are in [him]. . . . In them also [he] [is], [while] not in others.<sup>237</sup>

Just as devotion (*bhakti*/भक्ति) was associated with being knowledgeable (*gyānī*/ज्ञानी) of Krishna’s true nature back in chapter 7, here in *BG* 9:29, the *bhakti* path is shown to entail the worship (*bhaj*/भज)<sup>238</sup> of Krishna as God. When a yoga practitioner worships and is devoted to Krishna, he comes to be in Krishna. By *bhaj* and *bhakti*, he attains union with God.

In *BG* 9:30, Krishna continues, “Surely,<sup>239</sup> if a wicked person worships me with exclusive devotion, even<sup>240</sup> he [will be] regarded<sup>241</sup> as righteous.” Our main character emphasizes that, on the *bhakti* path, it is not one’s deeds that determine whether he is counted righteous (*sādhu*/साधु).<sup>242</sup> For even a wicked person<sup>243</sup> can gain a

<sup>236</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *api*/अपि, “assuredly, surely,” 55.

<sup>237</sup> Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, 256.

<sup>238</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhaj*/भज, “to serve, honour, revere,” 743. Sargeant and Feuerstein render this usage of *bhaj* as “worship.” Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 405; Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 199.

<sup>239</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *api*/अपि, “assuredly, surely,” 55.

<sup>240</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eva*/एव, “indeed, very, even,” 232.

<sup>241</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mantavya*/मन्तव्य, “to be regarded,” 785.

<sup>242</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sādhu*/साधु, “good, righteous,” 1201.

<sup>243</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sudurāchāra*/सुदुराचार, “very badly behaved or wicked,” 1225.

righteous status. Instead, what matters is that one worships (*bhaj/भज*) Krishna with exclusive devotion. The word for exclusive devotion here is the compound, *ananya-bhāk* (अनन्यभाक्), comprised of *ananya* (अनन्य), meaning exclusive,<sup>244</sup> and the *bhāk* root from which we get *bhakti*. Of the one who worships Krishna and follows the *bhakti* path, the supreme God says, “He [is], of course, rightly<sup>245</sup> resolved.<sup>246</sup>” The implication here is that such an exclusive, worshipful devotee will achieve union with God.

In fact, Krishna goes on to explain the fate of this wicked yet devoted yoga practitioner. In *BG* 9:31, Krishna says, “He quickly<sup>247</sup> becomes<sup>248</sup> a dutiful self and goes<sup>249</sup> to perpetual peace.” By worshipping Krishna and practicing singular devotion to him, even the wicked person’s self, his *ātman* (आत्मन्),<sup>250</sup> comes into alignment with its duty, its *dharma* (धर्म).<sup>251</sup> The wicked self becomes a dutiful, rightly aligned self. This echoes Krishna’s earlier teaching that even a wicked person could be regarded as righteous (*sādhu/साधु*). Through worship and exclusive devotion to God, even wicked yoga practitioners become righteous and dutiful. Then, says Krishna, the devotee goes to perpetual<sup>252</sup> peace.<sup>253</sup> Against the backdrop of the *Gītā*’s overall message, this perpetual

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<sup>244</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ananya/अनन्य*, “having no other object, not attached or devoted to anyone else,” 25. This prefix is attached to the *bhāk/भाक्* root to make *ananya-bhāk/अनन्यभाक्*.

<sup>245</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *samyanch/सम्यञ्च*, “correctly, properly,” 1181.

<sup>246</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vyavasita/व्यवसित*, “decided, determined, resolved,” 1033.

<sup>247</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *kshipra/क्षिप्र*, “quickly,” 329.

<sup>248</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhū/भू*, “to become, exist,” 760.

<sup>249</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *gam/गम्*, “to go,” 346.

<sup>250</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman/आत्मन्*, “individual soul, self,” 135.

<sup>251</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dharma/धर्म*, “prescribed conduct, duty,” 510.

<sup>252</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shashvat/शश्वत्*, “perpetual,” 1060.

<sup>253</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shānti/शान्ति*, “tranquility, peace,”

peace can be understood as union with God. Addressing Arjuna with an alternate name, Krishna says, “Know<sup>254</sup> this, oh Kaunteya,<sup>255</sup> no devotee of mine is lost.” No devotee, no true *bhakta* (भक्त),<sup>256</sup> of Krishna ever perishes.<sup>257</sup> That is to say, no one who practices exclusive, worshipful devotion to Krishna ever fails to unite with him.

In *BG* 9:34, Krishna advises Arjuna, “Become<sup>258</sup> me-minded,<sup>259</sup> my<sup>260</sup> devotee, my sacrificer. Do reverential salutations to me.” Krishna calls Arjuna his devotee (*bhakta*/भक्त) and his sacrificer. Being Krishna’s sacrificer, or *yāji* (याजि),<sup>261</sup> is essentially the same as being one who worships (*bhaj*/भज्) him as the supreme God. Monier-Williams affirms that the related noun *yājīn* (याजिन्) connotes worshipping.<sup>262</sup> As a devotee and worshipper of Krishna, Arjuna is encouraged to set his mind fully on this divine *avatāra*. Additionally, Krishna instructs Arjuna to perform reverential salutations<sup>263</sup> to him, which is part of the soldier’s worshipful devotion to Krishna as the

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1064.

<sup>254</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *gyā/ज्ञा*, “to know, to have knowledge,” 425.

<sup>255</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *Kaunteya/कौन्तेय*, “matronymic of Arjuna,” 948.

<sup>256</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhakta/भक्त*, “a worshipper, votary,” 743. This designation shares a root with the abstract noun, *bhakti/भक्ति*, meaning attachment or devotion.

<sup>257</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *nashyati/नश्यति*, “to perish,” 532.

<sup>258</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *bhū/भू*, “to become, exist,” 760.

<sup>259</sup> This is the compound *manmanā/मन्मना*, comprised of the prefix *man* which is a variant of *mad*, and *manā* which is a form of the root verb *man*. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mad/मद्*, “first pers. sg. pron.,” 777; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *man/मन्*, “to set the heart or mind on,” 783.

<sup>260</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mad/मद्*, “first pers. sg. pron.,” 777. This prefix is attached to *bhakta/भक्त* here to make the vocative *mad-bhaktō/मद्भक्तो*.

<sup>261</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yāji/याजि*, “sacrificer,” 850.

<sup>262</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yājīn/याजिन्*, “worshipping, sacrificing,” 850.

<sup>263</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *namaskra/नमस्कृ*, “to utter a salutation, do homage,” 528.

supreme God. Krishna closes the passage by saying, “Thusly<sup>264</sup> united to [my] self, with me as [your] final aim,<sup>265</sup> you will indeed<sup>266</sup> come to me.” With Krishna as their final aim, devotees like Arjuna will come (yā/या)<sup>267</sup> to the supreme God and be united (yukta/युक्त)<sup>268</sup> to his very self (ātman/आत्मन्).<sup>269</sup> The soteriological message of these verses is that devotees of Krishna who genuinely worship him will eventually achieve union with him as the supreme God.

**Bhakti as taking refuge in Krishna in BG 18:55, 65–66.** Toward the end of the *Gītā*, Krishna reiterates some of the soteriological teachings he laid out in chapters 7 and 9. Here in *BG*’s closing verses, Krishna reminds Arjuna that devotion entails really knowing him and thereby entering his very nature. The divine charioteer also reiterates to the soldier that performing reverence, sacrifice, and worship are part of what it means to be his devotee and ultimately come into his divine state of being. A major soteriological concept that Krishna introduces in these final lines of the *Gītā* is that of taking refuge in him and relying on him for salvation from sin. Along with knowing and worshipping Krishna, the *bhakti* path entails taking refuge solely in him to attain union with God:

(18:55) भक्त्या मामभिजानाति यावान्यश्चास्मि तत्त्वतः। ततो मां तत्त्वतो ज्ञात्वा विशते तदनन्तरम्।  
 . . . (18:65) मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु। मामेवैष्यसि सत्यं ते प्रतिजाने प्रियोऽसि  
 मे। (18:66) सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज। अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः।<sup>270</sup>

<sup>264</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *evam/एवम्*, “thus,” 232.

<sup>265</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *parāyana/परायण*, “final end or aim,” 587.

<sup>266</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eva/एव*, “indeed, very, even,” 232.

<sup>267</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yā/या*, “to come to, enter, become,” 849.

<sup>268</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yukta/युक्त*, “yoked, joined, united,” 853. This participle is built from the root, *yuj*, which is shared by the noun *yōga*.

<sup>269</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *ātman/आत्मन्*, “individual soul, self,” 135.

<sup>270</sup> Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 314–18. Here, I am citing the Sanskrit words of Dvaipayana as they appear in Feuerstein’s work. The English translation below Dvaipayana’s text is mine.

(18:55) By devotion to me, he perceives who I really am and how great [I am]. Then, really knowing me, he immediately enters [me]. . . . (18:65) Become me-minded, my devotee, my sacrificer. Do reverential salutations to me. You will indeed come to me. I promise you truly, [for] you are dear to me. (18:66) Abandoning all duties, take refuge in me alone. I will save you from all sins. Do not grieve.

In *BG* 18:55, Krishna says, “By devotion to me, he perceives who I really am and how great [I am]. Then, really knowing me, he immediately enters [me].” Just as in chapter 7, here at the end of the *Gītā*, Krishna emphasizes that true devotion, true *bhakti*, entails perceiving (*abhiḡyā/अभिज्ञा*)<sup>271</sup> and knowing (*gyā/ज्ञा*)<sup>272</sup> him. This is not some vague familiarity with Krishna or a mere recognition of his divinity. Rather, such a devotee understands who this supreme God really<sup>273</sup> is and how great<sup>274</sup> he is. He knows that Krishna is the supreme God; Vishnu, Īshvara, and *brahman*, all in one. The devotee who really grasps all of this, Krishna says, immediately enters him. Here, the verb for “enters” is *vish* (विश), and similarly to the semantic range of *prapad* (प्रपद), this entering can imply that the subject is somehow absorbed into the very state of its object.<sup>275</sup> One may wonder whether Krishna’s devotees enter him after many births, as taught in *BG* 7:19, or immediately,<sup>276</sup> as Krishna says here. The general soteriological point, however, remains the same: The devotee who knows Krishna attains union with Krishna.

In a verbatim restatement of *BG* 9:34a, Krishna instructs Arjuna in *BG* 18:65, “Become me-minded, my devotee, my sacrificer. Do reverential salutations to me.” Then,

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<sup>271</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *abhiḡyā/अभिज्ञा*, “to recognize, perceive,” 62.

<sup>272</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *gyā/ज्ञा*, “to know, to have knowledge,” 425.

<sup>273</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tattva/तत्त्व*, “real state, truth, reality,” 432.

<sup>274</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yāvat/यावत्*, “as great,” 852.

<sup>275</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vish/विश*, “to enter, pervade, be absorbed into, get into any state or condition,” 989. This is the same root from which we get the name Vishnu—the god who “enters” the world periodically in the forms of various *avatāras*.

<sup>276</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *tadanantaram/तदनन्तरम्*, “immediately, thereupon,” 434.

the divine *avatāra* assures the soldier, “You will indeed<sup>277</sup> come to me. I promise you truly,<sup>278</sup> [for] you are dear to me.” Here on the cusp of battle, Krishna promises<sup>279</sup> Arjuna that, being his worshipful devotee, the weary warrior will surely come (*yā/या*)<sup>280</sup> to him. Arjuna can be certain that he will attain union with God because he is dear<sup>281</sup> to Krishna himself. Just as we learned in *BG* 9:29–31, 34, this verse teaches that the *bhakti* path entails worshipping and sacrificing to Krishna, and its end is union with him.

*BG* 18:66 introduces the soteriological concept of taking refuge solely in Krishna and relying on him for salvation. Here, Krishna says to Arjuna, “Abandoning all duties, take refuge in me alone. I will save you from all sins. Do not grieve.<sup>282</sup>” Whereas, in *BG* 9:31, Krishna had said that the successful *bhakti* yoga practitioner is one who brings his *ātman* into alignment with its duty (*dharma/धर्म*), now the supreme God tells Arjuna to abandon<sup>283</sup> all duties (*dharma/धर्म*)<sup>284</sup> altogether. Instead, Krishna says, his devotees should take refuge (*sharanam vraj / शरणं व्रज*)<sup>285</sup> in him alone.<sup>286</sup> Ādi Shankara comments that taking refuge in Krishna amounts to the practitioner acknowledging that

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<sup>277</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eva/एव*, “indeed, very, even,” 232.

<sup>278</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *satyam/सत्यम्*, “truly, certainly,” 1135.

<sup>279</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pratigya/प्रतिज्ञा*, “to promise,” 665.

<sup>280</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *yā/या*, “to come to, enter, become,” 849.

<sup>281</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *priya/प्रिय*, “beloved, dear,” 710.

<sup>282</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *shuch/शुच*, “to grieve, mourn,” 1081.

<sup>283</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *parityaj/परित्यज*, “to abandon,” 595.

<sup>284</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dharma/धर्म*, “prescribed conduct, duty,” 510.

<sup>285</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *sharan/शरण*, “shelter, refuge,” 1057; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vraj/व्रज*, “retire, withdraw, go to any state or condition, attain to, become,” 1041. The lexical entry for *vraj* specifies that when it is used with *sharanam/शरणम्*, as here, it means “to take refuge with.”

<sup>286</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *eka/एक*, “one, solitary, single,” 227.

there is actually nothing but Krishna and that he himself is Krishna too.<sup>287</sup> Once a devotee has realized this, Krishna will save<sup>288</sup> him from all sins.<sup>289</sup> In this context, salvation from sin is shown to be a part of what it means to attain union with Krishna. Along with knowing and worshipping Krishna, the *bhakti* path of yoga requires that devotees take refuge only in him in order to find salvation and achieve union with God.

**Conclusion.** Over the course of the *Gītā*'s storyline, Arjuna has shown himself to be a successful practitioner of *bhakti* yoga. He has seen Krishna's raw form and become knowledgeable *gyānī* (ज्ञानी) of who he really is. The divine charioteer has acknowledged Arjuna as his sacrificer, as one who worships (*bhaj/भज*) him rightly. Here at the end of their pre-battle dialogue, Arjuna is told that he needs only to take refuge (*sharanam vraj / शरणं व्रज*) in Krishna alone for salvation, and he will surely come to him and enter his divine nature. By knowing, worshipping, and taking refuge solely in Krishna, practitioners of *bhakti* yoga—Krishna's devotees—can achieve union with God. Michael concludes that the *Gītā*'s central message is that all people can attain union with God through loving devotion.<sup>290</sup> According to *BG*, Krishna—who is Vishnu, Īshvara, and *brahman* all at the same time—is the supreme, personal God, and his devotees can attain union with God by knowing, worshipping, and taking refuge exclusively in him.

### ***BG* Teachings Echoed in *HYP***

*HYP* relies on and relays much of the *Gītā*'s core teachings. With its practical focus and late dating, *HYP* is not a foundational source of yogic theology or soteriology.

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<sup>287</sup> Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, 499.

<sup>288</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *much/मुचु*, "to free, absolve," 820. This root is shared by the nouns, *mōksha/मोक्ष* and *mukti/मुक्ति*, both terms associated with salvation, liberation, and release. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mōksha/मोक्ष*, "liberation, release from worldly existence," 835; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mukti/मुक्ति*, "becoming free, release, liberation," 821.

<sup>289</sup> Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. *pāpa/पाप*, "sin, crime, guilt," 618.

<sup>290</sup> Michael, "Bhakti Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita," 271–72.

However, the medieval text does adhere to and pass on some of the main theological and soteriological concepts found in *BG*, and since the younger work is often invoked as another authoritative basis for yoga, some of the more prominent instances of *HYP* echoing *BG* should not be missed. First, *BG* and *HYP* are both works of Hindu theism, each presenting its own principal divinity as the only supreme God. Second, the two scriptures both acknowledge the possibility of a kind of union or equality with that God. Third and lastly, both *BG* and *HYP* claim to offer a means to salvation and the forgiveness of sins. *HYP* echoes *BG* in these three crucial ways.

The *Gītā* and *HYP* each present their own principal divinity as the only supreme God. For its part, *BG* is a staunchly Vāshnavist scripture, putting forth Vishnu (in the person of his *avatāra* Krishna) as the only supreme God. Indeed, *BG* 11:3–4, 8–9 equates the Vishnu-Krishna figure with none other than Īshvara, Hindu theism’s generic title for the supreme, personal God. *HYP* does the same thing with another of Hinduism’s three main gods: Shiva, the destroyer. An overtly Shāivist scripture, *HYP* opens with reverential salutations to Shiva using one of his alternate appellations, Ādinātha, and the homage is rendered again at the start of the work’s final chapter.<sup>291</sup> Furthermore, *HYP* 1:33, 3:8, 3:128, and 4:66 all laud Shiva as the teacher of various yogic techniques.<sup>292</sup> Perhaps most importantly, though, *HYP* 3:128–29 equates Shiva with Īshvara. The passage concludes regarding the destroyer god, “He alone is the master, the Lord incarnate.”<sup>293</sup> The word for Lord here is Īshvara. The Vāshnavist *Gītā* is perfectly coherent in presenting Vishnu-Krishna as the only supreme God otherwise known generically as Īshvara, and *HYP*—a Shāivist scripture—does precisely that with Shiva.

Both *BG* and *HYP* acknowledge the possibility of yoga practitioners achieving

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<sup>291</sup> Brian Dana Akers, trans., *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (New York: YogaVidya, 2002), 1, 84.

<sup>292</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 15–16, 53, 82–83, 101.

<sup>293</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 83. My quotations in this section are from Akers’s translation, and my summaries of other *HYP* verses rely on his translation as well.



a kind of union or equality with their supreme God. The *Gītā*'s soteriological ideal is union with God, and the passages examined above show that this is a real, ontological oneness of being between the practitioner and Krishna, the divine *avatāra* of Vishnu who is identifiable with Īshvara himself. In the same vein, *HYP* 4:77 teaches that the successful yoga practitioner is “equal [*sama/सम*] to Ishvara.”<sup>294</sup> Since *HYP* 3:128–29 had already established that Shiva and Īshvara are one in the same, the point is clear that practitioners of *HYP*-based yoga can achieve equality with Shiva-Īshvara. To be sure, equality with God is at best a peripheral concept within the overall message of *HYP*. Nonetheless, the alignment of the two scriptures on this point should not be overlooked. As *BG* instructs its devotees to seek union with Krishna who is Īshvara, *HYP* informs its practitioners that they can be equal to Īshvara who is Shiva. Though Ross Clifford makes no reference to *HYP* or any other yogic scripture, his assertions that “Shiva is the god of yoga” and that yoga’s goal is “union with Shiva” find substantiation in *HYP*.<sup>295</sup>

The *Gītā* and *HYP* both claim to offer a means to salvation and the forgiveness of sins. In *BG* 18:66, Krishna promises Arjuna that he will save him from his sins. The word for sins here is *pāpa/पाप*, and the verb for save comes from the root *much/मुच*, from which we get the nouns *mōksha/मोक्ष* and *mukti/मुक्ति*. Both nouns point to a kind of liberation, and as ultimate soteriological goals in themselves, are counterparts to the Christian concept of salvation. Similarly, *HYP* provides its practitioners with means for doing away with their *pāpa* and achieving liberation—*mōksha* and *mukti*. Primarily, *HYP* teaches techniques for awakening the intangible spine serpent Kundalinī to actualize certain this-worldly boons. Some of these feats, however, accomplish more. *HYP* 2:59, 3:31, and 4:105 present certain bodily postures, breathing techniques, and concentration

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<sup>294</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 103–4.

<sup>295</sup> Ross Clifford, “Yoga: What Should Be the Christian Response?,” *Christian Today*, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://christiantoday.com.au/news/yoga-what-should-be-the-christian-response.html>.

methods that are said to destroy or eliminate sins (*pāpa/पाप*).<sup>296</sup> *HYP* 1:49, 3:60, and 3:94 describe postures and physical feats that allegedly effect liberation (*mukti/मुक्ति*).<sup>297</sup> Perhaps most importantly, *HYP* 3:105–8 teaches that the rousing of Kundalinī itself brings about *mukti* and *mōksha*.<sup>298</sup> Taken together, these *HYP* passages offer a means for getting rid of sin and bringing about liberation. *HYP* echoes *BG*, then, by presenting its principal deity as the only supreme God, by insisting practitioners can be equal to God, and by offering a means to salvation and the forgiveness of sin.

### **Comparative Study of *BG* and the Bible**

Here, I compare *BG*'s theology and soteriology against relevant material from the Bible. The theology of the *Gītā* centers around Krishna. Most importantly, *BG* reveres Krishna as the only supreme God and understands him as universally all-encompassing. As far as its soteriology is concerned, the *Gītā* is purposed toward gaining a real, ontological union of being with the one who provides salvation, namely Krishna. Furthermore, *BG* insists that taking refuge in Krishna alone is how yoga practitioners can be saved from their sins and achieve that desired union. Below, these points of *BG* theology and soteriology are compared against relevant biblical teaching. As in the case of *PYS*, the *Gītā* is found to be in stark contradiction to the Bible at every turn.

### **Theological Comparisons**

*BG* reveres Krishna as the only supreme God and understands him to be identifiable with the universe itself. In this section, I will highlight two elements of *BG*'s theology and compare them against relevant passages from the Bible. First, the *Gītā* and the Bible each put forward their own God as the only supreme divinity. Second, *BG*'s

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<sup>296</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 47, 59, 110. In the first of these passages, Akers renders its usage of *pāpa/पाप* as “evils,” but the verse’s context does not call for the divergent rendering.

<sup>297</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 24, 66, 75.

<sup>298</sup> Akers, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 77–78.

view of Krishna as the all-encompassing *brahman* is different from the way the Christian Bible describes God’s omnipresence. This comparison of *BG* theology against relevant biblical material reveals stark differences between the *Gītā* and the Bible.

***BG* Vāshnavism versus biblical Yahwism.** The *Gītā* and the Bible each put forward their own God as the only supreme divinity, worthy of exclusive worship. According to *BG*, Krishna is the supreme God, indeed, the only God there really is. The Bible claims the same of Yahweh. An adamantly Vāshnavist scripture, *BG* identifies Krishna as Vishnu and reveres Vishnu as the supreme, personal God—the God otherwise known generically as Īshvara. By exclusively recognizing its Krishna-Vishnu-Īshvara figure as the only supreme God, the *Gītā*’s theology runs counter to the very core of what the Bible claims about Yahweh. Pertinent passages from these diverging texts include *BG* 10:20b–21a and *BG* 11:8b–9, along with Exodus 20:2–5a. They read as follows:

(*BG* 10:20b) I [am] the beginning, the middle, and even the end of beings. (*BG* 10:21a) Of the initial deities, I [am] Vishnu. Of the celestial lights, [I am] the radiant sun.

(*BG* 11:8b) Behold, my Īshvara constitution. (*BG* 11:9) Then, having spoken thus, oh King, Hari, the great Īshvara of yoga, showed Pārthāya [his] supreme Īshvara form.

I am [Yahweh] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery. Do not have other gods besides me. Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, [Yahweh] your God, am a jealous God (*Exod* 20:2–5a).

Here, the difference between the yogic and biblical theologies is not that the *Gītā*’s divine figure is generic while the Bible’s is jealous. Rather, the two scriptures’ disagreement lies in the fact that they each claim the same supremacy for their particular God. *BG* 10:21a features Krishna claiming that he is the divine embodiment of Vishnu the preserver, one of Hinduism’s three principal gods: “Of the initial deities, I [am] Vishnu.” Being a staunchly Vāshnavist text, *BG* understands Vishnu as the supreme God, indeed as the only God there really is. It makes sense, then, that in *BG* 11:8b–9, Krishna reveals himself to be Īshvara as well. In perfect coherence, the *Gītā* presents Krishna as

Vishnu and therefore as the supreme God otherwise known generically as Īshvara. Naturally, Krishna calls his devotees to worship him (*bhaj/भज*) in *BG* 9:29–30 and to take refuge in him alone (*eka/एक*) in *BG* 18:66. According to the *Gītā*, Krishna is the only supreme God, worthy of exclusive worship.

The Bible makes the same claim of Yahweh in Exodus 20:2–5a. In verse 2, God says, “I am [Yahweh] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” God is called Yahweh (יהוה) and identified by one of his acts in history. He is a particular God, and he goes on to command in verse 3, “Do not let there be (יהוה)<sup>299</sup> other gods (אלהים)<sup>300</sup> for you besides me.” This and the following verses do not acknowledge other gods and then prohibit Yahweh’s people from worshipping them. They demand that there not be any other supposed gods for the Israelites in the first place. As a matter of course, then, verse 5 teaches that God’s people are not to bow in worship (הקש)<sup>301</sup> or to serve (עבד)<sup>302</sup> any other supposed gods. Yahweh concludes by saying he is jealous (אבק),<sup>303</sup> an attribute Nissim Amzallag insists is central to his identity.<sup>304</sup> Just as the *Gītā* does for Krishna, the Bible presents Yahweh as the only supreme God, worthy of exclusive worship. The respective theologies of *BG* and the Bible, then, are inescapably contradictory.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), s.v. יהוה, “be in existence” (226–27), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/bdbbrowndriverbriggshbrewandenglishlexiconoldtestament>.

<sup>300</sup> *BDB*, s.v. אלהים, “pl. god” or “God” (43–44).

<sup>301</sup> *BDB*, s.v. הקש, “bow down” (1005).

<sup>302</sup> *BDB*, s.v. עבד, “serve” (712–15).

<sup>303</sup> *BDB*, s.v. אבק, “jealous” (888).

<sup>304</sup> Nissim Amzallag, “Furnace Remelting as the Expression of YHWH’s Holiness: Evidence from the Meaning of *qannā* (אבק) in the Divine Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 2 (2015): 233–52.

<sup>305</sup> Christian speakers of Hindi (a derivative of Sanskrit) commonly refer to the God of the Bible as Parameshvara, a title comprised of the name Īshvara with the prefix *param* (परम), emphasizing his supremacy. The fact that both Christians and Hindus refer to their respective Gods using a form of Īshvara further evinces that each group asserts its own divine person to be the only supreme God.

**The all-encompassing Krishna versus the omnipresent God.** The *Gītā*'s view of Krishna as the all-encompassing *brahman* is different from how the Bible describes God's omnipresence. *BG* teaches that the universe is spread out by Krishna, that all beings exist in Krishna, and that the whole world is sustained and manifested by him. In other words, Krishna is the universe, and the universe is Krishna.<sup>306</sup> The Bible, on the other hand, teaches that God is present everywhere in his creation but not identifiable with it. *BG* and the Bible differ on this core theological point, and the two scriptures' divergence is shown clearly in *BG* 9:4–6 and Psalm 139:7–10. These passages read:

(*BG* 9:4) This entire universe [is] spread out by me [in my] unmanifest form. All beings exist in me, but I [am] not contained in them. . . . (*BG* 9:5b) Sustaining beings while not existing in beings, my self [is what] manifests [the universe's] beings. (*BG* 9:6) Concentrate on this: As the great, omnipresent wind exists eternally in space, so all beings exist in me.

Where can I go to escape your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I fly on the wings of the dawn and settle down on the western horizon, even there your hand will lead me; your right hand will hold on to me (Ps 139:7–10).

These verses in *BG*'s ninth chapter teach that the universe is spread out by Krishna, that it exists in Krishna and is constantly sustained and manifested by him. When Krishna says in *BG* 9:4 that the universe is spread out (*tatam*/ततम) by him, what he means is that the world exists in him ongoingly. That is, the world is in a constant state of existence in or composition of Krishna. The charioteer goes on to say in verses 4 and 6 that all beings (*bhūta*/भूत) exist in him. Since the term *bhūta* refers to both individual living beings and the universe as a whole, Krishna's point is that the manifest universe, including all its beings, exists (*stha*/स्थ) in him. Furthermore, the divine *avatāra* claims in *BG* 9:5b that he sustains (*bhra*/भृ) and manifests (*bhāvana*/भावन) the universe and its

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<sup>306</sup> *BG*'s view of Krishna as the universally all-encompassing *brahman* is similar to pantheism, but more accurately associated with the *vishishtādvāta* (or “qualified nondualist”) school of Hindu philosophy, codified by the eleventh-century thinker, Rāmānuja. This school envisions a *brahman* that is encompassing of the whole universe but nonetheless personal. Zaehner attest that *BG* theology aligns closely with Rāmānuja's *vishishtādvāta*. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.

beings. These verses come together to teach categorically that the universe is Krishna, and Krishna is the universe. Krishna is all-encompassing. In verse 6, the charioteer is likened to an omnipresent (*sarvatra*/सर्वत्र) wind. Given all that the *Gītā* so clearly teaches about Krishna throughout, however, his all-encompassing nature cannot be understood as anything like the omnipresence of the God of the Bible.

At first glance, Psalm 139:7–10 may seem to suggest that God is omnipresent in the same way Krishna is said to be in the *Gītā*. David sings of God’s Spirit being present in heaven, in Sheol, and on the western horizon. God’s presence, his  $\text{כֹּל־אֵרֶץ}$ , is everywhere. Commenting on these verses from Psalms, Daniel Abrahams points out,

God is completely unrestricted by any spatial limitations. He is present in all places simultaneously. We call this attribute his omnipresence. The psalmist recognises this when he asks where he can run from the presence of God (Psalm 139:7-12). No matter how high or deep or far he goes, God’s presence will still be there. Because God created space and matter, he isn’t constrained by either. He is in every place, consistently.<sup>307</sup>

The doctrine of God’s omnipresence, so beautifully on display in verses like these, offers a comfort for Christians. There is nowhere we can go where God—the sovereign person of God—will not be present. Yet this does not mean every particle of the universe is constituent of God. On the contrary, David’s words in this poem are directed to a sovereign person, ontologically distinct from the world he created. On final assessment, Krishna’s all-encompassing nature as seen in the *Gītā* is essentially different from God’s omnipresence as taught in the Bible. According to *BG*, Krishna is identifiable with the universe, as the universe exists in him. In the Bible, we see a God who is comfortingly present throughout his whole world, yet sovereignly separate from it. Abrahams clarifies that “omnipresence doesn’t mean that God is in or a part of everything,” explaining, “Some people like to imagine that there is a part of the Creator

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<sup>307</sup> Daniel Abrahams, “God’s Omnipresence: A Reassuring Reality to Rejoice In,” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 29, 2022, <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/gods-omnipresence-a-reassuring-reality-to-rejoice-in/>.

in every part of creation. Others believe he's some kind of mystical force or energy, moving within all living creatures. This is not the God we meet in the Bible."<sup>308</sup>

### **Soteriological Comparisons**

The *Gītā* is purposed toward gaining a real, ontological union with Krishna, and it teaches that taking refuge in him alone is how to be saved from sin and achieve that union. In this section, I will highlight three elements of *BG*'s soteriology and compare them against relevant biblical passages. First, while the *Gītā* and the Bible both speak of union and oneness with God, they have vastly different understandings of the nature of such a union. Second, while both scriptures use language of being somehow "in" their respective Saviors, the *Gītā*'s idea of being in Krishna and the Bible's notion of being in Christ are not the same. Third, *BG* and the Bible each assert that their respective hero is the only one who can provide salvation. This comparison of *BG* soteriology against relevant biblical material reveals major differences at the heart of their core teachings.

**Union with Krishna versus oneness with God.** In the first chapter of his book, *A Meeting of the Mystic Paths*, Justin O'Brien argues that both yoga and Christian worship are about union with the divine.<sup>309</sup> His argument is severely misleading, though, because, while the *Gītā* and the Bible both speak of union and oneness with God in their own ways, the two scriptures have widely diverging understandings of what union or oneness with God is. The pertinent passages from *BG* and the Bible are as follows:

(*BG* 7:18b) [T]he knowledgeable one [is] understood as my very self. United to [my] self, he exists in me, the very best mode of existence. (*BG* 7:19) At the end of many births, the knowledgeable one enters me. [Knowing] that Vāsudeva is all, this great a self [is] hard to find.

(*BG* 9:29b) [T]hose who worship me with devotion, they [are] surely in me, and I [am]

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<sup>308</sup> Abrahams, "God's Omnipresence."

<sup>309</sup> Justin O'Brien, *A Meeting of Mystic Paths: Christianity and Yoga* (St. Paul, MN: Yes International, 1996), 3–4.

surely] in them. . . . (BG 9:34b) Thusly united to [my] self, with me as [your] final aim, you will indeed come to me.

May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one (John 17:21–22).

*BG 7:18b–19* teaches that devotees who truly know Krishna eventually achieve real, ontological union with him as the only supreme God. In verse 18, Krishna says that knowledgeable devotees end up united (*yukta/युक्त*) to his very self (*ātman/आत्मन्*), and that they exist (*stha/स्थ*) in him. Reemphasizing the same idea in a different way, verse 19 maintains that knowledgeable devotees actually enter (*prapad/प्रपद*) into Krishna, and the verse then goes on to explain what it is that these devotees know: “Vāsudeva is all.” That is, Krishna is universally all-encompassing. Devotees who truly know Krishna, who comprehend his nature as identifiable with the universe itself, end up achieving union with him as the supreme God. This union—this yoga—is not merely a close relationship between Krishna and his ardent followers. It is an ontological oneness of being between yoga practitioners and the supreme God named Krishna who encompasses the world.

*BG 9:29b* and *BG 9:34b* teach that this same oneness can be expected, not only by knowledgeable Krishna devotees, but also by those who worship him with devotion. In verse 29, Krishna declares that those who worship him (*bhaj/भज*) come to be in him. That is, when a yoga practitioner worships and is devoted to Krishna, he comes to be in Krishna. By *bhaj* and *bhakti*, he attains union with God. Verse 34b is an assurance that such worshipful devotees will indeed come (*yā/या*) to Krishna and be united (*yukta/युक्त*) to his very self (*ātman/आत्मन्*). As in the case of devotees who are knowledgeable of Krishna’s all-encompassing nature, those who worship him with devotion will achieve real, ontological union—will achieve yoga—with him as the only supreme God.

The oneness Jesus talks about in John 17:21–22 is an altogether different kind of union. Here, Jesus acknowledges that the Father is in him and he is in the Father, and he also prays that his disciples would come to be in himself and in the Father.



Commenting on this passage, Justin Taylor cautions, “Of course, if we do not recognize that these are different sorts of ‘indwellings,’ we’ll quick descend into heresy!”<sup>310</sup> The way in which Jesus wants his disciples to be in him and the Father is different from the way in which he and the Father are in each other. Notice, the “as” conjunction (*καθώς*) does not link the Father and Son’s being in each other with the disciples’ being in the Father and Son. Rather, it links the Father and Son’s being in each other with the disciples’ oneness among themselves. Jesus prays, “May they all be one, *as* you, Father, are in me and I am in you.” He does not pray, “May they be in us *as* you, Father, are in me and I am in you.”<sup>311</sup> Jesus acknowledges that he and the Father are in each other, and he also prays that the disciples would be in them both, but nothing in the passage suggests that these two indwellings were to be of the same kind.

Still crucial for understanding this John 17 passage, though, is determining what Jesus means in praying that the disciples may be in himself and in the Father. During a 2021 sermon, Albert Mohler explained what is meant by the oneness Jesus prays for here in John 17, as well as by some of the other unity language used by Paul in other places throughout the New Testament. Mohler rightly locates the main thrust of the John 17 passage on Jesus’s desire that the disciples would have rich, loving oneness among themselves. When it comes to the question of how exactly the disciples are to be in Jesus and in the Father, Mohler’s teaching is clear: Jesus is not praying for an ontological oneness of being between his disciples and the triune God, rather, for an amazing sharing in the very same love that the members of the Trinity have for each

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<sup>310</sup> Justin Taylor, “Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer,” *Desiring God*, October 2, 2007, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/jesus-high-priestly-prayer>.

<sup>311</sup> Even if the sentence break in verse 21 were relocated so as to read, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,” then the *καθώς* conjunction would still not necessitate that the indwellings are of the same kind. The idea would be that, as Jesus and the Father exist in one another in one way, the disciples should also be in Jesus and the Father, but in another way. George Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: T. & T. Clark, 1937), s.v. *καθώς*, “as,” 224, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/manualgreeklexic0000gabb/page/360/mode/2up>.

other. Mohler explained in his sermon,

It means that the unity, the Trinitarian [unity between] the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is extended to include us. “As we are united to Christ” does not mean we’re in the Godhead. It doesn’t mean we’re in the Trinity. It means that by the miracle of the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, we share in the Trinitarian unity and in the Trinitarian love of the one, true God. And if that doesn’t blow your intellectual fuses, what would? How dare we think that it might be possible that we would be partakers of the Trinitarian love of God? But that’s exactly what Jesus is declaring here and is praying for us.<sup>312</sup>

Whereas these *BG* passages idealize an ontological oneness of being between Krishna and his devotees, John 17:21–22 call for loving oneness within the family of faith and for a sharing in the trinitarian love of God. Miller is right to conclude, “The Hindu concept of oneness with God is also radically different than the Christian one, since it involves mystically realizing that one *is* God.”<sup>313</sup> He goes on to attest, “Christian spirituality, by stark contrast, seeks a oneness of will and not of being with a personal God who thinks, converses, and has relationships.”<sup>314</sup> Union with Krishna is different from oneness with the God of the Bible.

**Being in Krishna versus being in Christ.** Both the *Gītā* and the Bible employ language of being somehow “in” the divine person who provides salvation. In the *BG* passages examined in the previous section, Krishna speaks not only of practitioners being united (*yukta/युक्त*) to him, but also of his devotees entering (*prapad/प्रपद*) and existing (*stha/स्थ*) in him. Using similar language, certain New Testament passages discuss how believers come to be “in Christ” (*ἐν Χριστῷ*). This similarity in language notwithstanding, the *Gītā*’s idea of being in Krishna and the Bible’s view of what it means to be in Christ are starkly different. The pertinent passages are as follows:

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<sup>312</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “John 17:20–26” (sermon preached at Third Avenue Baptist Church, Louisville, KY, April 18, 2021).

<sup>313</sup> Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2,” 8.

<sup>314</sup> Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2,” 8.

(BG 7:18b) [T]he knowledgeable one [is] understood as my very self. United to [my] self, he exists in me, the very best mode of existence. (BG 7:19) At the end of many births, the knowledgeable one enters me. [Knowing] that Vāsudeva is all, this great a self [is] hard to find.

(BG 9:29b) [T]hose who worship me with devotion, they [are] surely in me, and I [am surely] in them. . . . (BG 9:34b) Thusly united to [my] self, with me as [your] final aim, you will indeed come to me.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:1–2).

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17–18).

As explained above, BG 7:18b–19 and BG 9:29b, 34b teach that devotees who know and worship Krishna eventually achieve real, ontological union with him as the only supreme God. In addition to claiming that yoga practitioners can have union—or yoga—with Krishna, these verses also explain that, through yoga, his devotees can hope to enter (*prapad*/प्रपद्य) and exist (*stha*/स्थ) in him. For Dvaipayana, these are all just different ways of talking about the same phenomenon, namely, gaining a real, ontological union with Krishna as God. That is what being “in” Krishna means, and it is the ultimate soteriological goal of the entire *Gītā*.

In a seemingly similar manner, being in Christ is a major way in which the New Testament expresses its soteriological end. In the biblical passages above, those who are saved are said to be “in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ). Romans 8:1–2 teaches that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because they have been set free. In 2 Corinthians 5:17–18, Paul maintains that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation and has been reconciled to God. Clearly, being in Christ is a key way in which Paul describes the state of those who are saved. Lee Tankersley describes Paul’s notion of being in Christ as a union with Christ, and he attests that biblical soteriology is inexorably wrapped up with the idea of being in or united with Christ, going so far as to claim that

“without union with Christ, there is no salvation.”<sup>315</sup> He explains, “Salvation is pictured throughout Scripture in terms of those blessings which believers experiences by their union with Christ. Thus, when Paul writes of believers experiencing no condemnation before God, it is a reality for those who are *in Christ* (Rom 8:1).”<sup>316</sup>

Romans 8:1–2 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–18 teach that those who are in Christ are the ones who have received salvation. They are not condemned but have been set free. They are a new creation and have been reconciled to God. Nothing in these verses even begins to hint that being in Christ means achieving an ontological oneness with his own divine nature. To be sure, the concept of being somehow “in” their respective Saviors is central to the soteriologies of both the *Gītā* and the Bible. However, *BG*’s idea of being in Krishna is completely different from the Bible’s concept of being in Christ. The former envisions an ontological oneness of being, while the latter is purposed toward freedom and reconciliation. Here again, the soteriologies of the *Gītā* and the Bible diverge.

**Refuge in Krishna versus faith in Christ.** The *Gītā* and the Bible each assert that their respective hero is the only one who truly provides salvation from sin. In the closing verses of *BG*, Krishna encourages his devotees to take refuge in him alone, promising that he will be the one to save them from their sins. Similarly, the Bible teaches us to put our faith in Jesus, because it is only by his grace that we can be justified and have peace with God. The *Gītā* and the Bible present two mutually exclusive offers of salvation from sin. The pertinent verses are as follows:

(*BG* 18:66) Abandoning all duties, take refuge in me alone. I will save you from all sins. Do not grieve.

The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they

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<sup>315</sup> Lee Tankersley, “Raised for Our Justification: The Resurrection and Penal Substitution,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 18, no. 4 (2014): 54.

<sup>316</sup> Tankersley, “Raised for Our Justification,” 54.

are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:22–24).

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we boast in the hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:1–2).

In *BG* 18:66, Krishna instructs Arjuna to take refuge (*sharanam vraj* / शरणं व्रज) in him alone, promising that he will be the one to save (*much*/मुच, from *mōksha*/मोक्ष) him from his sins. In this passage of the *Gītā*, Krishna is presenting the way by which yoga practitioners can be saved. Important to note here is that the divine charioteer instructs the soldier to take refuge in him *alone* (*eka*/एक) for salvation from sin. This is an exclusivist offer of salvation, and it runs directly counter the Bible’s soteriological teaching that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ.

The gospel message of salvation by grace through faith is clearly laid out in Romans 3:22–24 and 5:1–2. These verses teach us to put our faith (*πίστις*) in Jesus, because it is only by his grace that we can be justified (*δικαιώω*). The neat correlation between the elements making up Krishna’s offer of salvation and those of the gospel of Christ vividly highlights the mutual exclusivity of these two soteriological teachings. Just as *BG* encourages yoga practitioners to take refuge (*sharanam vraj* / शरणं व्रज) in Krishna alone, the book of Romans urges us to put our faith (*πίστις*) in Christ. Whereas the *Gītā* promises that Krishna will save (*much*/मुच, from *mōksha*/मोक्ष) his devotees from their sins, these Pauline passages teach that we are justified (*δικαιώω*) purely by grace through our faith in Jesus. This is perhaps the most obvious point at which the soteriologies of the *Gītā* and the Bible conflict.

### Conclusion

This comparison of Dvaipayana’s theology and soteriology against relevant biblical material has revealed five major points of divergence between *BG* and the Bible. First, the *Gītā* and the Bible each put forward their own God as the only supreme divinity, worthy of exclusive worship. Second, the *Gītā*’s view of Krishna as universally

all-encompassing is different from the way the Bible describes God's omnipresence.

Third, while the *Gītā* and the Bible both speak of union and oneness with God, they have vastly different understandings of the nature of such a union. Fourth, while both scriptures use language of being somehow "in" their respective Saviors, the *Gītā*'s idea of being in Krishna and the Bible's notion of being in Christ are not the same. Fifth, *BG* and the Bible each assert that their respective hero is the only one who can provide salvation from sin. At least as far as their theologies and soteriologies are concerned, then, the *Gītā* and the Bible are starkly different.

## CHAPTER 5

### A REVIEW OF THE INCOMPATIBILITIES BETWEEN YOGIC AND CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

My thesis is that yoga's most foundational scriptures contradict the Bible on weighty theological and soteriological matters, such that participating in genuine yoga practices—those that adhere to their own scriptures—is impermissible for Christians. In chapter 2, I showed that many commentators on yoga have asserted yoga is something Christians should avoid. None of the literature examined in that chapter, however, goes on to demonstrate where and how yoga's primary sources contradict the Bible. The apparent lack of primary-source substantiation for the assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity, then, was the core problem I addressed in chapters 3 and 4. Those chapters revealed that yoga's most foundational scriptures—*PYS* and *BG*—together contradict the Bible on ten crucial points. The common assertion that yoga is incompatible with Christianity, as it turns out, is indeed substantiable on scriptural grounds. In this chapter, I review and collate the ten major ways in which yoga's primary sources are at odds with the Bible. These are the ten main ways in which yoga contradicts Christianity.

Also important to note now, though, is that some of the specific allegations against yoga cited in chapter 2 were directly substantiated in chapters 3 and 4. In other words, many of the specific ways in which social commentators have accused yoga of being unchristian do indeed find substantiation in certain passages of *PYS* and *BG*. Therefore, to be precise, this dissertation's unique contribution to the existing literature is primary-source substantiation for many of the specific ways in which yoga has been accused of being counterbiblical. In this chapter, I review the ten major ways in which

yoga's foundational scriptures—*PYS* and *BG*—substantiate the commonly alleged soteriological and theological discrepancies between yoga and Christianity.

### **Primary-Source Substantiation for Alleged Soteriological Differences**

Having seen that yoga's foundational scriptures feature soteriological tenets that contradict what the Bible teaches, we are now in a position to claim—based on the relevant primary sources—that the yogic idea of salvation is incompatible with the Christian faith. This dissertation's comparison of *PYS* and *BG* soteriologies against relevant biblical material has revealed five major points of divergence between yoga and Christianity. First, yoga's concept of meditation is aimed at emptying the mind, whereas the biblical notion of mediation is about gaining wisdom from the Word of God. Second, yoga's soteriological ideal of an emptied mind opposes the biblical concept of being filled with the Holy Spirit. These first two soteriological incompatibilities between yoga and Christianity find their substantiation in the juxtaposition of *PYS* against the Bible.

The third point of contrast between the yogic and the Christian ideas of salvation has to do with union. While yoga and Christianity both utilize language of union and oneness with God, their scriptures reveal vastly different understandings of the nature of the God-person relationship. The fourth point is that, while both yogic and Christian scriptures speak of being somehow “in” their respective Saviors, yoga's idea of being found in its supreme God and the Bible's view of being in Christ are not the same. Finally, yogic scripture and the Christian Bible each assert that their respective hero is the only one who can provide salvation from sin. These last three soteriological distinctions between yoga and Christianity are substantiated by examining *BG* alongside the Bible. Taken together, the foundational scriptures of yoga are at odds with the Bible on these five soteriological points. I will now briefly review where these five major soteriological discrepancies appear in the primary sources. The location of these unchristian teachings within yoga's scriptural corpus is important since these verses are what substantiate the



commonly alleged differences between yoga and Christianity.

First, yogic meditation is about emptying the mind, and this is different from how Christianity understands mediation. Whereas yoga's idea of meditation is aimed at emptying the mind, biblical mediation centers on the Word of God. This is evident when one examines *PYS* 3:3 alongside Psalm 119:97–99. The first text teaches that true meditation is when the mind is emptied of its form, while the biblical passage extols meditation as something based on God's instruction and decrees. This discrepancy is one others have alleged without substantiation from yoga's primary sources. Albert Mohler and Elliot Miller both assert that yogic meditation is different from biblical meditation, reporting correctly that the former has to do with emptying the mind.<sup>1</sup> What chapter 3 has introduced is primary-source substantiation for their claim. Since *PYS* is one of yoga's most foundational scriptures, these verses constitute authoritative attestation for the assertion that yoga's idea of meditation is incompatible with the Christian faith.

The second difference between the yogic and the Christian concept of salvation is that the first idealizes an emptied mind, while the other entails being filled with the Holy Spirit. The difference is obvious when one compares *PYS* 3:3 with the numerous passages throughout the book of Acts describing believers being filled with the Spirit. The juxtaposition of this *PYS* verse against the Acts passages constitutes further scriptural substantiation for the assertion that the two traditions' teachings on salvation are at odds. Miller suggests something similar when he writes that believers in Christ "are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and do not need to go 'out of their minds' to experience God."<sup>2</sup> Miller's is

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<sup>1</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Empty Promise of Meditation," Albert Mohler, November 20, 2008, <https://albertmohler.com/2008/11/20/the-empty-promise-of-meditation>; R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Subtle Body: Should Christians Practice Yoga?," Albert Mohler, September 20, 2010, <https://albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-subtle-body-should-christians-practice-yoga/>; R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Yoga in Alabama's Public Schools? Why Authentic Yoga Can Never Really Be Just Stretching Exercises," Albert Mohler, March 13, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/03/13/briefing-3-13-20>; Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2: Yoga in Its Contemporary Western Context," *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (2008): 8.

<sup>2</sup> Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response," *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 4 (2008): 7.

not a direct analysis of *PYS* 3:3 against Acts, in fact, he does not reveal which yogic materials call for going out of one's mind. In light of these texts' divergent teachings, though, his assertion proves true. Yoga's goal of an emptied mind—revealed in *PYS* 3:3—contradicts Christianity's ideal of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The third soteriological distinction between yoga and Christianity lies in the fact that, while both traditions speak of oneness with God, they have vastly different understandings of what that means. The *Gītā* teaches that yoga is purposed toward gaining ontological union with Krishna, the only supreme God. The counterbiblical nature of this idea becomes clear when one reads *BG* 7:18b–19 and *BG* 9:29b, 34b alongside John 17:21–22. The *Gītā* verses teach that yoga practitioners who truly know and worship Krishna achieve real, ontological union with him as God. That is, they come to *be* God. The oneness Jesus talks about in John 17:21–22 is totally different. Jesus prays that the disciples would have a oneness *among themselves* that mirrors the oneness he and the Father enjoy. Jesus also prays that the disciples would be found “in” him and the Father, but he is not praying for an ontological oneness of being between them and the triune God, rather, that they would share in the same love that the members of the Trinity have for each other.<sup>3</sup> Whereas yoga idealizes an ontological union of being between practitioners and God, Christianity calls for loving oneness within the family of faith and for a sharing in the trinitarian love of the Godhead.

Yoga's soteriological goal of union with God has been correctly identified many times over as being counter-Christian. During a 2020 interview with Alistair Shearer, Mohler was affirmed by the cultural historian when he suggested that “the spiritual essence of yoga starts from the idea of achieving a kind of union with the divine

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Mohler explains this in a 2021 sermon. R. Albert Mohler Jr., “John 17:20–26” (sermon preached at Third Avenue Baptist Church, Louisville, KY, April 18, 2021).

by means of this spiritual practice. That appears to be rather central to the project.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in his three-part article series for *Christian Research Journal*, Miller insists repeatedly that yoga aims at a kind of union with God that is unbiblical.<sup>5</sup> For his part, Miller mistakenly includes *PYS*-based yoga in his criticism of the union-with-God idea, and Jessica Smith does the same on her blog, *Truth Behind Yoga*.<sup>6</sup> Helpfully, Kalarikkal Aleaz points out that the goal of achieving union with God is completely foreign to Patanjali.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, what chapter 4 brings to the table is authoritative attestation from yoga’s other most foundational scripture, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, that the practice of yoga is indeed purposed toward a kind of union with God that is contrary to biblical teaching.

The fourth point at which the soteriologies of yoga and Christianity diverge is in their understandings of what it means to be “in” their respective Saviors. Yoga’s idea of being in Krishna is completely different from Christianity’s concept of being in Christ. This is evidenced by a juxtaposition of the above mentioned *BG* passages against New Testament verses like Romans 8:1–2 and 2 Corinthians 5:17–18. In the *Gītā* passages, Krishna speaks of yoga practitioners entering and existing in him, that is, achieving ontological union with his very being. In a way that may seem similar on first glance, Romans 8:1–2 teaches that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and 2 Corinthians 5:17–18 maintains that anyone who is in Christ has been reconciled to God. Being found in Christ is an important way in which Paul describes those who are

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<sup>4</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Battle Over Yoga: History, Theology, and Popular Culture in a Conversation with Historian Alistair Shearer,” Albert Mohler, May 20, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/05/20/alistair-shearer>.

<sup>5</sup> Elliot Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context,” *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (2008): 2, 6; Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2,” 1, 8; Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 3,” 1, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Smith, “What Does the Bible Say? The Teachings of Yoga and the Bible Are Antithetical,” *Truth Behind Yoga*, accessed October 9, 2023, <https://www.truthbehindyoga.com/what-does-the-bible-say-about-yoga/>.

<sup>7</sup> K. P. Aleaz, “Christian Response to Yoga Philosophy,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 37, no. 1 (June 2005): 192.

saved. Nothing in these epistolary passages, though, even hints that being in Christ means achieving ontological oneness with his own divine nature. The shared language between the two traditions of being found “in” one’s Savior could scarcely carry more starkly different meanings from one sacred text to the other.

The fifth instance of yogic soteriology contradicting Christianity shows up as each of their revered texts assert that their hero is the only one who can save us from sin. These mutually exclusive claims are put forward in *BG* 18:66, Romans 3:22–24, and Romans 5:1–2. In the closing verses of *BG*, Krishna encourages his devotees to take refuge in him alone, promising that he will be the one to save them from their sins. In this passage of the *Gītā*, the supreme God figure is laying out the way yoga practitioners can be saved. It is an exclusivist offer of salvation, and it runs directly counter Paul’s teaching in Romans 3:22–24 and 5:1–2. These passages encourage us to put our faith in Jesus, because it is only by his grace that we can be justified and have peace with God. This is perhaps the most obvious point at which the soteriologies of yoga and Christianity conflict. The *Gītā* and the Bible present two mutually exclusive offers of salvation. Yogic soteriology is indeed incompatible with Christianity on these five commonly alleged points, and now we have the primary-source substantiation to prove it. Table 1 below shows these five discrepancies alongside the scriptural passages undergirding them.

### **Primary-Source Substantiation for Alleged Theological Differences**

Having been shown in chapters 3 and 4 that yoga’s foundational scriptures contain theological teachings that contradict the Bible, we can now argue from the relevant primary sources that yoga’s ideas on God are incompatible with Christianity’s. My comparison of *PYS* and *BG* theologies against pertinent biblical material has revealed five crucial incompatibilities between yoga and the Christian faith. First, yoga’s supreme yet generic God figure—*Īshvara*—is decidedly not the Creator of the world, while central to Yahweh’s identity is his role as Creator. Second, *Īshvara* can be connected with in the

Table 1. Soteriological contradictions

<b>Alleged Soteriological Contradiction</b>	<b>Primary-Source Substantiation</b>
“Yoga’s mediation is different from Christian mediation.”	<i>PYS</i> 3:3 versus Psalm 119:97–99
“Yoga’s idea of union with God conflicts with Christian theology.”	<i>BG</i> 7:18b–19, 9:29b, and 9:34b versus John 17:21–22
“Yoga is about emptying your mind, but Christians are to be filled with the Spirit.”	<i>PYS</i> 3:3 versus Acts 2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 6:3–5, 11:24, and 13:9
“Yoga’s idea of being in Krishna is different from being in Christ.”	<i>BG</i> 7:18b–19, 9:29b, and 9:34b versus Rom. 8:1–2 and 2 Cor. 5:17–18
“Yoga and Christianity each claim to offer the means of forgiveness from sin.”	<i>BG</i> 18:66 versus Romans 3:22–24 and 5:1–2

form of lower deities, whereas the God of the Bible jealously forbids the worship of any other supposed gods. Third, yoga’s Īshvara figure is an optional, passive object of contemplation by which practitioners may attain salvation for themselves, but Yahweh is presented in Christianity as our necessary, active Savior. These first three theological discrepancies between yoga and Christianity find their substantiation in *PYS*.

The fourth point of contrast between the yogic and the Christian conceptions of God comes down to a call for exclusive worship. Yogic scripture and the Christian Bible each put forward their own God as the only supreme divinity worthy of worship. In other words, the two traditions make mutually exclusive claims about the supremacy for their respective Gods. The fifth and final way in which yoga has been proven—according to its own most foundational scriptures—to contradict Christianity has to do with divine omnipresence. Yoga’s view of its supreme God as being universally all-encompassing is different from the way the Bible describes God’s abiding everywhere. These last two theological differences between yoga and Christianity are substantiated in the analysis of

certain *BG* verses alongside pertinent passages from the Bible. Yoga's most foundational scriptures contradict the Bible on these five points of theology. I will now briefly review where these theological discrepancies appear in yogic scripture, because these verses substantiate five more commonly alleged differences between yoga and Christianity.

The first theological discrepancy lies in the fact that, whereas yoga presents Īshvara as a *purūsha* and therefore not the Creator, Christianity holds that creatorship is central to who God is. This difference is seen clearly when one reads *PYS* 1:24 alongside Nehemiah 9:6 and Colossians 1:16. Patanjali teaches that Īshvara is a *purūsha* and therefore has nothing to do with the creation of the world, but Nehemiah praises God for creating everything, and Colossians extends this creatorship to Jesus the Son. Unlike Īshvara, God's identity is bound up with his Creator role. Gerald Larson, Marzenna Jakubczak, Bradley Malkovsky, and Knut Jacobsen all acknowledge that Patanjali's God figure does not create the world.<sup>8</sup> Miller even mentions *PYS* 1:23–26 in alleging that Patanjali views Īshvara as a non-creator.<sup>9</sup> We now have direct, original-language analysis of a significant portion of yogic scripture against the Bible, substantiating this stark difference between yoga's theology and Christianity's.

The second theological difference between yoga and Christianity lies in the fact that, while yoga presents Īshvara as generic and accessible through lower deities, Christianity insists that God is a particular, jealous God. The incongruence here is obvious when one examines *PYS* 1:27 and 2:44 in light of Exodus 20:2–5a. The first *PYS* verse identifies Īshvara with the sacred syllable *ōm*, indicating that this is yoga's generic

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald Larson, "Yoga's 'A-Theistic'-Theism: A New Way of Thinking about God," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 25, no. 6 (2012): 22; Marzenna Jakubczak, "The Purpose of Non-Theistic Devotion in the Classical Indian Tradition of Sāṃkhya-Yoga," *Argument* 4, no. 1 (2014): 63; Bradley Malkovsky, "Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 30, no. 5 (2017): 35–36; Knut A. Jacobsen, "Songs to the Highest God (Isvara) of Sāṃkhya-Yoga," in *Yoga in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 325.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1," 7.

title for the supreme God. The second teaches that yoga practitioners may connect with a lower deity through study, and since these *devatās* are forms of Īshvara, the divinity practitioners really connect with is Īshvara himself. Ultimately, yoga's God is neither particular nor jealous. Exodus 20:2–5a, on the other hand, shows that the God of the Bible exhibits both these features. Indeed, Nissim Amzallag writes that God's jealousy is central to his identity, and Miller insists that the God of the Bible is not to be identified with other gods.<sup>10</sup> That Christianity holds to a particular, jealous God is not a new idea. In the juxtaposition of these verses from yogic scripture against the Bible, though, we now have primary-source substantiation for the allegation that the yogic and the Christian theologies differ over the question of God's particularity.

The third way yoga's theology differs from Christianity's has to do with how each tradition views God's role in salvation. Whereas yoga presents Īshvara as an optional object of contemplation by which people can save themselves, the Bible presents God as our necessary, active savior. The difference can be seen clearly when one reads *PYS* 1:23 and 2:45 alongside Ephesians 2:4–9. The *PYS* verses teach that *nirōdha* and *samādhi*—both partial attainments of yoga's idea of salvation—are attainable through contemplation on Īshvara. Even when yoga practitioners choose contemplation on Īshvara as their method of salvation, though, Īshvara is not active in bringing their salvation about. Jacobsen agrees that Īshvara “plays no active part” in people's salvation, concluding that the God figure in Patanjali's yoga is not “a savior god.”<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:4–9 that God is the one who grants us saving grace and is therefore our necessary, active Savior. Such an understanding of God is anything but novel. But these passages from yogic scripture and from the Bible together substantiate

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<sup>10</sup> Nissim Amzallag, “Furnace Remelting as the Expression of YHWH's Holiness: Evidence from the Meaning of *qannā* (קַנָּא) in the Divine Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 2 (2015): 233–52; Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 2,” 8.

<sup>11</sup> Jacobsen, “Songs to the Highest God (Isvara) of Samkhya-Yoga,” 325.

the allegation that yoga contradicts Christianity on precisely this point.

The fourth theological issue lies in the simple fact that yogic scripture and the Bible each put forward their own God as the only supreme divinity, worthy of exclusive worship. This is obviated when one reads *BG* 10:20b–21a and 11:8b–9 alongside passages like Exodus 20:2–5a. The *Gītā* verses present Krishna as Vishnu, and therefore (since *BG* is a Vāshnavist text), as the only supreme God otherwise known generically as Īshvara. Naturally, Krishna commands his devotees in other passages to worship him and take refuge in him alone (*BG* 9:29–30, 18:66). The Bible does the same for Yahweh in Exodus 20:2–5a. God is presented as a particular God, identified by one of his mighty acts in history, the Exodus. Yahweh commands his people that there be no other supposed gods among them, so as a matter of course, they are prohibited from worshipping any such gods. Allegations like that of Jonnathan Truong that yoga is unchristian since as it entails “the worship of false gods” find substantiation in these passages from *BG* and the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Any text calling for the worship—much less the exclusive worship—of a god other than Yahweh is blatantly counter-Christian. We now have demonstrable proof that yoga’s foundational scriptures do just that.

The fifth difference between yoga’s theology and Christianity’s has to do with their diverging understandings of God’s omnipresence. More specifically, the *Gītā*’s view of Krishna as all-encompassing is different from the way the Bible describes Yahweh being everywhere. The distinction shows up when one compares *BG* 9:4–6 with Psalm 139:7–10. The *Gītā* verses teach that the universe is spread out by Krishna, that it exists in Krishna and is constantly sustained and manifested by him. The supreme God of yoga is even likened to an omnipresent wind. All of this means, essentially, that Krishna is the universe and the universe is Krishna. This situation is nothing like God’s omnipresence. In

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<sup>12</sup> Jonnathan Truong, “Holy Yoga & Christian Yoga,” *God Manifest*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.godmanifest.com/holy-yoga-christian-yoga/>.



Psalm 139:7–10, David sings of God’s Spirit being in Heaven, in Sheol, and on the western horizon all at the same time. Yahweh’s presence is everywhere, but this does not mean the universe itself is constituent of him. David’s words are directed to a sovereign Person, ontologically distinct from his creation. In these passages, then, we have scriptural substantiation for one more conflict between yoga and Christianity. Yoga is incompatible with the Christian faith on these five theological points, and Table 2 below shows the primary-source substantiation for each of them.

Table 2. Theological contradictions

<b>Alleged Theological Contradiction</b>	<b>Primary-Source Substantiation</b>
“Yoga insists God is not the Creator, while Christianity clearly says he is.”	<i>PYS</i> 1:24 versus Nehemiah 9:6 and Colossians 1:16
“Yoga affirms myriad lower deities, but Christianity says God is jealous.”	<i>PYS</i> 1:27 and 2:44 versus Exodus 20:2–5a
“Yoga says God is an object of contemplation, but Christianity says he is our Savior.”	<i>PYS</i> 1:23 and 2:45 versus Ephesians 2:4–9
“Yoga and Christianity each present their God as supreme and worthy of worship.”	<i>BG</i> 10:20b–21a and 11:8b–9 versus Exodus 20:2–5a.
“Yoga’s panentheism differs from the Christian idea of God’s omnipresence.”	<i>BG</i> 9:4–6 versus Psalm 139:7–10

### **Conclusion**

Yoga and Christianity differ on at least ten essential points. The yogic idea of meditation is aimed at emptying the mind, whereas Christian mediation is all about gaining wisdom from the Word of God. Yoga’s ideal of an emptied mind opposes the Christian hope of being filled with the Holy Spirit. The union-with-God idea in yoga

envisions a real, ontological oneness of being, while the Bible simply encourages us to have unity among ourselves and share in the Trinitarian love of God. Yoga's language of being found "in" its supreme God also points to an ontological union, whereas Christianity's concept of being in Christ is just a way of describing those who are saved. Yoga says Krishna is the only one who can provide salvation from sin, but God's Word tells us our salvation is accomplished only by Christ. Yoga's supreme God is not the Creator of the world, while central to Yahweh's identity is his role as Creator. Yoga's God can be connected with in the form of lower deities, whereas the God of the Bible jealously forbids the worship of any other gods. The supreme God in yoga is an object of contemplation by which practitioners might save themselves, but Christianity says God is our necessary, active Savior. Yoga puts forth Krishna as the only supreme divinity, and the Bible claims the same for the God who brought Israel out of slavery. Yoga sees God as universally all-encompassing, but Christianity says God is present throughout his creation while ontologically separate from it. Yoga and Christianity are incompatible in these ten crucial ways, and we now know exactly where and how these discrepancies show up in the primary sources.

## CHAPTER 6

### SIGNIFICANCE AND PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

The preceding three chapters have demonstrated that yoga’s foundational scriptures contradict the Bible on weighty theological and soteriological matters. We now have primary-source substantiation for the assertion that yoga conflicts with Christianity. In this chapter, I explain the significance of this conflict. Since yoga’s scriptures violate biblical teaching, genuine yoga practices—those that are faithful to their own scriptures—are by definition counterbiblical and should be avoided by Christians. That is, insofar as a yoga practice reflects its own scriptures, that practice is unbiblical and impermissible for believers. What complicates things, though, is that not all practices currently referred to as yoga reflect the tradition’s primary sources in any way. A given wellness program at your local gym may be presented as yoga, but that does not necessarily mean the practice bears any resemblance to what is taught in yoga’s classical texts. Christians considering yoga, then, must evaluate individual practices case by case.

Religious historian Candy Gunther Brown is a leading advocate for critically analyzing today’s yoga phenomenon on a case-by-case basis. In an interview with Albert Mohler in 2014, speaking to the question of whether yoga itself is inherently religious, Brown encouraged listeners to examine the individual practices themselves, saying, “One of the key things to do is to look at the actual yoga program, rather than to just try and generalize.”<sup>1</sup> In her 2019 book, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools*,

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<sup>1</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Are We All Syncretists Now? A Conversation about Evangelical Christianity and Alternative Medicine with Historian Candy Gunther Brown,” Albert Mohler, May 5, 2014, <https://albertmohler.com/2014/05/05/are-we-all-syncretists-now-a-conversation-about-evangelical-christianity-and-alternative-medicine-with-historian-candy-gunther-brown>.

Brown challenges the assumption that “any and every practice called ‘yoga,’ regardless of what it involves and irrespective of its particular history and context, is basically the same thing; and that one must either be ‘for’ or ‘against’ *all* yoga.”<sup>2</sup> What matters, according to Brown, is what actually goes on during the session that is being called yoga. In an article for *Psychology Today*, Brown cautions, “It would be simplistic to think all ‘yoga’ is the same thing, so it’s best to focus on particular examples.”<sup>3</sup> To determine the permissibility of any given current practice called yoga, Christians must evaluate whether that practice genuinely embodies the counter-Christian elements of yogic scripture. In this chapter, I offer practical guidance for doing just that.

Analyzing the genuineness and permissibility of individual yoga practices inevitably raises questions surrounding the proper definition of yoga. If a gym’s weekly sessions of “power yoga” do not so much allude to any of the teachings found in yoga’s primary sources, should those sessions really be called yoga? Mohler, along with others including Subhas Tiwari and Susanna Barkataki, answer no, insisting that the term yoga should be reserved for those practices that convey at least some of the core teachings from the tradition’s foundational texts. I refer to theirs as the scriptural definition of yoga, since the general idea is that yoga is that which is laid out in yoga’s scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Other commentators, including Suzanne Newcombe and Andrea Jain, readily affirm that unscriptural, fitness-focused practices can be legitimate manifestations of yoga since yoga itself has always been evolving.<sup>5</sup> Theirs has been called the nonessentialist

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<sup>2</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2019), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, “Why ‘Christian’ Yoga?,” *Psychology Today* (August 23, 2019), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/testing-prayer/201908/why-christian-yoga>.

<sup>4</sup> I use a noncapitalized letter “s” here to show that the scriptural definition of yoga defines yoga as that which is taught in yoga’s uninspired, Hindu scriptures. The scriptural definition does not define yoga according to Christian Scripture. In fact, since yogic scripture is unbiblical, the opposite is true.

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the descriptor “unscriptural” here means that the yoga practice in question does not reflect the uninspired, Hindu scriptures of yoga. It is not true to *its own* scriptures. I do not use the term “unscriptural” to describe practices that conflict with the Bible.

definition of yoga. My use of the positive descriptor “genuine” to refer to those practices that do adhere to yogic scripture betrays my inclination toward the scriptural definition. Nonetheless, both definitions are examined in this chapter since the question of whether Christians can do yoga depends on what is meant by yoga in the first place.

Calling for Christians to avoid scripturally genuine yoga practices implies that we may participate in some ungentle ones—those that do not reflect their own primary texts.<sup>6</sup> In fact, such yoga practices may be permissible precisely because they eschew their own scriptures, thereby avoiding the doctrinal pitfalls prescribed therein. This raises the question of cultural appropriation, which involves the use of features from one culture by members of another culture in ways that lack understanding and may be exploitative.<sup>7</sup> Practices called yoga that show no understanding of the tradition’s scriptures may constitute cultural appropriation. While I cannot address every reason a Christian may still be advised to abstain from certain ungentle yoga practices, I do tackle the cultural appropriation issue in this chapter because the expressed significance of my dissertation implies that Christians may participate in precisely those yoga practices that might be culturally appropriative, namely ungentle ones. The very thing that makes a yoga practice potentially permissible—its eschewal of yogic scripture—is also what could render it guilty of cultural appropriation. In this chapter, I offer practical guidance for assessing individual yoga practices, while giving due consideration to the differing definitions of yoga as well as to the sensitive issue of cultural appropriation.

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<sup>6</sup> Just as the scriptural definition of yoga defines yoga according to *its own* uninspired, Hindu scriptures, I use the term “scripturally genuine” to describe those yoga practices that adhere *to their own* scriptures. This descriptor does not imply that the practice is genuine, or in any sense right, with respect to Christian Scripture. In fact, since yogic scripture is so counterbiblical, the opposite is the case.

<sup>7</sup> This understanding of cultural appropriation is supported by the following sources. “What Is Cultural Appropriation?,” *Britannica*, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-cultural-appropriation>; “Cultural Appropriation,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cultural-appropriation>; “Cultural Appropriation,” *Oxford Reference*, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095652789>.

## Assessing Individual Practices Called Yoga

Any given yoga practice may reflect its foundational scriptures in a number of ways and thereby earn the designations of both genuineness and impermissibility. One of my premises for this section is that participating in practices that convey counterbiblical teachings is impermissible for believers. Therefore, to the extent that a yoga practice genuinely conveys the counterbiblical teachings of its own scriptures, participating in that practice is impermissible for Christians. Put simply, genuineness correlates with impermissibility. However, a studio or a gym merely having the word yoga on the door does not indicate whether what goes on inside reflects yogic scripture in any way. What is incumbent upon believers interested in yoga, then, is to assess which practices available to them today are genuine and which are not. The preceding three chapters have brought to light ten key points at which yoga's foundational scriptures contradict bedrock tenets of Christian theology and soteriology. In this section, I suggest six questions that can be asked of any yoga practice to help discern whether it adheres to its own scriptures on those points and thereby renders itself impermissible for Christians.

The first two diagnostic questions to be asked of a yoga practice are obvious, as they get at the very heart of who God is. The first question is this: Do the instructors in this yoga practice ever teach about another deity, such as Krishna, being supreme and worthy of exclusive worship? If so, then the practice aligns faithfully with yogic theology as expressed in the *Gītā*, but it clashes with key Bible verses in which Yahweh proscribes the worship and acknowledgement of any other supposed gods. In such a case, the practice in question is scripturally genuine, and for that very reason, categorically impermissible for Christians. On the other hand, if the answer is no and the practice does not say anything about a particular deity like Krishna being supreme, then it may be permissible insofar as it avoids transgressing biblical teaching on God's exclusivity, but it is also largely ungentle as far as yogic theology is concerned since it ignores this key point from one of yoga's most foundational texts. An affirmative answer to this question

means the yoga practice under consideration is genuine but impermissible for believers, while a negative answer means it is ungentle and therefore potentially permissible.

The second question asks: Do the teachers in this yoga practice talk about another deity such as Krishna offering forgiveness from sin? If the answer is yes, then the practice is genuine in that it dutifully relays the *Gītā*'s teaching on how to be saved, but it is impermissible for Christians since it runs counter to the Bible's instruction to put our faith wholly in Christ. Believers in Jesus could not rightly participate in any practice where such starkly counter-Christian soteriology is being taught. On the other hand, if the practice does not talk about any deity other than Yahweh providing forgiveness from sin, then it may not violate biblical teaching on salvation through Christ, but it would also be ungentle with respect to its own scriptures insofar as it would leave out a crucial element of yogic soteriology. For the second question too, an affirmation means the practice is genuine and therefore impermissible, while a negation reveals it to be potentially permissible albeit scripturally ungentle.

The next two questions Christians may ask to determine the genuineness and permissibility of a given yoga practice are less obvious since they probe into subtler features of the practice that may seem compatible with Christianity on first glance. The third diagnostic question is this: Do the instructions given during this yoga practice ever express reverence toward a generic, supreme God figure known in Sanskrit as *Īshvara*? If so, then the practice genuinely maintains a basic theological pillar of yoga as expressed in *PYS*, but Christians cannot participate with integrity since, although *Īshvara* is a generic term for the supreme God, the *Īshvara* in view here is nothing like the God of the Bible. To state the obvious, it is impermissible for a Christian to participate in a practice where a god other than Yahweh (no matter how generically conceptualized) is revered. If the practice does not evince any reverence for *Īshvara*, then it may be permissible for Christians as far as its theology is concerned, but it is scripturally ungentle in that it ignores a key figure in yogic theology. Revering *Īshvara* shows a yoga practice is genuine

but impermissible, while not doing so means it is potentially permissible but ungentine.

The fourth question asks: Do the instructors in this yoga practice coach participants to empty their minds through meditation? If the answer is yes, then at least in this sense, the practice is a genuine expression of classical yoga based on *PYS*. Such a practice would be impermissible for Christians, however, since biblical meditation is purposed, not toward emptying the mind, but filling it with God's Word. Meditating with the hope of emptying one's mind, therefore, would be a perversion of God's design for mediation as laid out in the psalms. If the practice in question does not say anything about emptying the mind, then it may be permissible insofar as it does not transgress the Bible's guidance on meditation, but it also eschews a basic soteriological concept of yoga and is therefore ungentine on that count. A yoga practice that entails a kind of meditation aimed at emptying the mind is genuine but impermissible, while one that has nothing to say about an emptied mind is potentially permissible but largely ungentine.

The last two diagnostic questions also seek to examine certain features of a yoga practice that might seem compatible with the Christian faith to inquirers unfamiliar with yoga's foundational scriptures. The fifth question is this: Does the language used during this yoga practice put forward union with God or being in God as one of its goals? If so, then the practice aligns well with the soteriological teachings found in *BG*. It demonstrates genuineness on this point. However, such a practice is impermissible for Christians since it aims at an ontological oneness of being between practitioner and God, which is incompatible with the Bible. Christians who take the Bible seriously will not participate in anything that is purposed toward an ontological union with God. On the other hand, if the practice under examination does not mention union with God or being in God, then it may be permissible for believers since it avoids this major soteriological pitfall. In such a case, though, the practice would also be largely ungentine, because it would be failing to convey one of yoga's most essential teachings about salvation.

Coaching practitioners toward an ontological union with God's very being makes a yoga



practice genuine and wholly impermissible for Christians. Failing to do so leaves it potentially permissible for believers but scripturally ungentine.

The sixth and final question asks: Do the instructors in this yoga practice talk about God being everywhere or being in everything? If they do, then at least in this respect, the practice exemplifies genuine yoga based firmly on the *Gītā*. In which case, the practice would be impermissible for Christians since its equation of God with the universe contradicts the Bible's presentation of Yahweh as an omnipresent yet ontologically distinct Person. Put simply, the practice's counterbiblical theology—genuine as it is with respect to yoga's scriptures—would render Christians' participation in it impermissible. However, if the instructions given during the yoga practice do not speak of God being everywhere or in everything, then believers may find the practice permissible insofar as it avoids a significant violation of Christian theology. However, such a practice would also be ungentine on a fundamental level because it would be eschewing a central yogic teaching about who and what God is. Teaching that God is everything in the *BG* sense makes a yoga practice genuine and decidedly impermissible, while neglecting to do so makes it ungentine and potentially permissible.

Ultimately, an affirmative answer to even one of these six diagnostic questions means that the yoga practice under examination is scripturally genuine in at least that one theological or soteriological sense and is therefore impermissible for Christians. One might imagine a rubric featuring these six yes-or-no questions, where one or more ticks in the affirmative column reveals that the yoga practice is scripturally genuine and therefore ineligible for Christian participation. Having seen firsthand the ten ways yoga's primary sources contradict the Bible, believers interested in yoga could use such a rubric to assess whether an individual yoga practice adheres to its own scriptures on those points and thereby reveals itself to be genuine and impermissible. On a practical level, a Christian interested in a certain yoga practice might take part in several of its sessions and complete the rubric by reflecting on his or her experience overall. Additionally, a

group of believers might participate separately in multiple sessions of a certain yoga practice and then analyze their experiences together using the rubric afterwards. Table 3 below shows a simple, six-question rubric for evaluating the genuineness and permissibility of individual yoga practices.

Table 3. Yoga practice evaluation rubric

Question	Yes	No
Do the instructors teach about another deity being supreme?		
Do the teachers talk about another deity offering forgiveness?		
Do the instructions express reverence toward Īshvara?		
Do instructors coach you to empty your mind in meditation?		
Are the instructions purposed toward union with God?		
Do the instructors talk about God as being everywhere?		

### Defining Yoga

But what if a yoga practice being assessed with this rubric receives no ticks in the affirmative column? What if a Christian is interested in a particular practice called yoga that does not reflect any essential teachings from the tradition's primary sources? Mohler, along with Subhash Tiwari and Susanna Barkataki, maintain that such a practice would simply not be yoga, insisting that the term be reserved for those practices that do adhere in some way the tradition's foundational texts. Commentators like these are operating with a scriptural definition of yoga, understanding that yoga is that which is laid out in yoga's foundational, Hindu scriptures. Others, including Suzanne Newcombe and Andrea Jain, readily affirm that some fitness programs having nothing to do with

yogic scripture may still be legitimate manifestations of yoga since the tradition itself has always been evolving. Theirs is called the nonessentialist definition of yoga since it claims there is no single essence by which yoga must always be defined. My application of the descriptor “genuine” to those yoga practices that dutifully reflect their own Hindu scriptures reveals my own inclination toward the scriptural definition. To be sure, calling a yoga practice “ungenuine” is something very near to saying it is not truly yoga at all. Ultimately, though, the simple question of whether Christians should do yoga depends on what one means by yoga to begin with.

### **The Scriptural Definition of Yoga**

If one affirms the scriptural definition of yoga, then hopefully the preceding chapters have made clear that Christians cannot participate in yoga thusly defined. Scholars and commentators on yoga who espouse the scriptural definition insist that scripturally genuine practices are the only ones that can rightly be called yoga. The general idea here is that yoga is that which is found in yogic scripture. Though Brown assumes neither a scriptural nor a nonessentialist starting point, she highlights a reality that is crucial for those who affirm the scriptural definition of yoga: “[T]he earliest known written references to yoga are in what people now identify as Hindu texts.”<sup>8</sup> The primary sources on yoga are Hindu scriptures, and for many today—both Christians and Hindus alike—this reality has powerful implications for how yoga should be defined. Since yoga’s primary sources are Hindu scriptures, any current practice deserving of the name yoga should reflect in some way or another the teachings of those Hindu scriptures.

Albert Mohler is a leading advocate for the scriptural definition of yoga. In an article on his website from 2010, he writes,

I have heard from a myriad of Christians who insist that their practice of yoga

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools*, 53. Brown also points this out in her *Psychology Today* article from the same year. Brown, “Why ‘Christian’ Yoga?”

involves absolutely no meditation, no spiritual direction, no inward concentration, and no thought element. Well, if so, you are simply not practicing yoga. You may be twisting yourselves into pretzels or grasshoppers, but if there is no meditation or direction of consciousness, you are not practicing yoga, you are simply performing a physical exercise. Don't call it yoga.<sup>9</sup>

Ten years later, the title of one segment within an episode of Mohler's popular podcast, *The Briefing*, featured the phrase, "Why Authentic Yoga Can Never Really Be Just Stretching Exercises."<sup>10</sup> During this segment of the episode, Mohler asked rhetorically, "If it is merely stretching, then is it really yoga?" before going on to answer unambiguously, "If it's yoga, it's never merely stretching."<sup>11</sup> Mohler operates with a definition of yoga that is inseparably linked to its history and its original texts. In the same podcast episode, he continued, "[I]f we have an understanding of yoga and its historical context and in its religious origins, then at the very least we have to understand that there really is no such thing as Christian yoga."<sup>12</sup> Mohler's position that yoga—if it is indeed to remain yoga—cannot be Christianized is a natural outgrowth of his understanding that true yoga is that which is laid out in yoga's Hindu sources. Just a few weeks after this episode of *The Briefing* aired, following a conversation with historian Alistair Shearer in an episode of his other podcast, *Thinking in Public*, Mohler concluded, "[E]ven as most Americans think of yoga as . . . something of a physical discipline down at the YMCA, the reality is, it's a lot more than that. As a Christian and theologian, I have to insist it is much more than that. Also, as a theologian, I have to insist it can't be much less than that when yoga is rightly understood."<sup>13</sup> Mohler has formulated perhaps

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<sup>9</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Yahoo, Yoga, and Yours Truly," Albert Mohler, October 7, 2010, <https://albertmohler.com/2010/10/07/yahoo-yoga-and-yours-truly/>.

<sup>10</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Yoga in Alabama's Public Schools? Why Authentic Yoga Can Never Really Be Just Stretching Exercises," Albert Mohler, March 13, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/03/13/briefing-3-13-20>.

<sup>11</sup> Mohler, "Yoga in Alabama's Public Schools?"

<sup>12</sup> Mohler, "Yoga in Alabama's Public Schools?"

<sup>13</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Battle Over Yoga: History, Theology, and Popular Culture in a Conversation with Historian Alistair Shearer," Albert Mohler, May 20, 2020, <https://albertmohler.com/2020/05/20/alistair-shearer>.

more clearly than anyone the scriptural definition of yoga and the resultant conclusion that Christians cannot practice yoga thusly defined.

During his *Thinking in Public* interview with Mohler, Shearer mostly affirmed the Baptist leader's sentiments on the proper definition of yoga. Shearer maintains that purely physical, wellness-oriented practices are not really yoga in its fullest sense. That is, true yoga has a spiritual element to it. Shearer explained,

[I]f people want to take yoga as a set of physical exercises that make them feel better, a wellness therapy, that's absolutely fine by me. It doesn't worry me at all. But it's like stopping a dinner with a starter, it seems to me. If you want the full meal, all the courses, you have to go deeper than the physical. You can use the physical, and that's certainly part of yoga, but I think one has to move into the mental and even at a deeper level to spiritual to really get the full nourishment from yoga.<sup>14</sup>

Several leading Indian voices on yoga also operate with a scriptural definition of the practice. In 2010, Rajiv Malhotra expressed solidarity with Mohler's position on what yoga really is. While Malhotra is adamant that everyone should feel free to practice yoga regardless of their religion, he states categorically that yoga is something spiritual and that it has a certain metaphysic that is at odds with much in the Christian tradition. In the aftermath of some backlash following Mohler's 2010 comments, Malhotra wrote,

[Yoga] is a well-established spiritual path. Its physical postures are only the tip of an iceberg, beneath which is a distinct metaphysics with profound depth and breadth. Its spiritual benefits are undoubtedly available to anyone regardless of religion. However, the assumptions and consequences of yoga do run counter to much of Christianity as understood today. This is why, as a Hindu yoga practitioner and scholar, I agree with the Southern Baptist Seminary President, Albert Mohler, when he speaks of the incompatibility between Christianity and yoga.<sup>15</sup>

Though he references no yogic scripture, Malhotra goes on to list several points at which he perceives yoga's original teachings as contrary to the Christian faith. Substantiation for some of his points has been provided in the preceding chapters. Since Malhotra

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<sup>14</sup> Mohler, "The Battle Over Yoga."

<sup>15</sup> Rajiv Malhotra, "A Hindu View of Christian Yoga," Huff Post, November 8, 2010, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hindu-view-of-christian-yoga\\_b\\_778501](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hindu-view-of-christian-yoga_b_778501).

employs the scriptural definition of yoga, he too views attempts to Christianize yoga as illegitimate. “Some have responded by distorting yogic principles in order to domesticate it into a Christian framework,” Malhotra warns, before going on to write that the whole idea of Christian yoga is an oxymoron.<sup>16</sup> Rajiv Malhotra is a formidable Indian voice arguing for the scriptural definition of yoga and its incompatibility with Christianity.

In an earlier article for the magazine *Hinduism Today*, Subhas Tiwari explains that yoga, when rightly defined, is inescapably Hindu. For him, our understanding of yoga must not overlook its rootedness in what we now call Hinduism. “The simple, immutable fact is that yoga originated from the Vedic or Hindu culture,” Tiwari writes, “Its techniques were not adopted by Hinduism, but originated from it.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that yoga’s primary sources are Hindu scriptures is definitive here. Tiwari insists, “The effort to separate yoga from Hinduism must be challenged because it runs counter to the fundamental principles upon which yoga itself is premised.”<sup>18</sup> Yoga itself is comprised of those fundamental principles that are found in yoga’s foundational, Hindu scriptures. Anu Bhamra expressed a similar position a few years later, writing, “[B]y Yoga, I don’t mean just the breathing and the physical postures. The ‘Hindu’ way of worship, belief, practice, way of living is all part of the Yogic philosophy.”<sup>19</sup> Bhamra concludes unambiguously, “Yoga is indeed teaching about Hinduism.”<sup>20</sup> When it comes to defining yoga, the stance of Tiwari and Bhamra is that scripturally ungentle yoga practices are not really yoga.

Indian-American yoga teacher, Susanna Barkataki, also operates with the

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<sup>16</sup> Malhotra, “A Hindu View of Christian Yoga.”

<sup>17</sup> Subhas Tiwari, “Yoga Renamed Is Still Hindu,” *Hinduism Today*, January/February/March 2006, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Tiwari, “Yoga Renamed Is Still Hindu,” 9.

<sup>19</sup> Anu Sandhu Bhamra, “Stop Cultural Appropriation of Yoga: Yoga Is All about Hinduism, Albeit without the Ism,” *Sandhu Bhamra*, July 18, 2013, <https://sandhubhamra.com/2013/07/18/stop-cultural-appropriation-of-yoga-yoga-is-all-about-hinduism-albeit-without-the-ism/>.

<sup>20</sup> Bhamra, “Stop Cultural Appropriation of Yoga.”

scriptural definition of yoga. She argues, “When we mistake yoga for a workout routine, reduce it to physical fitness or even practice some of the deeper practices without an eye to the whole system of liberation it offers, we rob ourselves and each other of the potential of this practice.”<sup>21</sup> For Barkataki, what is at stake is more than simply missing out on some of yoga’s benefits. Rather, a secular, fitness-focused conceptualization of yoga completely misunderstands what the tradition is. “Though [yoga] has often been reduced to little more than just carrying around a yoga mat and rolling it out to do a class where you move your body into different shapes,” Barkataki writes, “it is so much more.”<sup>22</sup> She states unambiguously, “Yoga is not simply the physical practice.”<sup>23</sup> For an accurate, historically informed definition of yoga, Barkataki looks to yoga’s scriptures. She acknowledges that *PYS* is a seminal yogic text, observing that *PYS* 1:2 defines “what yoga is and how to attain it.”<sup>24</sup> Quite literally, then, according to Barkataki, yoga is what Patanjali’s classical scripture says it is.

Some of these voices maintain that yoga is inescapably Hindu, others emphasize that it must be understood according to its foundational texts, while still others go on to insist that yoga is incompatible with Christianity. What they all agree on is that yoga is what it originally was. When rightly defined, yoga is what was laid out two millennia ago in the classical yogic scriptures. Such an understanding of yoga is what seems to drive Jason Carlson to warn Christians against yoga and conclude, “[Y]oga is completely antithetical to a biblical worldview. It is a 2,000-year-old Hindu religious practice designed for very specific spiritual and occult purposes.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, because

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<sup>21</sup> Susanna Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga’s Roots: Courageous Ways to Deepen Your Yoga Practice* (Orlando, FL: Ignite Yoga and Wellness Institute, 2020), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga’s Roots*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga’s Roots*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga’s Roots*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Jason Carlson and Ron Carlson, “Warning: Christianity and Yoga Do Not Mix!,” Christian

she operates with a scriptural definition of yoga, Laurette Willis sees the notion of Christian yoga as nonsensical and carefully describes her PraiseMoves system as “the Christian alternative to yoga.”<sup>26</sup> The scriptural definition of yoga holds that yoga is that which is found in yogic scripture. According to this definition, the answer to the question of whether Christians should do yoga is a resounding “No.”

### **The Nonessentialist Definition of Yoga**

However, not everyone defines yoga as having anything to do with yogic scripture. Some suggest that yoga is an ever-evolving phenomenon, arguing that its definition cannot be confined to include only what was taught in a certain corpus of old texts. This is called the nonessentialist definition of yoga, since its whole point is that there never was any singular, fixed essence of yoga according to which the term must always be conceptualized. Under this definition, even scripturally ungentle practices may still be called yoga. When it comes to the question of whether Christians can do yoga, nonessentialists may answer, “Sure, as long as it’s not scripturally genuine yoga.” In other words, Christians operating with the nonessentialist definition may find it permissible to participate in some practices currently called yoga. In his interview with Brown, Mohler recalls, “I was confronted by people who said I don’t want to know anything about the background of yoga because it has nothing to do with yoga as I now experience it.”<sup>27</sup> Such people are using a nonessentialist definition of yoga, referring to their practices as yoga despite their having nothing to do with yoga’s background.

Suzanne Newcombe is a leading advocate for the nonessentialist definition of yoga. Observing that yoga’s referent has changed drastically over time and still varies

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Ministries International, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.christianministriesintl.org/warning-christianity-and-yoga-do-not-mix/>.

<sup>26</sup> Laurette Willis, “Why a Christian Alternative to Yoga?,” Praise Moves, accessed October 2, 2023, <https://praisemoves.com/about-us-why-a-christian-alternative-to-yoga>.

<sup>27</sup> Mohler, “Are We All Syncretists Now?”



from one context to another, she concludes, “[Y]oga cannot be seen as a fixed thing.”<sup>28</sup> What matters to Newcombe is that, for better or worse, the term yoga is applied to different activities depending on the needs of the situation.<sup>29</sup> In fact, she goes on to reason that “the experiential referent of the word ‘yoga’ is unique for every individual.”<sup>30</sup> By Newcombe’s analysis, it is not simply that the term jumps from referent to referent over time, rather, yoga itself has always been evolving. “If one looks at yoga from all the spatial positions it can occupy,” she argues, “it is obvious that yoga is immensely flexible and amorphous.”<sup>31</sup> And if yoga is something that can change into anything at any time, then its definition is not reducible to any one essence. For this reason, Newcombe concludes that “overarching essentialist definitions of yoga are impossible,” advocating instead for “a view of yoga that is non-linear and non-essentialist.”<sup>32</sup>

Andrea Jain also makes a robust case for the nonessentialist definition of yoga. She argues that, since yoga has always been evolving to fit certain contexts, there is no singular essence by which we can judge the authenticity of each yoga practice: “[Y]oga has been perpetually context-sensitive, so there is no ‘legitimate,’ ‘authentic,’ ‘true,’ or ‘original’ tradition, only contextualized ideas and practices organized around the term *yoga*.”<sup>33</sup> Not only are many modern yoga practices quite novel, but premodern yoga itself had been in flux since the beginning. Indeed, Jain insists that even premodern yoga

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<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Newcombe, “Spaces of Yoga: Towards a Non-Essentialist Understanding of Yoga,” in *Yoga in Transformation*, ed. Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz (Göttingen, Germany: Vienna University, 2018), 563.

<sup>29</sup> Newcombe, “Spaces of Yoga,” 569.

<sup>30</sup> Newcombe, “Spaces of Yoga,” 565.

<sup>31</sup> Newcombe, “Spaces of Yoga,” 569.

<sup>32</sup> Newcombe, “Spaces of Yoga,” 569.

<sup>33</sup> Andrea R. Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 2015), xvi.

practices were context-specific and not monolithic.<sup>34</sup> Since there was never any one essence of yoga, there is no singular type of current yoga that should be deemed authentic. “[T]he quest for the essence of yoga is an impossible task,” Jain pronounces before concluding that “an authentic form of yoga does not exist.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, she gets down to the point by stating that the authenticity of a yoga practice does not depend on its adherence to yoga’s scriptures: “[P]ostural yoga systems, in all of their various manifestations, cannot be judged as authentic or inauthentic relative to . . . ancient or so-called classical yoga traditions.”<sup>36</sup> According to the nonessentialist definition of yoga as advanced by Newcombe and Jain, scripturally ungenue practices are still yoga.

Other scholars affirm the nonessentialist definition of yoga, emphasizing that a given practice may have any number of purposes and need not reflect yogic scripture at all. Sarah Strauss’s nonessentialist view of yoga is utilitarian: “Yoga, with its origins on the [Indian] subcontinent, has become a bodily idiom that resonates with the needs and experiences of people across many different cultural and national contexts.”<sup>37</sup> That is, yoga is what its practitioners need it to be. Strauss writes unapologetically, “[Yoga] can also be understood as a commodity that . . . can be customized for distribution to specific target audiences.”<sup>38</sup> Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne suggest that we “think more generally of *yogas*, with a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations, rather than of a single yoga that we would seek to define and circumscribe.”<sup>39</sup> They insist that yoga practices in our time “should not be dismissed or condemned simply on account of their

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<sup>34</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 2, 18–19, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 157, 132.

<sup>36</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts across Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 22.

<sup>38</sup> Strauss, *Positioning Yoga*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, Routledge Hindu Studies Series (New York: Routledge, 2008), 5.

dislocation from the perceived tradition.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the legitimacy of a yoga practice does not depend on its faithfulness to the primary sources. The nonessentialist definition of yoga allows for a utilitarian understanding of the practice that does not require adherence to the counterbiblical teachings of yogic scripture.

Logically then, many Christian practitioners of yoga rely on the nonessentialist definition to maintain that their participation in yoga is permissible. Rie Skarhoj of CrossYoga writes, “The development yoga has undergone since the word was used the first time makes it extremely difficult to define what yoga is,” emphasizing that “yoga is a dynamic phenomenon that adapts to cultural needs.”<sup>41</sup> In the online publication, *Christians Practicing Yoga*, Kevin Flynn acknowledges that in many contexts yoga has undergone drastic changes. “I for one do not lament this transformation,” reflects Flynn, reasoning that it is “a legitimate, if not inevitable, aspect of the ongoing evolution of yoga.”<sup>42</sup> Michelle Thielen of YogaFaith declares, “How a practitioner or a group chooses to use yoga is their business. It certainly is not up to others to judge how or why one practices.”<sup>43</sup> Since yoga’s scriptures are demonstrably counterbiblical, in order to maintain that Christians can do yoga, one’s definition of yoga must allow for the inclusion of those practices that eschew the tradition’s primary sources. This is exactly what the nonessentialist definition of yoga does.

Using the nonessentialist definition, Alexandra Davis and Alli Patterson advocate for Christians doing scripturally ungentine yoga practices, specifically, those that are secularized and fitness-focused. Davis acknowledges that yoga originated in a

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<sup>40</sup> Singleton and Byrne, *Yoga in the Modern World*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Rie Frilund Skarhoj, *Yoga in the Church: Why and How?* (Self-published, 2019), 6, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Flynn, “It May Be Christian, But Is It Yoga?,” *Christians Practicing Yoga*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.christianspracticingyoga.com/christianity-and-yoga-blog/2017/3/18/it-may-be-christian-but-is-it-yoga>.

<sup>43</sup> Michelle Thielen, “Christian Yoga: When Yoga & Christianity Come Together,” *Seattle Yoga News*, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://seattleyoganews.com/christian-yoga-christianity-come-together/>.

counter-Christian context and cautions believers to avoid any yoga practice that includes those original, unbiblical elements.<sup>44</sup> Patterson admits that yoga is associated with Hinduism and that some features of the Indian religion are in conflict with Christianity.<sup>45</sup> What matters for her is the intention and purposes undergirding one's yoga practice. Although yoga was originally tied to a counterbiblical belief system, Patterson testifies to utilizing some of its postures simply to strengthen her core and stretch her limbs.<sup>46</sup> According to her, a fitness routine like this still qualifies as yoga. The nonessentialist definition allows that some yoga practices disregard yogic scriptures and be purposed toward fitness. Defining yoga this way, many Christians feel free to do it.

Under the nonessentialist definition, not only can secularized, fitness-focused practices count as yoga, but even explicitly Christianized ones may be legitimate manifestations of the practice. Mary Lou Davis advocates for Christians taking part in yoga practices that are intentionally infused with Christian elements. In an article on her website from 2018, she writes, "We can treat yoga the same way we would treat any other workout: either to get strong and limber or . . . as a moving meditation, focusing our efforts on the creator of the universe."<sup>47</sup> Davis testifies, "I like to think that when I raise my arms up, I am lifting them in praise to my heavenly Father."<sup>48</sup> As Davis practices what she calls yoga, she performs the movements in such a way as to incorporate her Christian sentiments and express praise to God. In cooperation with CrossYoga's Rie Skarhoj, Rebekka Maria Brandt Kristensen calls for enculturating yoga as a Christian

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<sup>44</sup> Alexandra Davis, "Should Christians Do Yoga?," Evangelical Alliance, January 1, 2016, <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/should-christians-do-yoga>.

<sup>45</sup> Alli Patterson, "Can Christians Do Yoga?," Crossroads Church, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.crossroads.net/media/articles/can-christians-do-yoga>.

<sup>46</sup> Patterson, "Can Christians Do Yoga?"

<sup>47</sup> Mary Lou Davis, "Should Christians Practice Yoga?," *Mary Lou Davis*, December 12, 2018, <http://www.maryloudavis.com/2018/12/12/should-christians-practice-yoga/>.

<sup>48</sup> Davis, "Should Christians Practice Yoga?"

practice. In a contribution to Skarhoj’s book, Kristensen writes, “In connection with Christianity, yoga can be enculturated, be made Christian.”<sup>49</sup> She goes on to explain what this enculturation can look like: “To incorporate parts of yoga does not mean to approve of everything. You can only accept the parts of the yoga that are compatible with Christianity.”<sup>50</sup> Kristensen concludes, “Yoga in a Christian context is not an acceptance of the Hindu way of thinking. Christian yoga is a tool that when cleansed, qualified and enculturated can be used in a Christian context and setting.”<sup>51</sup>

The scriptural definition of yoga maintains that only those practices that reflect the primary sources actually qualify as yoga, and since yogic scripture is blatantly counterbiblical, Christians cannot participate in yoga thusly defined. The nonessentialist definition holds that scripturally ungentine yoga practices still count as yoga—whether they are purely secular or strategically Christianized—so believers may find some practices called yoga to be perfectly permissible. Important to note here is that the very practices that may be permissible for Christians under the nonessentialist definition are those that totally eschew yoga’s foundational scriptures and thereby ignore much of the tradition’s history and culture. Christians interested in doing scripturally ungentine yoga practices, then, need to work through one more consideration: cultural appropriation.

### **The Cultural Appropriation Issue**

The very thing that makes a yoga practice potentially permissible for Christians—its eschewal of yogic scripture—is also what could render it guilty of cultural appropriation. Many current practices labelled as yoga are secular and fitness-focused, and therefore fundamentally different from what is laid out in yoga’s foundational texts. Here again, Brown offers a helpful starting point: “Although many people associate yoga

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<sup>49</sup> Skarhoj, *Yoga in the Church*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Skarhoj, *Yoga in the Church*, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Skarhoj, *Yoga in the Church*, 14–15.

primarily with *āsanas*, or physical postures, modern postural yoga is relatively recent. Prior to the 1920s, *āsanas* played at most a subordinate role in most yoga.”<sup>52</sup> In our time, yoga is largely fitness-focused and oriented heavily around physical postures, and as such, the phenomenon is vastly different from anything called yoga before the twentieth century. Put simply, modern yoga is overwhelmingly physical and therefore scripturally ungentle. What remains to be determined is whether participating in these ungentle, posture-oriented yoga practices makes one guilty of cultural appropriation.

Brown calls attention to the fact that those who advocate for physicalized or even explicitly Christianized yoga practices face allegations of cultural appropriation.<sup>53</sup> The general idea is that participating in practices that eschew yoga’s scriptures and ignore its original culture may be culturally appropriative. Heather Caliri, a Christian who has some experience in more physicalized yoga forms, reflects transparently in a blog entry from 2015: “I’d assumed that by taking all of the Hindu parts out of yoga, I’d make yoga Christ-friendly. But now, my very attitude strikes me as problematic. Just like Selena Gomez’s fashion choices, I’m assuming I can use yoga for my own ends . . . without worrying about whether I’m . . . disrespecting its essence.”<sup>54</sup> Catholic yoga practitioner Allyson Huval writes that “this term ‘Christian yoga’ is textbook cultural appropriation[,] white-washing yoga’s history.”<sup>55</sup> Tension is high surrounding the question of whether ungentle yoga practices—be they purely secular or strategically Christianized—constitute cultural appropriation. The answer depends on whether those who spearheaded the development of such modern practices were cultural insiders or outsiders.

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<sup>52</sup> Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, “Christian Yoga: Something New Under the Sun/Son?,” *Church History* 87, no. 3 (September 2018): 681.

<sup>54</sup> Heather Caliri, “Yoga, Hospitality, and Cultural Appropriation,” *Christ and Pop Culture*, June 15, 2015, <https://christandpopculture.com/yoga-hospitality-and-cultural-appropriation/>.

<sup>55</sup> Allyson Huval, “Yoga Appropriation or Yoga Appreciation,” *Christians Practicing Yoga*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.christianspracticingyoga.com/christianity-and-yoga-blog/yoga-appropriation-or-yoga-appreciation>.

To ascertain whether today's scripturally ungentle yoga practices constitute cultural appropriation, we need to uncover who is responsible for this massive departure from yoga's primary sources. Since cultural appropriation involves the misuse of features from one culture *by members of another culture*,<sup>56</sup> scripturally ungentle yoga practices are only appropriative if they were developed by non-Indians. In this section, I present an overwhelming body of existing research showing that modern, fitness-focused yoga was created in India, by Indians, for Indians. For this reason, contemporary, purely physical practices called yoga—scripturally ungentle as they are—cannot be considered instances of cultural appropriation. By and large, they were architected by cultural insiders. In many cases, then, a Christian who participates in a fitness-focused practice that has nothing to do with yogic scripture yet still goes by the name yoga may do so without transgressing biblical teaching or committing cultural appropriation.

### **Modern Postural Yoga as Distinct from Scripturally Genuine Yoga**

Much of what is called yoga in the contemporary West is focused on physical postures and is therefore phenomenologically different from what we find in the classical yogic texts. In her 2008 book, *A History of Modern Yoga*, Elizabeth De Michelis coined the term Modern Postural Yoga, or MPY. De Michelis defines MPY as “those styles of yoga practice that put a lot of emphasis on *āsanas* or yoga postures; in other words the more ‘physical’ or gymnastic-like type of yoga.”<sup>57</sup> She explains that it was during the early decades of the twentieth century that the yoga strands that would make up MPY “developed a stronger focus on the performance of *āsana*.”<sup>58</sup> This development was a

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<sup>56</sup> This understanding of cultural appropriation is supported by Encyclopedia Britannica, Cambridge Dictionary, and Oxford Reference, as cited above.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004; repr. London: Continuum, 2008), 4.

<sup>58</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 187.

drastic departure from what was laid out in yoga's scriptures, and De Michelis highlights up front the stark difference between classical and modern yogas.<sup>59</sup> She writes, "The way MPY has been practiced throughout the twentieth century is of course worlds apart from all forms of classical yoga."<sup>60</sup> As different as MPY is from genuine yoga, it has been equally definitive for the term yoga over the last century. In her 2008 book, De Michelis declared that "in colloquial English, 'yoga' has come to mean a session of MPY."<sup>61</sup> In another work from the same year, she writes, "By and large, when people talk about 'yoga' in everyday English, this is the type of practice that is intended."<sup>62</sup> MPY is scripturally ungenue and oriented decidedly around physical postures. Currently in the West, it is also the most commonly intended referent for the term yoga.

Mark Singleton is another scholar who calls attention to the difference between MPY and any conceptualization of yoga that came before it. He writes, "The primacy of *āsana* performance in transnational yoga today is a new phenomenon that has no parallel in premodern times."<sup>63</sup> He goes on to insist that MPY practices "have no precedent (prior to the early twentieth century, that is) in Indian yoga traditions."<sup>64</sup> His conclusion is unambiguous: "Any assertion that transnational postural yoga is of a piece with the dominant orthopraxy of Indian yogic tradition is therefore highly questionable."<sup>65</sup> Perhaps most helpful is Singleton's diagnosis that the "yoga" of the classical scriptures

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<sup>59</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 248.

<sup>61</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 248.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth De Michelis, "Modern Yoga: History and Forms," in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, Routledge Hindu Studies Series (New York: Routledge, 2008), 22.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University, 2010), 3.

<sup>64</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 21.

<sup>65</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 27.



and the predominant “yoga” of today are mere homonyms. They are two words that look and sound the same, but they have two completely different referents. Singleton writes,

A more valid and helpful way of thinking . . . might be to consider the term *yoga* as it refers to modern postural practice as a *homonym*, and not a synonym, of the “yoga” associated with the philosophical system of Patañjali . . . or the “yoga” of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and so on. In other words, although the word “yoga” as it is used popularly today is identical in spelling and pronunciation in each of these instances, it has quite different meanings and origins. It is, in short, a homonym.<sup>66</sup>

Joseph Alter explains the difference between modern and classical yogas in a way that is similar to Singleton’s homonym model. He begins his book by writing, “On the one hand, [yoga] is one of the six main schools of classical South Asian philosophy, most explicitly articulated in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*.”<sup>67</sup> Alter adds, “On the other hand, Yoga is a modern form of alternative medicine and physical fitness training.”<sup>68</sup> Alter concludes his work by observing, “There is an enormous space of knowledge and practice between the message of the *Gītā* and the *Yoga Sūtra* on the one hand and steel nerves and iron muscles on the other.”<sup>69</sup> Advancing a similar point, Strauss points out the obvious when she writes, “The original goal of classical yoga, *kaivalya*, or isolation of the self, is a far cry from [yoga’s] contemporary goals of health, stress reduction, and flexibility.”<sup>70</sup> MPY is fitness-focused, and for that very reason, scripturally ungenueine.

Canadian yoga scholar Norman Sjoman also acknowledges that modern yoga is heavily oriented around physical postures and therefore starkly different from what is taught in any premodern yogic texts. Sjoman observes a “total absence of connection between the traditional sources and modern traditions,” such that “[t]he yoga textual

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<sup>66</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2004), 3.

<sup>68</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 175.

<sup>70</sup> Strauss, *Positioning Yoga*, 4.

tradition is not the basis of modern practices of yoga.”<sup>71</sup> Sjoman pulls no punches in reporting that most practitioners of modern yoga “have indiscriminately alleged the support of ancient authorities in order to lend authenticity to their own practices,” before going on to point out the reality that, “[i]n fact, their practices have no real textual justification and there is no continuous tradition of practice that can be traced back to the texts on yoga.”<sup>72</sup> Classical, scripture-based yoga and modern, fitness-focused yoga are two different things, and the latter is not fashioned after the former in any real sense.

Jain also acknowledges the vast difference between classical yoga and the fitness-focused, posture-oriented practices that predominate today. She writes, “In popularized yoga classes today, we most frequently find some variety of postural yoga, a fitness regimen made up of sequences of often onerous *asanas* or bodily postures,” and she points out that “these are images never seen before in the history of yoga.”<sup>73</sup> Jain insists that “there is no direct, unbroken lineage between the South Asian premodern yoga systems and modern postural yoga (Alter 2004; de Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010). In other words, today’s popularized yoga systems are new, not continuations of some static premodern yoga tradition.”<sup>74</sup> Her clarity on the matter continues, “[M]odern yoga systems, including postural yoga ones, bear little resemblance to the yoga systems that preceded them.”<sup>75</sup> She even describes MPY as “radically distinct” from the yoga practices of premodernity.<sup>76</sup> Jain adds her scholarly attestation to the position that much of contemporary yoga is fitness-focused and scripturally ungenueine.

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<sup>71</sup> N. E. Sjoman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1999), 39.

<sup>72</sup> Sjoman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, 40.

<sup>73</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 18–19; Jain repeats this claim verbatim on page 160.

<sup>76</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 2.

Ultimately, it is undisputable that there exists a huge segment of yoga now that is thoroughly secularized, decidedly fitness-focused, and therefore fundamentally different from what was laid out in yoga's foundational scriptures. As a Christian yoga enthusiast, then, Davis is not wrong in pointing out, "Most yoga currently practiced in America only slightly resembles the original practice. In fact, most of what we do in the West isn't the same yoga at all."<sup>77</sup> To determine whether participating in an MPY session constitutes cultural appropriation, though, what matters is who actually drove this shift away from yoga's scriptures during the twentieth century. Since, by its very definition, cultural appropriation must be perpetrated by members of a culture that is different from the one being abused,<sup>78</sup> MPY practices can only be called appropriative if they were designed by people not indigenous to India. The research presented below demonstrates that MPY is an Indian product through and through. However, outside of serious yoga scholarship, the most widely held assumption seems to be that it is not.

### **The Story of Modern Yoga**

Mohler's commentary on yoga over the years has generally operated with the version of MPY's development story that is most popular: The Americans did it. In an article from 2010, Mohler writes, "Americans have turned yoga into an exercise ritual . . . and an avenue to longer life and greater health."<sup>79</sup> During his interview with Shearer in 2020, Mohler was affirmed in his observation that "there are just millions and millions of Americans who think that they are doing yoga when what they're doing is an appropriation of yoga."<sup>80</sup> To be sure, Americans' use of yoga as an exercise routine

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<sup>77</sup> Davis, "Should Christians Practice Yoga?"

<sup>78</sup> This understanding of cultural appropriation is supported by Encyclopedia Britannica, Cambridge Dictionary, and Oxford Reference, as cited above.

<sup>79</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Subtle Body: Should Christians Practice Yoga?," Albert Mohler, September 20, 2010, <https://albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-subtle-body-should-christians-practice-yoga>.

<sup>80</sup> Mohler, "The Battle Over Yoga."

would be a textbook case of cultural appropriation if it were twentieth-century Americans (cultural outsiders) who had fashioned these scripturally ungentle MPY practices for their own ends. The most common assumption outside of serious yoga scholarship is that they did. Understandably, Mohler estimates that most yoga practitioners in the West have created their own yoga practices by way of syncretism.<sup>81</sup> This is an all-too-common version of MPY's origin story, assuming that it began in the West.

Barkataki also seems to operate with the assumption that non-Indians were generally responsible for the development of MPY over the last century and concludes that participating in such practices today makes one guilty of cultural appropriation. She explains cultural appropriation in this way: "Cultural appropriation is when someone uses someone else's culture, including practices, symbols, rituals, fashion or other elements from a target or 'minority' culture, without considering the source, origins or people of that culture."<sup>82</sup> She goes on to explain, "Cultural appropriation happens when a dominant group in a position of privilege and power politically, economically or socially adopts, benefits from, shares and even exploits the customs, practices, ideas or social and spiritual knowledge of another, usually target or subordinate, society or people."<sup>83</sup> Barkataki's understanding of cultural appropriation entails that one person or group exploits a different person or group. More specifically, she writes that cultural appropriation happens when a dominant group exploits a subordinate one. In *Embrace Yoga's Roots*, Barkataki alleges that this is what has happened in the case of MPY. She contends that there has been "harm done to yoga—the harms of oppression and cultural appropriation."<sup>84</sup> Since cultural appropriation is something that must be committed by

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<sup>81</sup> Mohler, "The Battle Over Yoga."

<sup>82</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga's Roots*, 46.

<sup>83</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga's Roots*, 48.

<sup>84</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga's Roots*, 17.

cultural outsiders, if MPY is to be considered culturally appropriative, then it must have been non-Indians who developed it. Barkataki asserts that it was indeed cultural outsiders who developed MPY, arguing that the normative culture of the West is what effectually devalued yoga and ripped it from its roots.<sup>85</sup> Barkataki is an example of a contemporary voice in the yoga world accusing MPY practitioners of cultural appropriation by assuming it was non-Indians who birthed the phenomenon to begin with.

In reality, though, the story of yoga throughout the last century makes clear that the scripturally ungentine fitness practices that would come to constitute the MPY phenomenon were created in India, by Indians, for Indians. Indeed, De Michelis herself identifies Bellur Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois—two twentieth-century Indian yoga leaders who are examined below—as having established “[r]elatively pure examples of MPY schools” in their yoga facilities in southern India.<sup>86</sup> By its very definition, cultural appropriation must be committed by cultural outsiders. For this reason, purely physical yoga practices—scripturally ungentine as they are—cannot be considered instances of cultural appropriation. Therefore, in many cases, a Christian who participates in an ungentine, fitness-focused MPY session may do so without transgressing biblical teaching or committing cultural appropriation.

Alter, Jain, and Singleton all agree that the development of MPY was spearheaded by Indian yoga teachers in the early twentieth century. Alter explains that, during those formative decades, men in India were seeking to revive yoga and give it a bodily focus.<sup>87</sup> He states, “It was in India that Yoga was modernized, medicalized, and transformed into a system of physical culture.”<sup>88</sup> For her part, Jain reports that modern

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<sup>85</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga’s Roots*, 9. Bhamra also accuses the West in general of committing cultural appropriation against yoga. Bhamra, “Stop Cultural Appropriation of Yoga.”

<sup>86</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 187.

<sup>87</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 7–8.

<sup>88</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 10.

Indian yoga teachers assimilated many elements from European physical culture and then prescribed their new yoga forms as methods for physical fitness.<sup>89</sup> Singleton argues that modernity's radically transformed manifestations of yoga "were the result of a reframing of practices and belief frameworks within India itself over the last 150 years."<sup>90</sup> In fact, Singleton goes on to state unambiguously that "the merger of 'traditional yoga' . . . with physical culture did not begin on North American shores."<sup>91</sup> The consensus here is that the advent of scripturally unguanine MPY practices was an Indian phenomenon, not a Western one. Singleton explains the growth of MPY in this way:

To a large extent, popular postural yoga came into being in the first half of the twentieth century as a hybridized product of colonial India's dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement. The forms of physical practice that predominate in popular international yoga today were developed in a climate of intense experimentation and research around a suitable regimen for Indian bodies and minds.<sup>92</sup>

Stuart Sarbacker is another scholar who acknowledges that MPY was developed during the early decades of the twentieth century within India itself. He explains that the physical, posture-oriented practices we now call yoga "are deeply situated in the soil of Indian modernism."<sup>93</sup> Like Jain, Sarbacker argues that modern Indian yoga teachers got many of their ideas from European fitness practices such as gymnastics.<sup>94</sup> Regardless of where the physical elements of MPY came from, though, what is important for our purposes is that it was twentieth-century Indians—cultural

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<sup>89</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 37.

<sup>90</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 16. Singleton also makes this same claim in two other volumes. Singleton and Byrne, *Yoga in the Modern World*, 4; Ellen Goldberg and Mark Singleton, introduction to *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 1.

<sup>91</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 209.

<sup>92</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 81.

<sup>93</sup> Stuart Ray Sarbacker, "The Numinous Cessative in Modern Yoga," in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, Routledge Hindu Studies Series (New York: Routledge, 2008), 161.

<sup>94</sup> Sarbacker, "The Numinous Cessative in Modern Yoga," 161.

insiders—who birthed the fitness-focused phenomenon from the very beginning. The bodily practices of MPY are completely untethered from anything that is taught in yoga’s classical scriptures. But they are inarguably indigenous to India. During the first half of the twentieth century, there were three epicenters for the development of MPY on the Indian subcontinent: Mysore, Bombay, and Calcutta.

**Fitness-focused yoga in Mysore.** In southern India during the first half of the twentieth century, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, along with his two students, Bellur Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, created the strand of secular, fitness-focused yoga practices that would constitute the foundation of MPY. Brown ventures, “No single individual exerted a greater influence on modern postural yoga than Shri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) in Mysore, India.”<sup>95</sup> Singleton explains that Krishnamacharya’s yoga was purely physical, and as such, completely different from any conceptualization of yoga that had existed before (especially in yoga’s scriptures). Singleton writes, “[Krishnamacharya’s] system, which was to become the basis of so many forms of contemporary athletic yoga, is a synthesis of several extant methods of physical training that (prior to this period) would have fallen well outside any definition of yoga.”<sup>96</sup> This new Mysore style of yoga would become so popular that Singleton estimates Krishnamacharya’s teachings “have arguably had the greatest influence on radically physicalized forms of yoga across the globe.”<sup>97</sup> Undoubtedly, the advent of Krishnamacharya’s innovative yoga method marks the genesis of MPY, and it was overwhelmingly fitness-focused.

Jain and Shearer agree that Krishnamacharya’s yoga practice was novel, seminal, and decidedly oriented around bodily postures. Jain names the Mysore teacher

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<sup>95</sup> Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools*, 68.

<sup>96</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 117.

<sup>97</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 176.

as one of the two “figures most significant in the process of reconstructing yoga in the popular imagination as postural yoga.”<sup>98</sup> She explains that it was Krishnamacharya who first associated yoga with various elements of physical culture such as muscle-building and stretching and began training students in what we now call postural yoga.<sup>99</sup> Shearer explains in his interview with Mohler, “[Krishnamacharya] taught yoga very much as a system of physical exercises. He didn’t talk about meditation. He didn’t talk about breath control very much—the slightly more inner aspects of yoga. He taught yoga as a physical practice for good health, for flexibility.”<sup>100</sup> Shearer is careful to emphasize in his book from the same year that Krishnamacharya’s fitness-focused yoga “is not a practice sanctioned by the mythistorical ‘five thousand years’ of tradition as is sometimes claimed by its proponents.”<sup>101</sup> This new Mysore yoga was novel and physical. It was scripturally ungentle and was the seed of all MPY. Most pertinent to the cultural appropriation question, though, is the fact that it was a *boda fide* product of India.

De Michelis, along with Matthew Anderson and Norman Sjoman, affirm that Krishnamacharya’s concept of yoga was oriented around the physical and was in that sense a novel offshoot from yoga’s history and scripture. The coiner of the MPY term acknowledges that Krishnamacharya “did integrate Western physical fitness and training techniques in his practice and teaching,” and Anderson reports that his yoga sessions are described in official records as “physical culture” and “exercise.”<sup>102</sup> Sjoman is more blunt in his appraisal of Krishnamacharya’s methods, writing that his yoga practice was

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<sup>98</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 39.

<sup>99</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 39.

<sup>100</sup> Mohler, “The Battle Over Yoga.”

<sup>101</sup> Alistair Shearer, *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West* (London: Hurst, 2020), 162.

<sup>102</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 197; Matthew Lee Anderson, “Let’s Call it Danish Gymnastics: The Yoga Body,” *Mere Orthodoxy*, August 23, 2011, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/call-danish-gymnastics-yoga-body>.



“strongly preoccupied with the practice of āsanās or yoga positions, appears to be distinct from the philosophical or textual tradition, and does not appear to have any basis as a tradition as there is no textual support for the āsanās taught and no lineage of teachers.”<sup>103</sup>

As if that were not disappointing enough for those inclined to see modern Mysore yoga as a continuation of some classical discipline, Sjöman goes on to write, “It is quite clear that the yoga system of . . . Krishnamachariar is another syncretism drawing heavily on [an earlier, non-yogic] gymnastic text, but presenting it under the name of yoga.”<sup>104</sup>

Krishnamacharya’s fitness yoga was a novel departure from yogic scripture, and it was seminal for the majority of yoga expressions that would come in its wake.

Other scholars have pointed out that, not only was Krishnamacharya’s yoga practice oriented around physical fitness, but it was also strategically secularized. Coauthoring with Tara Fraser, Singleton relays that Krishnamacharya has been called “the father of modern yoga” and observes that “his reputation as the source and originator of yoga in the modern world is well established.”<sup>105</sup> Singleton and Fraser report, “For many practitioners in the West today, Krishnamacharya is considered the source of and authority for yoga practice.”<sup>106</sup> Most helpfully, Singleton and Fraser argue that this seminal figure of MPY taught a yoga that was open to people of any religion or none. They explain that, although Krishnamacharya was a Vāshnavist, his teachings on yoga did not require one to espouse Vāshnavist doctrines such as those found in *BG*.<sup>107</sup> The two scholars write, “Krishnamacharya presented a form of yoga that could be open and

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<sup>103</sup> Sjöman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, 35.

<sup>104</sup> Sjöman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, 55.

<sup>105</sup> Mark Singleton and Tara Fraser, “T. Krishnamacharya, Father of Modern Yoga,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 83.

<sup>106</sup> Singleton and Fraser, “T. Krishnamacharya, Father of Modern Yoga,” 100.

<sup>107</sup> Singleton and Fraser, “T. Krishnamacharya, Father of Modern Yoga,” 95.

accessible to all, beyond religious sectarianism, gender, caste, or nationality.”<sup>108</sup> In fact, they even quote the Mysore-based yoga master as having said, “We need to de-Indianize yoga in order to try to universalize it.”<sup>109</sup> Krishnamacharya advanced a yoga practice that was fitness-focused, secular, and crucially seminal for all future expressions of MPY. He was also, of course, a born-and-bread insider to the culture of southern India.

Stephanie Corigliano is another scholar who acknowledges the secular nature of Krishnamacharya’s yoga practice, and she goes on to argue that his innovation is what ultimately made space for explicitly Christianized yoga forms as well. Corigliano observes that the Mysore master emphasized “the general, non-religious benefits of Yoga”<sup>110</sup> and concludes, “The heart of Yoga practice in [Krishnamacharya’s] context is a religiously neutral space, open to believers from different traditions.”<sup>111</sup> By Corigliano’s estimation, Krishnamacharya’s posture-oriented, nonsectarian inclinations must have been what gave rise to the secular and more fitness-focused yoga practices we have now.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Corigliano theorizes that explicitly Christianized forms of yoga naturally resulted from the teachings of MPY innovators such as Krishnamacharya: “I argue that Christian Yoga . . . might be viewed as a natural result of the philosophical precepts set forth by 20th century proponents of Yoga like Krishnamacharya.”<sup>113</sup> Since Krishnamacharya taught yoga as something not exclusively tethered to any one religion, even practices infused with Christian elements are within bounds. An unimpeachable

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<sup>108</sup> Singleton and Fraser, “T. Krishnamacharya, Father of Modern Yoga,” 95.

<sup>109</sup> Singleton and Fraser, “T. Krishnamacharya, Father of Modern Yoga,” 95. Singleton and Fraser offer this English rendering of Krishnamacharya’s words, citing a French publication of his teachings, many of which were likely first given by him in the Kannada language.

<sup>110</sup> Stephanie Corigliano, “Devotion and Discipline: Christian Yoga and the Yoga of T. Krishnamacharya,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 30, no. 4 (2017): 28.

<sup>111</sup> Corigliano, “Devotion and Discipline,” 29.

<sup>112</sup> Corigliano, “Devotion and Discipline,” 26.

<sup>113</sup> Corigliano, “Devotion and Discipline,” 22.

insider to the Indian culture, Krishnamacharya was the chief architect of secular MPY.

Just as Krishnamacharya is responsible for creating the scripturally ungentle yoga practice that would prove seminal to the whole MPY phenomenon, his two students, Bellur Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, are responsible for popularizing MPY beyond Mysore, especially in the West. Frederick Smith and Joan White attest to just how formidable a figure Iyengar was in the advancement of fitness-focused MPY throughout the second half of the twentieth century. They estimate, “For the last sixty-five years, B. K. S. Iyengar has been the most visible and influential figure in the development and expansion of . . . postural yoga.”<sup>114</sup> In fact, Smith and White identify Iyengar as “the single Indian yoga master who has changed the face of both the practice and the presentation of yoga.”<sup>115</sup> Iyengar took what Krishnamacharya taught him and ran with it. An indisputable insider to the culture of southern India, Bellur Iyengar brought Krishnamacharya’s fitness-focused yoga practice to the world stage.

De Michelis attests that Iyengar honed his own MPY practice and disseminated it liberally outside of India. She reports, “Iyengar combined within himself influences from all the main early formulations of MPY,” including that of Krishnamacharya as well as some other contemporary yoga innovators in Bombay who are examined below.<sup>116</sup> De Michelis relays that, throughout much of his book, *Light on Yoga*, “Iyengar substantiates the value and effectiveness of *āsana* in pure MPY style by discussing their effects mainly in terms of Western medical knowledge and fitness training.”<sup>117</sup> As a scripturally ungentle, fitness-focused practice, Iyengar’s yoga fit squarely within the bounds of

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<sup>114</sup> Frederick Smith and Joan White, “Becoming an Icon: B. K. S. Iyengar as a Yoga Teacher and a Yoga Guru,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, eds. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 122.

<sup>115</sup> Smith and White, “Becoming an Icon,” 122.

<sup>116</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 197.

<sup>117</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 212.

MPY, and he was wildly successful in spreading it to the West. Just after the close of the twentieth century, De Michelis announced, “Iyengar Yoga is arguably the most influential and widespread school of Modern Postural Yoga worldwide.”<sup>118</sup> Iyengar’s yoga is scripturally ungentine, completely fitness-focused, and—most pertinently to the cultural appropriation question—originally Indian.

Shearer and Alter agree that Iyengar’s yoga fits the bill of MPY perfectly and that he promoted it prodigiously among Western consumers during the second half of the twentieth century. Shearer argues that “from its beginning Iyengar’s system became synonymous with a squarely physical orientation, a rigorous approach bolstered by an array of props to facilitate stretching and suppleness.”<sup>119</sup> In other words, Iyengar’s yoga was indeed modern, postural yoga. Attesting to the Mysore-trained yoga leader’s success in proliferating his practice across the UK, Shearer holds that “Iyengar was by far the most important early populariser of yoga in Britain.”<sup>120</sup> For his part, Alter overlooks the importance of Krishnamacharya’s earlier innovations when he writes that Iyengar “invented a new kind of Yoga based on a synthesis of *āsanas* with Western gymnastics.”<sup>121</sup> Nonetheless, Alter’s likening of Iyengar’s yoga to gymnastics is helpful, and he goes on to write, “Iyengar’s method involves a great deal of effort of the kind more often associated with aerobic physical fitness.”<sup>122</sup> Iyengar was a leading Indian yoga teacher who taught the modern, Western world that yoga is a fitness program.

Newcombe begins describing Iyengar’s work in the UK by writing, “When B. K. S. Iyengar (1918–2014) came to Britain to promote yoga in the 1960s, he attempted to

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<sup>118</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 194.

<sup>119</sup> Shearer, *The Story of Yoga*, 169. Shearer also pointed this out during his interview with Mohler. Mohler, “The Battle Over Yoga.”

<sup>120</sup> Shearer, *The Story of Yoga*, 170.

<sup>121</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 17.

<sup>122</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 24.

make use of every platform he could in order to inspire interest in the subject.”<sup>123</sup> She goes on to document the novelty of his yoga methods, along with their success in popularizing the idea of yoga in the Western imagination. She writes,

Some during this period took offense at Iyengar’s performance of physical virtuosity, which they considered to be violent, exhibitionist, and exemplifying contortionism rather than yoga. However, Iyengar’s performances did inspire considerable interest in the subject of yoga and his promotion contributed to making physical-posture oriented yoga a more normal activity in the West.<sup>124</sup>

Not only did Iyengar teach the West that yoga is a fitness program, but he also taught audiences in the UK and America that yoga is something secular. Jain affirms that Iyengar’s yoga was decidedly fitness-focused, calling it “a physical fitness brand.”<sup>125</sup> She goes on to report that the Mysore master taught that “yoga, although a part of an ancient South Asian yoga transmission, is not specific to any religious tradition.”<sup>126</sup> That is, yoga is not particularly Hindu. Jain writes, “Iyengar’s students’ yoga classes at American YMCAs and London institutions were thoroughly postural and were deemed beneficial for a variety of consumers regardless of other religious or lifestyle commitments.”<sup>127</sup> The fact that yoga’s primary sources are Hindu scriptures was not definitive for Iyengar’s understanding and promotion of yoga. Stefanie Syman affirms that Iyengar kept religious elements out of his yoga practice. She relays that, during his yoga sessions, Iyengar “forbade instructors to teach meditation and chanting. Instead, they were to focus only on poses and [systematized breathing].”<sup>128</sup> The importance of Iyengar’s Indian identity is not lost on Syman. She observes, “[Iyengar] was an Indian Yogi, and so had all the

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<sup>123</sup> Newcombe, “Spaces of Yoga,” 554.

<sup>124</sup> Newcombe, “Spaces of Yoga,” 554.

<sup>125</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 82.

<sup>126</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 84.

<sup>127</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 84.

<sup>128</sup> Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), 254.

credibility and authenticity his ethnicity conferred, who had, in effect, stripped the religion out of yoga.”<sup>129</sup> Trained in the scripturally ungentle MPY methods of his teacher Krishnamacharya, the South Indian yoga teacher, Bellur Iyengar, taught the West that yoga is a fitness program that is completely secular.

The yoga practices that emerged out of Mysore in southern India during the twentieth century were seminal for the MPY phenomenon as a whole. They were scripturally ungentle yoga practices, focused on fitness, and vehemently secular. Krishnamacharya was the original catalyst of the Mysore movement, and his student Iyengar advanced their brand of yoga on the world stage. Also helpful in promoting Mysore-style yoga in the West was another of Krishnamacharya’s students, Pattabhi Jois. Benjamin Smith identifies Jois’s proprietary yoga practice as a textbook example of MPY,<sup>130</sup> and Byrne argues that his highly active, aerobics-style practice “forms the basis of many styles of yoga we see today.”<sup>131</sup> Like the yoga practices of Krishnamacharya and Iyengar, Jois’s yoga was fitness-focused and powerfully influential. These modern yoga teachers from Mysore taught the West that yoga is something secular and fitness-focused. And most importantly for the cultural appropriation question, these teachers and the yoga practices they engineered were inarguably indigenous to India.

**Health-oriented yoga in Bombay.** In the early decades of the twentieth century, Bombay was another epicenter for the development of MPY. The two main figures of the Bombay-based movement toward scientifically explicable, health-oriented

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<sup>129</sup> Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 254.

<sup>130</sup> Benjamin Richard Smith, “‘With Heat Even Iron Will Bend’: Discipline and Authority in Ashtanga Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, Routledge Hindu Studies Series (New York: Routledge, 2008), 141. Interestingly, Jois branded his yoga practice as “Ashtanga Yoga” to be reminiscent (albeit inaccurately) of Patanjali’s eight limbs.

<sup>131</sup> Jean Byrne, “‘Authorized by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois’: The Role of *Paramparā* and Lineage in Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, eds. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 107.

yoga practices were Kuvalayananda and Yogendra. Their work in western India was so seminal for the ascendance of MPY during the first half of the twentieth century that Alter identifies Kuvalayananda and Yogendra as “the two main characters in the history of modern Yoga as it is linked to health and fitness.”<sup>132</sup> Any explanation as to the origins of scripturally ungentine, health-oriented yoga practices in the modern era must account for the formative work of these two yoga innovators based near Bombay. Their yoga practices were, in a word, scientific, and they played a huge role in shaping how the world has understood yoga ever since.

Kuvalayananda was not a practitioner or teacher of yoga *per se*. Rather, he was a researcher and analyst of MPY as a scientific phenomenon. His project was to study and then present yoga to the Indian public as a scientifically verifiable system for better health. Alter paints a helpful picture: “[Kuvalayananda] wore a white lab coat, built a laboratory and clinic, imported X-ray machines and electrocardiographs. To a significant extent he modeled himself and his study of Yoga on the hegemonic image of science.”<sup>133</sup> Kuvalayananda approached his study of yoga as a scientist, and Alter explains that one of his main purposes was “to teach and train young people to practice Yoga in order to maintain health.”<sup>134</sup> Strauss agrees, testifying that Kuvalayananda “emphasized the scientific validation of yoga practice as a health-promoting program through scientific research and experimentation,” going on to deduce that “Kuvalayananda’s primary concern was to present yoga as a science.”<sup>135</sup> Kuvalayananda’s work was effective in promoting yoga for health in western India. Though he makes the common mistake of

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<sup>132</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 27.

<sup>133</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 30.

<sup>134</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 85.

<sup>135</sup> Sarah Strauss, “‘Adapt, Adjust, Accommodate’: The Production of Yoga in a Transnational World,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, Routledge Hindu Studies Series (New York: Routledge, 2008), 63.

referring to physical yoga practices as *hatha* yoga, Elliott Goldberg reports helpfully, “Kavalayananda’s dream of transforming hatha yoga into a widely practiced physical exercise in India was an unambiguous success.”<sup>136</sup> Kavalayananda advanced the Indian public’s understanding of yoga as a health practice, rather than as something whose purpose was determined in any way by the classical yogic scriptures.

Not only did Kavalayananda present yoga as something purposed toward physical health, but he also insisted that yoga be stripped of its original culture and spiritual elements. Regarding the work of Kavalayananda’s team in their lab outside Bombay during the early twentieth century, Alter writes, “Their scientific focus on the human body enabled a translation of a branch of Indian philosophy into a form of practice that is, like Modern Science itself, putatively free of cultural baggage while clearly linked to the history of a particular part of the world.”<sup>137</sup> Making no attempt to hide the fact that yoga had been inherently wrapped up with Indian philosophy for centuries, Kavalayananda’s team nonetheless presented yoga as something culturally neutral and completely focused on the physical body. Alter goes so far as to write that Kavalayananda “took the ‘culture’ out of Yoga.”<sup>138</sup> Goldberg adds that, during those days, the Bombay-based scientist set about “expunging spirituality—the essence of yoga—from his writings.”<sup>139</sup> Through what he taught and wrote, Kavalayananda contributed to the modern Indian understanding of yoga as a culturally neutral, despiritualized practice oriented around health.

Yogendra accomplished essentially the same thing from his own institute in western India. Singleton explains, “Like Kavalayananda, Yogendra was concerned with

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<sup>136</sup> Elliott Goldberg, *The Path of Modern Yoga: The History of an Embodied Spiritual Practice* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2016), 140.

<sup>137</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 77.

<sup>138</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 102.

<sup>139</sup> Goldberg, *The Path of Modern Yoga*, 95.



providing scientific corroboration for the health benefits of yoga and with creating simplified, accessible [physical posture] courses for the public.”<sup>140</sup> Singleton records that the whole purpose of Yogendra’s institute was to research “the health-giving aspects of yoga.”<sup>141</sup> Alter agrees, writing, “From the very outset, [Yogendra] conceptualized his teaching as directly related to health and healing.”<sup>142</sup> Goldberg affirms that the main goal of Yogendra’s classes was “good health as an end in itself.”<sup>143</sup> Yogendra’s proprietary form of yoga was a textbook example of MPY. Furthermore, Goldberg argues that his reframing of yoga as exercise was a deliberate departure from what yoga had always been up to that point. Goldberg writes, “Although he sometimes claimed to be preserving the purity of an ancient, classical tradition, most of what [Yogendra] wrote and did reflects the purposeful modification of practice to fit [bodily postures] and [systematized breathing] into the rubric of therapy and rhythmic exercise.”<sup>144</sup> Yogendra developed a yoga practice that was health-oriented and therefore scripturally ungenueine.

Being aimed so squarely at the goal of physical health, Yogendra’s yoga practice was adamantly secular. Alter writes that Yogendra made an “effort to sanitize, secularize, and rationalize the practice of yoga.”<sup>145</sup> Here again, Goldberg is clear on just how starkly Yogendra’s secularization efforts broke with the broader story of yoga prior to that time. “In turning yoga into a physical education routine, which enabled Indians to save or acquire fitness and good health,” Goldberg explains, “Yogendra transformed

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<sup>140</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 117.

<sup>141</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 116.

<sup>142</sup> Joseph S. Alter, “Shri Yogendra: Magic, Modernity, and the Burden of the Middle-Class Yogi,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, eds. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 63.

<sup>143</sup> Goldberg, *The Path of Modern Yoga*, 21.

<sup>144</sup> Alter, “Shri Yogendra,” 73.

<sup>145</sup> Alter, “Shri Yogendra,” 62.

yoga from a spiritual quest into a service for middle-class Indian consumers.”<sup>146</sup> What had been a spiritual enterprise was now a commodity in India’s health and wellness industry. Goldberg summarizes Yogendra’s contribution to modern yoga rather bleakly, claiming that he “made an essentially religious experience into a secular experience.”<sup>147</sup> Yogendra’s yoga was health-oriented, secular, and altogether ungentle.

Yogendra was highly effective in spreading his style of yoga throughout the greater Bombay area and beyond. In fact, Singleton estimates that Yogendra “did more than anyone (barring Kuvalayananda) to carve out the kind of public health and fitness regimen that today dominates the transnational yoga industry.”<sup>148</sup> For his part, Alter writes that Yogendra “was very successful in attracting national and international attention and in promoting practical yoga training for health and education,” going so far as to call Yogendra “one of the key figures in the early twentieth-century yoga renaissance.”<sup>149</sup> Like Iyengar and Jois, Yogendra presented his secular, physical practice as yoga to eager consumers in the Western world as well. Goldberg reflects that “Yogendra made yoga into a commodity” and reckons that he was the first to teach physical, health-oriented yoga in the United States.<sup>150</sup> Yogendra developed an MPY practice that was ungentle, secular, and wholly geared toward health. Then he taught the West that this was what yoga had always been. Operating from their institutes outside Bombay, Kuvalayananda and Yogendra—indisputable insiders to the Indian culture—helped remake yoga into something secular and health-oriented.

**Body-builder yoga in Calcutta.** The third epicenter for the development of

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<sup>146</sup> Goldberg, *The Path of Modern Yoga*, 25.

<sup>147</sup> Goldberg, *The Path of Modern Yoga*, 19.

<sup>148</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 117.

<sup>149</sup> Alter, “Shri Yogendra,” 73, 60.

<sup>150</sup> Goldberg, *The Path of Modern Yoga*, 25, 59.

MPY during the twentieth century was Calcutta in northeastern India. Jerome Armstrong recounts, “In the first part of the twentieth century, the Calcutta gymnasium played a significant role in the development of modern yoga, providing a training ground where indigenous [calisthenics] became intermingled with classical Hatha yoga postures.”<sup>151</sup> In this retelling, Armstrong oxymoronically combines the terms “classical” and “*hatha*,” and he implicitly conflates bodily postures with *hatha* yoga itself (a common conflation). Nonetheless, Armstrong’s overall point is helpful: Early twentieth-century Calcutta was another epicenter for the development of MPY. Bishnu Ghosh, along with his brother Mukundalal, who took the name Yogananda (not to be confused with Yogendra of Bombay), were the lead designers of Calcutta’s proprietary brand of MPY. What they developed in northeastern India and then brought to the West was a yoga practice almost indistinguishable from body-building. The yoga of Bishnu Ghosh and Yogananda was all about muscle, and like the two innovators themselves, it was a product of India.

Bishnu Ghosh was a seminal figure in the development of body-builder yoga in and around Calcutta during the early twentieth century. Syman identifies Ghosh as a “physical culturist,” explaining that his teachings ‘took much from weight lifting and the earliest bodybuilders.’<sup>152</sup> Armstrong agrees, attesting that the Calcutta muscle man mimicked much of the work of contemporary German bodybuilder Max Sick.<sup>153</sup> Wherever his ideas came from, Ghosh was hugely instrumental in teaching the people of northeastern India that yoga was for shaping muscles. Armstrong writes, “Bishnu’s role as integrator, organizer and promotor of yoga as exercise within Indian society was immense, particularly in Calcutta.”<sup>154</sup> Body-builder yoga emerged in Calcutta during the

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<sup>151</sup> Jerome Armstrong, *Calcutta Yoga: How Modern Yoga Travelled to the West from the Streets of Calcutta* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2020), 79.

<sup>152</sup> Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 271.

<sup>153</sup> Armstrong, *Calcutta Yoga*, 77.

<sup>154</sup> Armstrong, *Calcutta Yoga*, 347.

early twentieth century largely through the work of Bishnu Ghosh.

It was Bishnu's brother, Yogananda, who would introduce Calcutta-style yoga to the rest of the world. Singleton affirms that, in America, Yogananda taught a practice that was centered on what he called "muscle control," and which clearly bore influences from European body-building.<sup>155</sup> While Goldberg maintains that the Bombay master, Yogendra, was the first to teach any kind of health-oriented yoga in America, Singleton suggests that when Yogananda came to the West from Calcutta, it was "the first time that such muscle manipulation was being sold in America as yoga."<sup>156</sup> Regardless, both these Indian innovators taught Americans that yoga is a physical practice. Yogananda referred to his system as Yogoda, and Armstrong explains that it was a mixture of traditional Indian calisthenics (or *bayam*), yogic postures, and some meditation.<sup>157</sup> Yogananda seems to have tailored his Yogoda method even more specifically for his American audience during his time in the United States, such that Armstrong reports, "In America, the Yogoda exercises eventually became a complete set of physical exercises that worked on different parts of the body in a systematic way."<sup>158</sup> Indian to the core, Yogananda taught Americans a kind of yoga practice that was essentially body-building.

Yogananda also taught his yoga practice in such a way that it cohered well with the overwhelmingly Christian sentiments of his American clientele. Whereas the MPY movements coming out of Mysore and Bombay during those decades were strategically secular, Yogananda's teachings would be better described as religiously pluralistic. Armstrong explains that in Yogananda's speeches, "[t]erms from both Christianity and Hinduism were easily integrated, giving [his message] a pluralistic sense

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<sup>155</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 132.

<sup>156</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 132.

<sup>157</sup> Armstrong, *Calcutta Yoga*, xix.

<sup>158</sup> Armstrong, *Calcutta Yoga*, 105.

of shared faith and helping [him] fit into the predominantly Christian culture.”<sup>159</sup> Philip Goldberg recounts that some contemporaries thought Yogananda was going too far to accommodate his Christian audience. He writes that Yogananda received accusations “of selling out to attract Christian followers, of ‘Christianizing’ Hinduism, and of handing cultural imperialists an easy way to appropriate Hindu traditions.”<sup>160</sup> For better or worse, Yogananda taught Americans a body-builder style of yoga that was Christian-friendly. Ultimately, Calcutta’s body-builder style of MPY helped to solidify yoga in the Western imagination as a purely physical and religiously neutral practice.

### **Conclusions on Yoga Appropriation**

The story of modern yoga shows that scripturally ungenueine MPY is an Indian phenomenon through and through. Krishnamacharya developed a yoga practice that was wholly fitness-focused, and his students, Bellur Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, taught the Western world that his Mysore-made exercise system was exactly what yoga had always been. Outside Bombay, Kavalayananda studied yoga’s physical postures as if they comprised a health-oriented science, and both there in western India and abroad, Yogendra taught a yoga practice that was geared toward health and purely secular. Bishnu Ghosh spearheaded the development of body-builder yoga in Calcutta, and his brother Yogananda taught the American Christian that this kind of yoga cohered perfectly with his life and faith. To state the obvious, all three of these epicenters for the development of MPY during the twentieth century lie on the Indian subcontinent. MPY is indisputably a product of India, and its chief architects taught the Western world that their scripturally ungenueine wellness practices were yoga.

For this reason, participating in a session of MPY cannot rightly be considered

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<sup>159</sup> Armstrong, *Calcutta Yoga*, 46.

<sup>160</sup> Philip Goldberg, *The Life of Yogananda: The Story of the Yogi Who Became the First Modern Guru*, 2nd ed. (London: Hay House, 2020), 149.

culturally appropriative. Cultural appropriation involves the misuse of features from one culture by members of a different culture. Even Barkataki affirms that cultural appropriation “is when someone uses someone else’s culture . . . without considering the source, origins or people of that culture.”<sup>161</sup> The formidable fathers of MPY in Myore, Bombay, and Calcutta fostered an understanding of yoga that disregarded the classical scriptures wholesale. It could certainly be alleged that they created something inauthentic. But since these leaders were insiders to the culture in which yoga is embedded, they could not have been committing cultural appropriation in their development of MPY. Modern, postural yoga practices—inauthentic as they are with respect to yoga’s scriptures—are not instances of cultural appropriation. In many cases, then, a Christian who participates in an MPY practice may avoid transgressing the Bible insofar as the practice eschews yoga’s scriptures, and he or she may also keep from committing cultural appropriation since MPY itself is an Indian creation.

### **Potential Foci for Further Research**

I have emphasized that ungentine yoga practices disregarding their own scriptures are potentially permissible for Christians precisely because they avoid the theological and soteriological pitfalls called for in foundational texts like *PYS* and *BG*. I have also explained that these scripturally ungentine yoga practices cannot be considered culturally appropriative since the whole MPY phenomenon was driven by insiders. None of this is to say, however, that all scripturally ungentine yet Indian-inspired yoga practices are necessarily permissible for Christians. I have not spoken comprehensively to all possible questions surrounding the permissibility of those yoga practices that do not reflect their own scriptures. While such practices may avoid transgressing biblical teaching by eschewing their own primary sources, and while they may be immune to

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<sup>161</sup> Barkataki, *Embrace Yoga’s Roots*, 46.

charges of cultural appropriation since with they were engineered by Indians, scripturally ungentine MPY practices may still pose other problems for believers. Such problems present two potential foci for further research.

The first potential focus for further research is to investigate the additional situational factors that might affect the permissibility of a given yoga practice. Even if a certain practice does not reflect any of the problematic teachings from yogic scripture, and even if it is not culturally appropriative, there still may be circumstantial reasons why a Christian should avoid it. For example, a believer's familial or social situation may be such that participating in any practice called yoga would cause his or her loved ones to stumble in the Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 sense. The loved ones may be hurt by seeing the believer participate in something they believe to be wrong, or they may feel encouraged to participate themselves, thereby violating their conscience. In such a case, the sin would not lie in the MPY practice itself, rather, in the harm done to the loved ones of the participating believer. Paul Gosbee and Mary Lou Davis each issue a caution concerning this situational consideration as well.<sup>162</sup> As another example, the general atmosphere of a given yoga session or the typical attire worn by its practitioners may incline a believing participant toward vanity or lust. In such circumstances, the believer would need to determine whether participating in that practice constitutes an unwise self-invitation to sin. Investigating these and other situational factors that might affect the permissibility of individual yoga practices is one potential focus for further research.

The next potential focus for further research has to do with the longer-term effects that an otherwise permissible MPY practice might have on believers who do it. Gosbee suggests that certain delayed risks might present themselves, writing, "Even if the class atmosphere is relatively harmless, there is a temptation for those involved to learn

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<sup>162</sup> Paul Gosbee, "Hatha Yoga More Than Just Posturing? I Think So." Evangelical Alliance. January 1, 2016. <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/should-christians-do-yoga>; Davis, "Should Christians Practice Yoga?"

more about the whole yoga philosophy. So it may become the bait into a vast belief system that involves much more than physical exercise.”<sup>163</sup> Even scripturally ungentle MPY practices may open their participants’ minds to counterbiblical yogic teachings in subtle ways. In fact, Brown calls attention to the fact that physical practices themselves can alter people’s beliefs over time.<sup>164</sup> In her interview with Mohler, Brown explains, “What a lot of evangelicals don’t recognize is that intentions can actually change through religious practices” such as yogic postures.<sup>165</sup> Brown observes that, when evangelicals go through the motions of other religions, they “sometimes actually find themselves adopting the religious assumptions of these other worldviews and shifting their own theological positions.”<sup>166</sup> In a separate article, Brown presents a wealth of sociological data demonstrating this reality that physical practices like yogic postures can effectually shape people’s beliefs.<sup>167</sup> Ultimately, the possible longer-term effects of otherwise permissible MPY practices constitutes a second potential focus for further research.

### **Conclusion**

Yoga’s foundational scriptures contradict the Bible on at least the ten theological and soteriological points laid out in chapters 3 through 5. Those points, along with their corresponding references in *PYS*, *BG*, and the Bible, constitute primary-source substantiation for the assertion that yoga is incompatible with Christianity. Since yoga’s scriptures are manifoldly contrary to biblical teaching, genuine yoga practices—those that are faithful to their own scriptures—are by definition counterbiblical and should be avoided by Christians. I have proposed a six-question rubric for determining whether a

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<sup>163</sup> Gosbee, “Hatha Yoga More Than Just Posturing?”

<sup>164</sup> Mohler, “Are We All Syncretists Now?”

<sup>165</sup> Mohler, “Are We All Syncretists Now?”

<sup>166</sup> Mohler, “Are We All Syncretists Now?”

<sup>167</sup> Brown, “Christian Yoga,” 665–66.



given practice currently being called yoga adheres to its own scriptures and thereby renders itself impermissible for Christians. An affirmative answer to even one of the rubric's questions means the practice is at least somewhat genuine and therefore impermissible. For those who operate with the scriptural definition of yoga, such scripturally genuine practices are the only ones deserving of the name yoga, so the answer to the question of whether Christians should do yoga is a simple "No." However, under the nonessentialist definition, even scripturally ungentue practices may still be called yoga. Therefore, some nonessentialists suggest that Christians may do certain yoga practices as long as those practices are not of the type that adhere to yoga's scriptures.

The very practices that may be permissible for Christians under the nonessentialist definition are those that intentionally eschew yoga's foundational scriptures and thereby ignore much of the tradition's history and culture. In other words, the very thing that makes a yoga practice potentially permissible for Christians—its being scripturally ungentue—is also what some say make it guilty of cultural appropriation. There exists a huge segment of yoga in our time that is thoroughly secularized, narrowly focused on the body, and therefore fundamentally different from what was laid out in yoga's primary sources. This segment of yoga is called MPY, and it is now the most commonly intended referent for the word yoga. Some see MPY as culturally appropriative. To be sure, the entire MPY phenomenon would be a textbook case of cultural appropriation if it were cultural outsiders who had fashioned its scripturally ungentue yoga practices for their own ends. After all, cultural appropriation is when one person or group exploits a different person or group.

In reality, though, the story of yoga throughout the last century makes clear that the scripturally ungentue wellness practices that would come to constitute MPY were created in India, by Indians, for Indians. During the first half of the twentieth century, Mysore, Bombay, and Calcutta were the three epicenters for the development of MPY. The story of modern yoga shows that scripturally ungentue MPY is an Indian

phenomenon, and its principal designers taught the Western world that their wellness practices were exactly what yoga had always been. Since the creators of MPY were insiders to the culture in which yoga is embedded, MPY practices—scripturally ungentine as they are—cannot be considered instances of cultural appropriation. In many cases, then, a Christian who participates in an MPY practice may avoid transgressing the Bible insofar as the practice eschews yoga’s scriptures, and he or she may also keep from committing cultural appropriation since MPY itself is an Indian creation.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Should Christians participate in yoga? Do yoga's original teachings contradict the Bible's guidance on life and faith? Now, we can offer a defensible answer to the first question, but only because we have adequately addressed the second. In this dissertation, I have contributed to the body of scholarly literature arguing that yoga contradicts Christianity. However, I have added something that has not been a part of the discussion to this point, namely, original-language analysis of significant portions of yoga's most foundational scriptures in direct comparison with relevant biblical passages. It turns out that yoga's primary sources do indeed contradict the Bible on crucial matters of theology and soteriology. Therefore, insofar as a yoga practice adheres to its own scriptures, that practice is incompatible with biblical teaching and should be avoided by Christians. Do yoga's original teachings conflict with those of the Bible? We have seen that they do so on many levels. Should Christians participate in yoga, then? If by "yoga" we mean anything remotely adherent to even the most basic features of the tradition's primary sources, then no, Christians cannot take part in such a practice.

The core problem I have addressed here is the lack of substantiation in the existing literature for the assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity. In chapter 2, I surveyed a wide range of scholars and commentators insisting that participation in yoga is impermissible for Christians. That chapter revealed that none of those contributors provide adequate, primary-source substantiation for their assertion. Several of them insist that yoga contradicts Christianity without even invoking the title of any yogic scripture, speaking instead from their own experiences or secondary sources. Others assert yoga's incompatibility with Christianity by interacting with isolated lines pulled from English

translations of yogic scriptures. Some have dealt more extensively with broader concepts found in yoga's revered texts, but even they stop short of providing direct analysis of significant portions of yoga's primary sources in comparison with the Bible—much less using these scriptures' original languages. This lack of substantiation for their claim need not be seen as a failure on the part of these contributors. Rather, original-language analysis of significant portions of yoga's primary sources has lain outside the scope of their work. Their assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity is defensible on textual grounds, but it has not been within their purposes to formulate such a defense. This lack of primary-source, original-language substantiation for the assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity was the core problem I tackled in this dissertation.

I began formulating this substantiation by examining yoga's first foundational scripture—*PYS*—against the Bible. In chapter 3, my comparative analysis of these two texts revealed five major points of divergence between them. First, *PYS*'s concept of meditation is aimed at emptying the mind, whereas the biblical notion of mediation is all about gaining wisdom and insight from the Word of God. Second, Patanjali's soteriological ideal of an emptied mind opposes the biblical notion of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Third, as a *purūsha*, the supreme God figure in *PYS* is not the creator of the world, while central to the identity of the God of the Bible is his role as Creator. Fourth, Patanjali's supreme God is generic and can be connected with the form of lower deities, whereas the God of the Bible is particular and his jealousy forbids the worship of any other supposed gods. Fifth, *PYS*'s God is an optional, passive object of contemplation by which yoga practitioners may attain salvation for themselves, while the God of the Bible grants saving grace and is therefore our necessary, active savior. *PYS* and the Bible, it turns out, are starkly different.

In chapter 4, I analyzed the key teachings of yoga's other foundational text—*BG*—and compared them against pertinent biblical truths. Here too, there were five key points at which the yogic scripture differed from the Bible. First, the *Gītā* and the Bible

each put forward their own God as the only supreme divinity, worthy of exclusive worship. Second, *BG*'s view of Krishna as universally all-encompassing is different from the way the Bible describes God's omnipresence. Third, while the *Gītā* and the Bible both speak of union and oneness with God, they have vastly different understandings of the nature of such a union. Fourth, while both scriptures use language of being somehow "in" their respective Saviors, *BG*'s idea of being in Krishna and the Bible's notion of being in Christ are not the same. Fifth, *BG* and the Bible each assert that their respective hero is the only one who can provide salvation from sin. Just as in the case of *PYS*, the *Gītā* was found to be in conflict with the Bible at every turn.

Ultimately, then, this dissertation's unique contribution is primary-source, original-language substantiation for the claim that yoga is impermissible for Christians. Together, chapters 3 and 4 reveal that yoga's two most foundational scriptures contradict the Bible on at least ten crucial points. In chapter 5, I reviewed and collated these ten points at which the yoga tradition as a whole shows itself to be incompatible with biblical teaching. Simply put, these are the ten main ways in which yoga contradicts Christian faith and practice. Whereas chapters 3 and 4 examined each of yoga's two most foundational scriptures in turn, chapter 5 looked at the two revered texts as one body of literature—the primary literature of yoga. There, I identified five points of soteriology and five points of theology on which yoga's scriptural corpus contradicts Christianity's. I presented one table displaying the five soteriological contradictions, along with (most importantly) the corresponding textual references substantiating each. Then, I offered another table showing the same for yoga's five main theological differences from Christianity. Those two tables in chapter 5 constitute a concise representation of my dissertation's unique contribution to the literature on yoga and Christianity.

Since yoga's foundational scriptures do indeed contradict the Bible, participating in scripturally genuine yoga practices—those that adhere to at least some of the core teachings found in yoga's primary sources—is impermissible for Christians.

Herein lies the significance of this dissertation for the Christian life today. The assertion that genuine yoga practices are impermissible for Christians is substantiable on textual grounds, but what complicates things is that not all current practices called yoga are genuine in any real sense. Therefore, Christians interested in yoga must assess individual yoga practices on a case-by-case basis. Yoga practices that are scripturally genuine are, for that very reason, impermissible for believers. Scripturally *ungenuine* yoga practices, on the other hand, are potentially permissible for Christians since they eschew the counterbiblical teachings found in yoga's foundational texts. In chapter 6, I presented a six-question rubric for determining the genuineness and permissibility of individual yoga practices. This rubric constitutes a tool by which Christians may apply the findings of my dissertation in their practical lives today.

The more general question of whether Christians may do yoga, though, depends on how one defines yoga to begin with. For some, scripturally genuine yoga practices are the only ones deserving of the name yoga. This is the scriptural definition of yoga, and it maintains that, for a given practice to truly be yoga, it must adhere to at least some of the key teachings found in yoga's primary sources. Logically, Christians may not participate in yoga thusly defined since the tradition's scriptures are so manifoldly counterbiblical. For one who holds to the scriptural definition of yoga, then, the question of whether Christians may do yoga is a clear and obvious "No." However, the nonessentialist definition of yoga allows that even some ungentle yoga practices—practices not reflective of yogic scripture at all—may still qualify as yoga. Indeed, under this definition, even a practice that eschews the essential, counter-Christian teachings of yogic scripture can still be yoga. When asked whether Christians may practice yoga, then, the nonessentialist may answer, "Sure, as long as it is not scripturally genuine yoga." Ultimately, the general question of whether Christians may do yoga depends on whether one holds to the scriptural or the nonessentialist definition of yoga.

Acknowledging that some scripturally ungentle yoga practices may be

permissible for Christians brings up the issue of cultural appropriation. Indeed, the very thing that makes a yoga practice potentially permissible—its eschewal of yogic scripture—is also what some say makes that practice culturally appropriative, since it ignores the rich history and culture of the yogic tradition. What is important to remember, though, is that cultural appropriation is something that one person or group commits against *another* person or group. In other words, one cannot commit appropriation against one's own culture. Therefore, the question of whether scripturally ungentine yoga practices are culturally appropriative depends on who is responsible for the development of such practices—whether cultural insiders or cultural outsiders.

To be sure, a huge segment of what is referred to as yoga in our time is altogether ungentine as far as the tradition's scriptures are concerned. This massive phenomenon of scripturally ungentine, exercise-like yoga practices is commonly referred to as modern postural yoga, or MPY. It is often assumed that MPY was developed over the last century and a half by figures who were not indigenous to yoga's home culture. Admittedly, if that were the case, then the entire MPY phenomenon—ungentine as it is with respect to yoga's history and scripture—would be a textbook example of cultural appropriation. Furthermore, if scripturally ungentine MPY practices were in fact culturally appropriative, then just like scripturally genuine yoga practices (but for a different reason), they too would be impermissible for Christians. Therefore, determining whether scripturally ungentine MPY practices constitute cultural appropriation was a key part of clarifying the practical significance of this dissertation.

In chapter 6, I put forward a wealth of scholarly testimony demonstrating that MPY is inarguably a product of twentieth-century India and therefore cannot be considered culturally appropriative. In the early days of MPY's development and ascendance to the world scene, there were three main epicenters from which it emerged on the Indian subcontinent: Mysore, Bombay, and Calcutta. In Mysore, Krishnamacharya developed a yoga practice that was wholly fitness-focused, and his students went on to

teach the West that his exercise system was exactly what yoga had always been. Near Bombay, Kuvalayananda studied yoga's postures as if they comprised a health-oriented science, and Yogendra taught a yoga practice that was equally geared toward health and purely secular. Starting in Calcutta, Bishnu Ghosh led the development of body-builder yoga, and his brother Yogananda taught American Christians that it cohered perfectly with their life and faith. Put simply, scripturally ungenueine MPY practices were developed by cultural insiders and cannot be considered culturally appropriative. In many cases, then, a Christian who participates in an MPY practice may avoid transgressing the Bible insofar as the practice eschews yoga's scriptures, and he or she may also keep from committing cultural appropriation since MPY itself is an Indian creation.



## APPENDIX 1

### ASSESSMENT OF SANSKRIT-ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS



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India

Kyle Brosseau  
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Crane, MO 65633

07 May, 2024

This is to acknowledge that we received the translations of the following Sanskrit texts from Kyle Brosseau:

1. Patanjali Yoga Sutra: 1:1, 1:2, 1:3, 1:4, 1:12, 1:13, 1:14, 1:15, 1:16, 1:23, 1:24, 1:25, 1:26, 1:27, 2:28, 2:29, 2:32, 2:44, 2:45, 3:1, 3:2, 3:3, 3:4, 3:50, 3:55, 4:25, 4:26, 4:34

2. Bhagavad Gita: 7:17, 7:18, 7:19, 7:23c, 9:4, 9:5, 9:6, 9:17a, 9:29, 9:30, 9:31, 9:34, 10:20b, 10:21a, 11:3, 11:4, 11:8, 11:9, 11:24b, 11:30b, 18:55, 18:65, 18:66

We checked the original Sanskrit texts and the translations done by Kyle and our feedback is attached to this letter. Kyle's translations were generally accurate and in basic agreement with published translations. At places where our reviewer felt that something could be rendered slightly differently, she has indicated that in her comments.

If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact us.

Ali Taqi  
Director  
Zabaan School for Languages Pvt Ltd

The Sanskrit texts below are taken from Edwin Bryant’s 2009 publication of *The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*. The English translations below each segment are the work of Kyle Broseau. Bryant’s English translation, along with that of Chip Hartranft from 2003, served as helpful references for Broseau’s translations here.

### *Patanjali Yoga Sūtras 1:1–4 and 1:12–16*

- (1:1) अथ योगानुशासनम्। (1:2) योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः। (1:3) तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपेऽवस्थानम्।  
 मितरत्र (1:4) वृत्तिसारूप्यम् इतरत्र। . . . (1:12) अभ्यासवैराग्याभ्यां तन्निरोधः।  
 (1:13) तत्र स्थितौ यत्नोऽभ्यासः। (1:14) स तु दीर्घकाल-नैरन्तर्य-सत्कारासेवितो दृढभूमिः।  
 (1:15) दृष्टानुश्रविकविषयवितृष्णस्य वशीकारसंज्ञा वैराग्यम्।  
 (1:16) तत्परं पुरुषख्यातेर्गुणवैतृष्ण्यम्।

This works. Can also consider “stilling” if you want to give it a more active sense

- (1) Now, the teachings of yoga. (2) Yoga [is] the stillness of the mind’s churning.  
 (3) Then, the seer abides in its own [true] form. (4) Otherwise, [it abides] in the form of the churning. . . . (12) By practice and dispassion, that [churning of the mind is] stilled. (13) Among these, practice [is] effort toward stability. (14) But [only when] dwelt in for a long time, continuously and reverently, [is] it firmly grounded.  
 (15) Dispassion [is] the subdued understanding of one without desire for sensory experiences, [whether] seen or heard. (16) Better than that [is being] without desire [even] for the *gunas*, [which results in] realization of the *purūsha*. *purusha*, *puruṣa*

1.13: I would take तत्र and स्थितौ as going together, so something like: Practice is the effort to be in that state of steadiness.

1.15 अनुश्रविक: it seems like some dictionaries and commentaries take it as “scriptural knowledge”. So, if we go by this understanding, दृष्ट would be knowledge perceived by senses (any sense in general), and अनुश्रविक, knowledge from scripture, knowledge that is learnt. Overall the sutra can also be translated as: Dispassion is the state of subduing/regulating consciousness of the one who is without desire for sensory experiences or learnt/scriptural knowledge. “वशीकारसंज्ञा” is difficult to translate.

1.16: I would translate पुरुषख्यातेः as a causal ablative, so something like: Beyond that, with the knowledge/realization of the *puruṣa* [there] is a lack of desire for *gunas*. But commentaries in Sanskrit seem to be saying: Higher dispassion is the lack of desire for the *gunas* that arises with the knowledge of the *puruṣa*.

## Patanjali Yoga Sutras 2:28–9 and 3:1–4

- (2:28) योगाङ्गानुष्ठानाद् अशुद्धिक्षये ज्ञानदीप्तिराविवेकख्यातेः। (2:29) यमनियमासनप्राणायाम  
प्रत्याहार धारणाध्यानसमाधयोऽष्टाव् अङ्गानि। . . . (3:1) देशबन्धस्थितस्य धारणा।  
(3:2) तत्र प्रत्ययैकतानता ध्यानम्। (3:3) तद् एवार्थमात्रनिर्भासं स्वरूपशून्यम् इव समाधिः।  
(3:4) त्रयम् एकत्र संयमः।

(2:28) Through the performance of yoga’s limbs and the removal of impurity [comes]  
a light of knowledge and a discriminative realization. (2:29) The eight limbs [are]  
restraint, duty, posture, breath control, withdrawal, **concentration, focus, and**  
**meditation**. . . . (3:1) Concentration [is] the fixing of [one’s] mind on a point.  
(3:2) Focus [is] single-directedness **at that idea**. (3:3) Meditation [is] the appearance of  
only that very thing, so that [the mind is] devoid of its own form. (3:4) *Sanyama* [is]  
the three together.

I am sure who have thought  
about how to render these  
three words. For समाधि  
something like “absorption” is  
also possible

2.28 अशुद्धिक्षये is locative and not ablative, and आविवेकख्यातेः is a compound which most likely means “till the knowledge of discrimination”. So, put together, it would mean something like: When there is a removal of impurities with the performance of yoga’s limbs, [there comes] a light of knowledge till there is discriminative realization.

3.2 Here प्रत्यय probably means mind/mental activity, so something like: Focus is single-directedness of mental activity on that [point—mentioned in 3.1].

3.3 Meditation (or absorption) is that [focus, तद् ध्यानम्] in which only the object [of focus] is seen/appears, and it is as though devoid of its own form.

**Patanjali Yoga Sutras 3:50, 55 and 4:25–6, 34**

रु

Is this इति there in the original?

(3:50) तद्वैराग्यादपि दोषबीजक्षये कैवल्यम्। (3:55) सत्त्वपुरुषयोः शुद्धिसाम्ये कैवल्यम् इति।...

(4:25) विशेषदर्शिन आत्मभावभावनाविनिवृत्तिः। (4:26) तदा विवेकनिम्नं कैवल्यप्राग्भारं चित्तम्।

(4:34) पुरुषार्थशून्यानां गुणानां प्रतिप्रसवः कैवल्यं स्वरूपप्रतिष्ठा वा चित्तिशक्तिरिति।

(3:50) By dispassion even toward that, along with the destruction of the seeds of guilt [comes] isolation. (3:55) Thus, [when] *sattva* and *purūsha* [are] equally pure, [then comes] isolation. . . . (4:25) The one who sees the distinction turns back from reflecting on the nature of the self. (4:26) Then the mind, deep in discrimination, [is] inclined toward isolation. (4:34) Thus, isolation [is when] the *gunas* [have become] devoid of any purpose, [such that] the *purūsha* abides in its own true form, and indeed, the mind's power is suspended.

3.50 दोष could be just "flaw", कैवल्यम् "supreme isolation"? But I know you must have thought about how to translate these words.

4.34 Isolation is the drawing back of the *gunas* that have become devoid of any purpose back into themselves; in other words, [it is] the abiding of the mind's power in its own form.

**Patanjali Yoga Sutras 1:23–7**

(1:23) ईश्वरप्रणिधानाद् वा। (1:24) क्लेशकर्मविपाकाशयैरपरामृष्टः पुरुषविशेष ईश्वरः।

(1:25) तत्र निरतिशायं सर्वज्ञबीजम्। (1:26) पूर्वेषाम् अपि गुरुः कालेनानवच्छेदात्।

(1:27) तस्य वाचकः प्रणवः।

(1:23) Or, [*nirōdha* is attainable] by contemplation on Īshvara. (1:24) Īshvara [is] a special *purūsha*, untouched by the afflictions or by the stock or effect of *karma*.

(1:25) In him, the seed of omniscience [is] unsurpassed. (1:26) Not cut off by time, [he was] also the *gurū* of the ancients. (1:27) The expression of him [is] the *pranava*.

***Patanjali Yoga Sutras 2:32 and 2:44–5***

(2:32) शौचसंतोषतपःस्वाध्यायेश्वरप्रणिधानानि नियमाः। . . .

(2:44) स्वाध्यायाद् इष्टदेवतासंप्रयोगः। (2:45) समाधिसिद्धिरीश्वरप्रणिधानात्।

(2:32) The duties are cleanness, contentedness, austerity, study, and contemplation on Īshvara. . . . (2:44) From study [comes] a connection with [one's] desired deity.

(2:45) From contemplation on Īshvara [comes] the complete attainment of *samādhi*.

The Sanskrit texts below are taken from Georg Feuerstein's 2014 publication of *The Bhagavad Gītā*. The English translations below each segment are the work of Kyle Broseau. Feuerstein's English translation, along with those of R.C. Zaehner and Winthrop Sargeant, served as helpful references for Broseau's translations here.

***Bhagavad Gītā* 10:20b–21a and 11:24b, 30b**

(10:20b) अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च। (10:21a) आदित्यानामहं विष्णुर्ज्योतिषां  
रविरंशुमान्। . . . (11:24b) दृष्ट्वा हि त्वां प्रव्यथितान्तरात्मा धृतिं न विन्दामि शमं च  
विष्णो। (11:30b) तेजोभिरापूर्य जगत्समग्रं भासस्तवोग्राः प्रतपन्ति विष्णो।

Usually आदित्य is translated as "son of Aditi"

(10:20b) I [am] the beginning, the middle, and even the end of beings. (10:21a) Of the  
initial deities, I [am] Vishnu. Of the celestial lights, [I am] the radiant sun. . . .  
(11:24b) Just seeing you, [my] internal self trembling, I find neither fortitude nor  
tranquility, oh Vishnu! (11:30b) Filling the whole universe with [their] brilliance,  
your consuming rays shine forth, oh Vishnu!

**Bhagavad Gītā 11:3–4 and 11:8–9**

ऐश्वर can  
also be  
translated  
as  
“majestic,”  
“supreme,”  
or  
“divine”

(11:3) एवमेतद्यथात्थ त्वमात्मानं परमेश्वर। द्रष्टुमिच्छामि ते रूपमैश्वरं पुरुषोत्तम।

end of  
verse is  
usually  
indicated  
by “।”

(11:4) मन्यसे यदि तच्छक्यं मया द्रष्टुमिति प्रभो। योगेश्वर ततो मे त्वं

दर्शयात्मानमव्ययम्। . . . (11:8) न तु मां शक्यसे द्रष्टुमनेनैव स्वचक्षुषा। दिव्यं ददामि ते

चक्षुः पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम्। (11:9) एवमुक्त्वा ततो राजन्महायोगेश्वरो हरिः। दर्शयामास

पार्थाय परमं रूपमैश्वरम्।

(11:3) Thus, you have described yourself in this way, oh supreme Īshvara. I desire to see your Īshvara form, oh ultimate *purūsha*. (11:4) If you think [it is] possible for me to see it thus, oh Lord, oh Īshvara of yoga, then show me your imperishable self. . .

(11:8) But you aren’t able to see me with merely your own eye. I am giving you a divine eye. Behold, my Īshvara constitution. (11:9) Then, having spoken thus, oh King, Hari, the great Īshvara of yoga, showed Pārthāya [his] supreme Īshvara form.

just Pārtha (Arjuna)



**Bhagavad Gītā 9:4–6, 17a**

(9:4) मया ततमिदं सर्वं जगदव्यक्तमूर्तिना। मत्स्थानि सर्वभूतानि न चाहं तेष्वस्थितः।

(9:5) न च मत्स्थानि भूतानि पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम्। भूतभृन्न च भूतस्थो ममात्मा

भूतभावनः। (9:6) यथाकाशस्थितो नित्यं वायुः सर्वत्रगो महान्। तथा सर्वाणि भूतानि

मत्स्थानीत्युपधारय। (9:17a) पिता हमस्य जगतो माता धाता पितामहः। वेद्यं पवित्रमोकारः।

I think if the verse is cut off here, the last word should be पवित्रमोकारः ?

(9:4) This entire universe [is] spread out by me [in my] unmanifest form. All beings exist in me, but I [am] not contained in them. (9:5) But [some] beings do not exist in me. Behold, my Īshvara constitution. Sustaining beings while not existing in beings, my self [is what] manifests [the universe's] beings. (9:6) Concentrate on this: As the great, omnipresent wind exists eternally in space, so all beings exist in me. (9:17a) I [am] the father of this universe, the mother, the establisher, the grandfather, the one to be known, the purifier, [and] the *ōmkāra*.

9.5: It seems like some commentators/translators resolve the contradiction with the previous verse by saying something like "[And yet] the beings do not exist in me." I think Krishna attempts a resolution too in the following verse which seems to suggest that he is playing with the polyvalence of the term "मत्स्थ."

**Bhagavad Gītā 7:17–19, 23c**

तेषां

(7:17) तेषां ज्ञानी नित्ययुक्त एकभक्तिर्विशिष्यते। प्रियो हि ज्ञानिनोऽत्यर्थमहं स च मम प्रियः।

(7:18) उदाराः सर्व एवैते ज्ञानी त्वात्मैव मे मतम्। आस्थितः स हि युक्तात्मा मामेवानुत्तमां

गतिम्। (7:19) बहूनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान्मां प्रपद्यते। वासुदेवः सर्वमिति स महात्मा

सुदुर्लभः। (7:23c) मद्भक्ता यान्ति मामपि।

नित्ययुक्त can also be translated as “always steadfast or intent”

(7:17) Of them, the knowledgeable one, **eternally united** [and] singly devoted, stands out. I [am] exceedingly dear to the knowledgeable one, and he [is] dear to me.

(7:18) All of these [are] indeed noble, but the knowledgeable one [is] understood as my very self. United to [my] self, he exists in me, the very best mode of existence. (7:19) At the end of many births, the knowledgeable one enters me. [Knowing] that Vāsudeva is all, this great a self [is] hard to find. (7:23c) My devotees surely come to me.

**Bhagavad Gītā 9:29–31, 34**

(9:29) समोऽहं सर्वभूतेषु न मे द्वेष्योऽस्ति न प्रियः। ये भजन्ति तु मां भक्त्या मयि ते तेषु  
चाप्यहम्। (9:30) अपि चेत्सुदुराचारो भजते मामनन्यभाक्। साधुरेव स मन्तव्यः  
सम्यग्व्यवसितो हि सः। (9:31) क्षिप्रं भवति धर्मात्मा शश्वच्छान्तिं निगच्छति।  
कौन्तेय प्रतिजानीहि न मे भक्तः प्रणश्यति। (9:34) मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मयाजी मां  
नमस्कुरु। मामेवैष्यसि युक्तैवमात्मानं मत्परायणः।

युक्तैवमात्मानं

(9:29) I [am] the same toward all beings. For me there is neither a hated one nor a  
dear one. But those who worship me with devotion, they [are] surely in me, and I  
[am surely] in them. (9:30) Surely, if a wicked person worships me with exclusive  
devotion, even he [will be] regarded as righteous. He [is], of course, rightly  
resolved. (9:31) He quickly becomes a dutiful self and goes to perpetual peace. Know  
this, oh Kaunteya, no devotee of mine is lost. (9:34) **Become me-minded**, my *think of me?*  
*worshipper?* devotee, my **sacrificer**. Do reverential salutations to me. Thusly united to [my] self,  
with me as [your] final aim, you will indeed come to me.

**Bhagavad Gītā 18:55 and 18:65–6**

(18:55) भक्त्या मामभिजानाति यावान्यश्चास्मि तत्त्वतः। ततो मां तत्त्वतो ज्ञात्वा विशते  
तदनन्तरम् तदनन्तरम्। ... (18:65) मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु। मामेवैष्यसि सत्यं ते  
प्रतिजाने प्रियोऽसि मे। (18:66) सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज। अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो  
मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः।

(18:55) By devotion to me, he perceives who I really am and how great [I am]. Then, really knowing me, he immediately enters [me]. . . . (18:65) Become me-minded, my worshipper? devotee, my sacrificer. Do reverential salutations to me. You will indeed come to me. I promise you truly, [for] you are dear to me. (18:66) Abandoning all duties, take refuge in me alone. I will save you from all sins. Do not grieve.

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## ABSTRACT

### A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YOGA'S MOST COMMONLY INVOKED SCRIPTURES AND RELEVANT BIBLICAL PASSAGES

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This dissertation is an analysis of yoga's most foundational scriptures: the *Patanjali Yoga Sūtras* (*PYS*) and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*BG*) in their original Sanskrit. My thesis is that these yogic scriptures contradict sound, biblical teaching. The significance of this thesis is that, insofar as a yoga practice adheres to its own scriptures, that practice is impermissible for Christians. The existing literature asserting yoga's impermissibility for Christians lacks original-language analysis of yoga's scriptures, the primary sources in question. Therefore, my dissertation provides much-needed, primary-source substantiation for the assertion that yoga contradicts Christianity. The argument I advance throughout the dissertation runs as follows: (1) *PYS* and *BG* are yoga's most foundational scriptures, and (2) these scriptures contradict the Bible, (3) therefore, yoga's most foundational scriptures contradict the Bible, so yoga practices adhering to these scriptures are consequently impermissible for Christians.

In chapter 1, I establish that *PYS* and *BG* are the most foundational scriptural bases for yoga and are therefore the appropriate primary sources for determining what yoga says on matters germane to a comparison with Christianity. In chapter 2, I examine the existing literature on yoga's permissibility for Christians, showing that, while several voices have asserted that yoga contradicts Christianity, none have demonstrated where and how yoga's scriptures contradict the Bible. In chapter 3, I analyze certain

thematically arranged portions of *PYS* in their original Sanskrit and then show how the scripture's teachings contradict the relevant biblical texts. In chapter 4, I use the same process for comparing *BG* with the Bible. In chapter 5, I summarize the ten key theological and soteriological points at which these two yogic scriptures contradict the Bible. In chapter 6, I explain that, because yogic scripture contradicts the Bible, Christians should not participate in scripturally genuine yoga practices—those that adhere to yoga's primary sources. Finally, I offer practical guidance for assessing the genuineness and permissibility of individual yoga practices case by case while giving due consideration to the issue of cultural appropriation.

## VITA

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### EDUCATION

BA, Southwest Baptist University, 2009  
MA, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012  
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### PUBLICATIONS

Review of *Liberty for All: Defending Everyone's Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age*, by Andrew T. Walker. *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2022): 140–42.

### ORGANIZATIONS

The Evangelical Missiological Society  
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