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# Bible and Yoga: Toward an Esoteric Reading of Biblical Literature

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## THE PROBLEM

We live in a post-biblical world—a world that sentimentalizes the Bible, ignores it, or is indifferent about the sacred text of the Christian and Jewish religions. Our daily lives are not shaped by biblical rhetoric, imagery, or practice, but by our everyday efforts of making a living, staying healthy, and raising a family. By “we” I mean those of us who are part of North America or Western Europe and belong to the culturally and politically dominant group of white, middle-class, educated people. We live in societies that are largely secularized, perhaps even “anti-religiously” oriented, increasingly digitalized, and economically organized by a capitalist system that eradicates equal and just distribution of wealth nationally and internationally. In our world the Bible plays, at best, a privatized, individualized, and societally marginalized role. Sometimes, especially in the United States, Christian fundamentalists organize politically to foster change, trying to reinstate the Bible’s political centrality. The effort to place stone sculptures of the Ten Commandments in the Alabama state courthouse,<sup>1</sup> or—related primarily to middle and high school education—the insistence on the validity of creationism are prominent examples for the Christian fundamentalist involvement in the secularizing developments of Western countries. Mostly, however, such reactionary struggles confront an indifferent majority that favors the Western scientific worldview over biblical primacy. And even among many American fundamentalists, the Bible is mainly a privatized source of religious piety.

My comments come from and speak to the particularities of the Western secular context. I do not want to be understood as making general statements about locations different from the Western one since they face different priorities. For instance, in Asian countries biblical traditions have never enjoyed a majority position as they did in Europe or North America. Historical, cultural, and religious differences do not, however, imply that other locations have nothing to contribute to the understanding of the Bible in post-biblical societies—on the contrary. But here my comments focus on the situation of the Bible and biblical studies in the West.

## THE SITUATION: BIBLICAL STUDIES TODAY

The familiarity with biblical literature is dramatically lower among people younger than forty-five than among those older than forty-five. The so-called Generation X (those born after 1960) and the generation afterward (those born after 1984) know little of the Bible and have little use for it, except if they affiliate with a Christian or Jewish organization. This fact raises important questions: If the younger generations in post-biblical societies do not read the Bible, what is the future of this sacred text in the West? Will it simply turn into a relic of the past? And what does this trend indicate for the academic field of Bible research?

Biblical scholarship—until the 1980s a largely Western endeavor—is still indifferent about these generational developments in our societies. To many biblical scholars, the fact that we are living in a post-biblical world is a nonissue and does not affect their daily work with biblical literature. Accordingly, many, if not most, publications in biblical studies continue operating within a nineteenth-century mindset that regards “the Church” as the powerful opposition to the historical and literary study of the Bible, although by now mainstream religion has little cultural, political, and religious authority and power. Furthermore, much of biblical scholarship is not read by laypeople, who remain mostly ignorant of the issues discussed in the field. And even when some scholars recognize independence from religious institutions, they seldom reflect on the limited relevance of their work to larger society.

Perhaps oblivious of the changed circumstances or unable to relate to post-biblical discourse in Western societies, many researchers do what they know best: they apply historical and literary methods to biblical literature, as if nothing else is needed in our era. Accordingly, many Bible scholars hardly notice that they talk only with, and among, themselves. They seem undisturbed that their work rarely, if ever, has an impact on cultural, religious, or political discourse. In fact, many of them would not even agree that the Bible and biblical studies face a severe crisis. Yet the lack of institutional investment in biblical research, the small and decreasing number of research support and academic positions, and the disinterest in biblical research by scholars outside biblical and religious studies are reason enough to worry about the future of this academic field and the Bible in the West. Will the Bible soon be a book of the religiously conservative movement alone?

## THE RELIGIOUS-SPIRITUAL ENERGY IN THE WEST TODAY

Modern biblical scholarship has successfully dismantled the notion that the Bible is “sacred” literature, that is, “the word of God.” Nowadays, most people know that the Bible was written by somebody, and so they ask, “who wrote the Bible?” If anything, historical concerns predominate. Even religious people, including fundamentalists, focus on the history of biblical literature. They ask if the Bible is “true,” and whether biblical events “really” happened. The Bible is a history book that can be thrown out if it is not historically accurate (the secular position) or must be believed under all circumstances (the fundamentalist position). In either way the Bible is approached according to the standards of the modern, externalized view of the world.

This view focuses on the historicity of an event or character and leaves little or no room for spiritual-religious questions. Unsurprisingly, the modern situation has triggered various responses from people who are religiously and spiritually interested. Two responses stand out because of their success in drawing followers in our post-biblical world. One response has emerged from Christian fundamentalism; the other from the so-called New Age movement.

### *Christian Fundamentalism*

Though often characterized as a premodern phenomenon, Christian fundamentalism is an inherently modern phenomenon. It is a reaction to the modern scientific approach as it developed in the West since the sixteenth century. A reaction to this worldview, Christian fundamentalism began in the United States in the late nineteenth century but also spilled over to other Western countries (and by now throughout the world, often owing to successful missionary movements). Fundamentalist readers reject hermeneutical ambiguities that are endemic to biblical literature. Since they accept the modern notion that something is true only if it happened historically, they affirm the historical accuracy of biblical events. Thus, modern convictions control their biblical readings, and so Christian fundamentalists subordinate the Bible to the scientific worldview.

The fundamentalist strategy of reading the Bible in accordance with modern historical standards aims to keep the Christian tradition central in post-biblical society because of a deep concern about the lack of the religious-spiritual dimension to human life in our societies. Although the fundamentalist solution is socially, politically, and economically conservative-reactionary, it must be seen as part of the larger effort to insert religious principles into our post-biblical world.

### *The New Age Movement*

The New Age movement represents another attempt of keeping religious-spiritual meaning alive in Western society. In contrast to the Christian fundamentalist movement that accepts scientific-historical primacy, the New Age movement rejects modern scientific standards and does not identify religious truth with historical fact. As a result, New Agers are concerned with a spiritual-religious understanding of one's place in the universe beyond the Western scientific view of the world. They oppose an exoteric approach to religion and emphasize esoteric meaning. Since the Western traditions of Christianity and Judaism almost completely adhere to the exoteric approach, New Agers have turned their attention toward Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. These religious traditions, having so far escaped the grip of modernity, developed systematically esoteric knowledge. Their concern with teaching how to become a spiritual being, a mystical self, attracts many Westerners who are tired of an externalized understanding of the world.

One of the most popular esoteric practices of these adherents is, of course, Yoga. An estimated three million Westerners practice (Hatha) Yoga today.<sup>2</sup> This and other Eastern religious traditions teach people to turn inward, to become still, and to lis-

ten to the divine from the within. Yoga, like other Eastern traditions, emphasizes interiorized knowledge with step-by-step methodologies that help to move from the outside to the inside. It is this very characteristic that makes Hatha Yoga so popular in the West. Beginning with the physical body, Hatha Yoga promises “union” with the divine in the here and now if one follows its teachings in a disciplined and consistent fashion. Moreover, the practice provides relief from the noise and speed of the Western exteriorized way of life.

Of course, Yoga has also suffered from the exteriorized mindset dominant in the West, as many yogis sadly observe. We Westerners cannot help ourselves. We experience the world with an exteriorized mindset that is very difficult to overcome. Sometimes, Eastern observers make cynical comments about the Western practice of Eastern religious traditions. One of them is Usharbudh Arya, who categorizes Western Yoga into “Hollywood Yoga,” “Harvard Yoga,” and “Cultic Yoga.”<sup>3</sup> To him, “Hollywood Yoga . . . caters to those whom popular slang describes as the ‘beautiful people.’ They are the people who want merely to look young, stay young and feel young, both physically and mentally. They desire a slim figure, a young body and a long life. . . . For such people, Yoga is limited to a set of physical exercises to rejuvenate the skin, redden the cheeks, brighten the eyes and add curves to a flabby body.”<sup>4</sup>

Then there is Harvard Yoga, which “is more limited. It is the concern of scientists. The interest of scientists is not the performance or physical exercise in order to beautify the body and calm the mind, but rather to measure and study the effects of Yoga exercises on the human personality. Scientists wish to educate people, informing them of the influence of Yoga practice on the transformation of a human being.”<sup>5</sup>

And finally there is Cultic Yoga. “Cultic Yoga is for the curiosity seekers, who are looking for an ‘instant high.’ In the West, these curiosity seekers practice a form of Yoga that has been modified to cater to their fashionable interests. . . . Emphasis is placed on the personal powers that have been achieved by the founders of certain religious and cultic groups. The leaders of these groups declare themselves to be in possession of enlightenment, which they can pass on to their disciples, through a word, a look or a touch. . . . This cultic form of Yoga has drawn a huge number of disciples to these charismatic leaders.”<sup>6</sup> All three Western forms of Yoga prevent the practice of a rightly understood Yoga, which Arya calls “Himalayan Yoga,” “the true and authentic Yoga.” The goal of Yoga is, after all, “self-realization” and not attachment to physical exercise, fame, or accomplishment.

There is some truth to the complaints about the externalizing drive in Western appropriations of Eastern religious practices. Still, despite excesses and misunderstandings, the Western effort of developing an internal way of life is part of the effort to develop spiritual-religious depth in Western societies. Like Christian fundamentalism, the New Age movement—of which Yoga is probably its most visible and flourishing example—yearns for something more than the materialistic, exoteric theories and practices of the modern era. Like fundamentalist Christianity—though certainly based on very different theories and practices—the New Age movement reflects the longing of Western people that there is more to life than we can see. Yet while fundamentalists make this claim by trying to integrate Christian traditions into

the modern worldview, the New Age movement rejects the dominant religious traditions of the West, reaches out to religions not affected by modernity, and embraces interiorized and mystical spiritual practices vibrantly alive in the East.

When one looks at the religious-spiritual energy of both movements, much of mainstream Christianity and Judaism appear to be stale, lacking enthusiasm, and stuck in exteriorized habits and thought. The question is if there is a way of reading the Bible that aligns the study of this sacred text with the remarkable insight of fundamentalism and the New Age movement. Is there a way to read biblical texts in a spiritually meaningful way in the post-biblical world? Because literalist Bible readings of fundamentalist Christians are not an option for progressive Bible readers, New Age esoteric religious practices, such as Yoga, represent another intriguing option. Is it possible to combine the readings of the sacred text of Christianity and Judaism with the interiorized practice of Yoga so that the Bible becomes a source for spiritual-religious growth in the context of our secularized and exoterically driven societies?

#### ESOTERIC APPROACHES TO CHRISTIANITY AND THE BIBLE

Surprisingly, quite a bit has been written about Christianity, the Bible, and Yoga. Especially on the Indian continent, but also elsewhere, the topic has enjoyed serious attention for many decades. Yet Westerners inside and outside the academy know little of it. Biblical research, too, has not exhibited interest in interpretations of the Bible that emphasize esoteric meaning and relate biblical texts to spiritual-religious development and growth. Such a goal seems murky and “unscientific” to the historically minded West, and so scholars ignored it. Yet publications abound. Since the publications are too many to be discussed individually, the following presents them in three categories.

The first category consists of literature that analyzes the esoteric meaning of Western and Eastern religious traditions. Such works present Christianity as an esoteric religion, similar to Buddhism or Hinduism, which in contrast to Eastern religions has largely been marginalized and forgotten. The book *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition* by Richard Smoley reclaims Christianity as an esoteric tradition.<sup>7</sup> Smoley maintains that Western Christianity should not be rejected too quickly since it has enjoyed a long esoteric history. The challenge is to recover this approach to Christianity after centuries of exteriorized doctrine and life. According to Smoley, Westerners need to appreciate Christianity from an esoteric perspective, a difficult task since the West has emphasized an exterior understanding for so long. Smoley’s volume surveys many esoteric practices that Christians developed over the centuries, such as the Prayer of the Heart, Christian meditation, or *lectio divina*, all of them interiorized forms of prayers and Bible meditations.<sup>8</sup> Smoley also discusses major esoteric and Christian-oriented traditions and theorists, such as Gnosticism, the monastic movement, Hermeticism in the Middle Ages, Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875), Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), G. I. Gurdjieff (1866?–1949), and Carl Jung (1875–1961).

Another example for the first category of publications explores the esoteric mean-

ing of Christianity, but in close conversation with Yoga philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Margret Distelbarth, a Yoga teacher and former student of Christian theology, moves smoothly and seamlessly between spiritual-religious meanings of the Christian and the Yogic traditions. She maintains that every serious Yoga practitioner of Western Christian origins has to ask how Christianity and Yoga complement one another. Her 108 conversations on Yoga and Christianity affirm both traditions as spiritually rewarding and meaningful. For instance, Distelbarth suggests that Western Christianity suffers because of the emphasis on institutional functionality, while Eastern religions flourish because of the concern for personal religious meaning. Western Christianity would greatly benefit from the Eastern concern and help Christians in moving away from exteriorized religious activities. After all, the purpose of the Christian faith is not to worry about church buildings or committee work, although this is exactly what has happened to Western Christianity, Distelbarth contends.

Still another publication illustrates the first category. In *Christ, Krishna and You*,<sup>10</sup> Swami Venkatesananda discusses the relationship between Yoga and Christianity based on the conviction that we are living at the “dawn of a New Era of religious unity and understanding.”<sup>11</sup> To the swami, the fundamental teachings and doctrines are the same whether one examines Christianity or Hinduism. His discussions illustrate his conviction, and so he discusses such topics as “Union,” “Discipleship,” or “God and Truth.” The book consists of interviews the swami gave over several years. They emphasize that despite the different terminologies, at their heart all religions aim for the same: union with the divine. Hence his book, too, reads Christianity as an esoteric religious tradition.<sup>12</sup>

The second category is made up of publications that relate specific biblical verses to Yogic philosophical teachings. A rigorous scholarly study is presented by Jay G. Williams and titled *Yeshua Buddha: An Interpretation of New Testament Theology as Meaningful Myth*.<sup>13</sup> As the title indicates, Williams presents a reading of the Jesus story based on Eastern religious ideas. Each chapter of the book focuses on selected New Testament passages and relates them to Eastern teachings. Presented as the “Enlightened One,” Jesus emerges as the Buddha, not in a historical but in an existential and spiritual sense.

Another, much smaller, pamphlet-like publication by Albrecht Frenz relies on individual Bible passages to prove the compatibility of Christianity with Yoga. In *Yoga in Christianity* the author shows that some of Yoga’s basic tenets are also found in the Bible. For instance, the emphasis on developing an attitude of quietude and stillness so prevalent in the Eastern traditions appears in Exodus 14:14 and Isaiah 30:15 and is crucial for the notion of the Sabbath. Frenz is defensive at times—as, for instance, when he says: “If the content is clear, then Christian Yoga cannot lead to Hinduism, but is and remains a Christian expression of life.”<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, Frenz recognizes the great overall benefit of Yoga for the Christian tradition.

Another valuable publication in this category is *Yoga and the Bible* by Joseph Leeming, first published in 1963.<sup>15</sup> Each of the eighteen chapters begins with a quote from a New Testament passage, mostly from Matthew and John, and uses the text as clues for describing the nature of spiritual-religious growth. The study is based on

the conviction that the teachings of the Yoga masters are “in essence” similar to the teachings of the New Testament. Since Leeming addresses a Western audience, which is mostly familiar with the Jesus sayings, he introduces the spiritual teachings of “past and present Masters” with the words of the “enlightened teacher” of the first century CE. For instance, the first chapter quotes Matthew 7:7–8 (“Ask and it shall be given you . . .”) to elaborate on the age-old spiritual quest of humanity that currently enjoys renewed interest in the materialistically oriented West. Many of today’s seekers do not find their needs satisfied by religious institutions, such as the churches, Leeming presciently observes. Writing in 1963, he points out that those seeking spiritual enlightenment are searching elsewhere, including the Eastern traditions. If seekers do not give up on the Christian tradition, they will find in Jesus Christ a teacher who will accompany them on their spiritual journey, Leeming promises. The book ends with a discussion on “The Life everlasting,” based on a quote from John 16:6, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” stressing the ultimate goal of a seeker’s journey: union with God.

A third category comprises literature that provides practical guidance in combining individual Bible verses with Yoga poses (*asanas*). These publications are similar to user manuals. One of them is Nancy Roth’s *An Invitation to Christian Yoga*.<sup>16</sup> The author explains that the Christian faith is based on the belief in the incarnate God, and that Christians need to cherish their bodies as “temples of God.” The book presents twenty-five exercises, each related to a biblical verse. A final section illustrates how to practice the Salute to the Sun with the Lord’s Prayer.

Another manual-like booklet is Gilbert Carlo’s *Christian Meditation through Yoga*,<sup>17</sup> in which the author describes the benefits of meditation for Christian spirituality, summarizes the various forms of Yoga and poses, and presents selected Bible verses with individual Yoga *asanas*. Carlo, too, emphasizes the need to find “peace and quietness” in today’s “noisy and distracted world”<sup>18</sup> and to develop an appropriate interior attitude for Christian prayer and worship.<sup>19</sup> This and other similar publications demonstrate that the connection between the Bible and Yoga is hardly new or novel, though it remains a relatively unexplored topic in our post-biblical world.

#### TEACHING THE BIBLE WITH YOGA PRACTICE

One day I became conscious of the fact that I am engaging two seemingly separate contexts: one when I practice Yoga and another when I study and teach the Bible.<sup>20</sup> When I practice Yoga, as I have for the last thirteen years, I am surrounded by young and “hip” people who are interested in Eastern spirituality and often left Christian or Jewish religious life. They are usually in their twenties, thirties, or forties and mostly white, female, middle class, educated, and committed to spiritual learning. Some of them are financially stable; others are on shaky ground. Many of them are on a serious spiritual quest, although, admittedly, some seem to be mostly interested in the physical aspects of Yoga. They are an interesting crowd, and I always have the feeling that I am with like-minded people.



In contrast, people reading the Bible gather primarily in churches. Their demographics are very different from those of the Yoga crowd. In many Bible study courses that I attended or led the average age of people is significantly older than in most Yoga classes. There are rarely people in their twenties or thirties; the average age is probably closer to fifty-five years and older. Another key difference is that spiritual quests are far less pronounced in Bible courses than in Yoga classes. Questions in Bible courses focus on the history of the literature rather than spiritual-religious meanings, which seems to satisfy people in Bible study courses.

In my academic teaching positions at predominantly white private liberal arts colleges, I have encountered most vividly the tension of both contexts. Traditional Bible courses, such as “The Prophets” or “The Book of Exodus,” do not have the resonance or caché that courses on Eastern religious traditions enjoy. Today’s college generation often assumes that Bible courses “force” them to believe traditional religious teachings. They also perceive Bible courses as intellectually and spiritually narrow or boring. They hardly know what the prophetic literature of the Bible is. And even when they take a Bible course, historical analysis does not interest them much. Unlike previous generations, today’s young people—if they do not belong to a Christian fundamentalist church—do not find it liberating to learn about complex historical reconstructions and hypotheses. Not only do these students have little knowledge of the Bible’s content, they also do not see the point of extensive historical speculation, as their concern is systematic-ethical rather than textual-historical. They want to learn about the spiritual-religious dimensions of the Bible. In this regard white American college-aged students are similar to people who attend Yoga classes. They, too, want to explore the spiritual-religious dimensions of human existence.

The problem is that most contemporary biblical scholarship does not consider these questions but remains heavily invested in the historical study of the Bible. This approach, however, does not motivate but rather alienates my students, who find it religiously and intellectually beside the point. What is to be done? My idea to combine the reading of biblical texts with Yoga practice promises a solution. The quieting of one’s mind combined with the reading of a biblical passage takes seriously the spiritual-religious quest of young people. It also keeps the Christian and Jewish text central to the task at hand: to develop an esoteric approach to the Bible.

When I articulated my idea initially, I was unaware of the long tradition of “inner” Christianity. I did not know that for centuries Christians developed strategies for reading Christian texts contemplative-meditatively. Yet when I received the opportunity to teach courses on “The Bible and Yoga” at a Protestant church in New York City in 2002 and during the 2003 Graduate Theological Union summer session in Berkeley, California, I discovered that Christians had walked the esoteric Christian path for a long time. Especially among some Indian Christians, this path has often included the practice of Yoga to deepen spiritual-religious awareness. It is indeed curious, then, that Western Christians know little about this tradition although many Western “post-Christians” travel to India every year to study Yoga with their favorite gurus.

The following sections describe how I taught “The Bible and Yoga” courses, what

the experience and effect of Yogic Bible readings are for students and teacher, and what, in my view, some of the concerns are of this esoteric approach to biblical literature.

### *The Method*

The method of Yogic Bible readings is contemplative-meditative, combining the reading of a short biblical passage with Yoga poses (*asanas*). The goal is to slow down the reading process by physically involving ourselves. We turn physically inward and so listen to biblical content with less time for mental objection or approval. It is very important to prepare the text in advance. Any biblical text can be used for a Yogic Bible reading. For my courses I chose texts based on God (various Hebrew Bible texts such as Gen. 6:5–7 and 8:21–22, Ps. 23:1–4) and Jesus the Christ (John 1:1–4, Eph. 1:20–23, Phil. 2:6–11, Col. 1:15–20). Each text should be relatively short—three or four verses long—and subdivided according to literary criteria that usually expands each passage into fifteen to twenty lines. The text should be printed on aesthetically pleasing paper. Whenever I distributed the text of the day in this unusual format, students commented favorably on it; most of us are used to the columns of ordinary Bible editions. Students should receive an individual copy of the passage. Students should be dressed in comfortable clothes suitable for Yoga and bring a Yoga mat.

It is crucial to start with some warm-up exercises in preparation for the Yogic Bible reading. After the warm-up exercise, we begin by sitting in the lotus position (or cross-legged). The group then reads the text once or twice aloud in unison to center the participants as individuals and as the group. After the collective reading the students put the text aside. The teacher does the first pose and the students follow. After the first pose, everybody sits again in the lotus position. The teacher reads aloud the first line. After the teacher finishes, the students repeat aloud what the teacher said. Then the students follow the teacher into the second pose, after which everyone sits again in the lotus position. The teacher reads aloud the second line and the students repeat the line. Following the example of the teacher, everybody does the third pose. This process continues until the entire passage is read.

At the end the group lies on the ground in corpse pose with closed eyes. The teacher reads one line, and the students repeat what they hear until the whole text is read aloud. The teacher invites the students to pick up their sheets and lift them up above their bodies. The whole group reads the text in unison. Afterward, the students place their sheets on their chests, close their eyes, and relax. Everybody is silent for several minutes, then the teacher asks students to slowly sit up in the lotus position. If it seems appropriate, the group reads the whole text again aloud and in unison. A feedback session on the reading process follows. Students are asked to share phrases and words that stood out for them during the Yogic reading, obstacles they encountered, and where they felt resistance. They describe thoughts they had while they did the Yogic Bible reading, which poses they liked or disliked and why, if and how the content and meaning of the text changed. They consider how the text con-

tributes to the theme under consideration, or how the text differs from a previous reading. The entire process, including the warm-up exercises, the Yogic reading, and the reflection, easily takes three hours.

### *The Experience*

A Yogic Bible reading is an unusual experience for many Western people, whether they come from the Christian and Jewish traditions or the New Age movement. First, every reading is a unique experience for each participant. Even when the text and poses remain unchanged, every Yogic reading is experienced differently. The level of participation changes from pose to pose and from biblical phrase to biblical phrase. Thought and mood are coming and going from moment to moment. At one point a participant feels quiet and joyful; at the next moment physical limitation distracts from the task. These patterns shift from reading to reading, and make every reading unlike the one before. Yogic Bible readings depend entirely on the level of commitment at the very moment of the practice, which is influenced by the moods of the participants and their attitudes toward the text and the poses. Yogic Bible readings teach people to enjoy and live in the present moment, which is unique and thus cannot be repeated and eventually passes.

Another aspect makes the contemplative-meditative approach unusual. Its level of depth and intensity depends on the religious-spiritual background of each person, and so different people experience the same reading at their level of interiority. It is thus possible that a participant of advanced interiority enjoys the same Yogic reading during which another person struggles, worrying if the pose is correctly done and the text well understood. Beginners especially experience Yogic Bible readings as challenging, even disconnected, because they do not yet feel comfortable with the process. Over time, however, they learn to relax and to grow into mature practitioners. Yet for beginners or advanced students the goal remains the same: to nurture spiritual interiority beyond exoteric religious habits, traditions, or doctrine. Yogic Bible readings guide us on this path in alternating movements from body to text and from text to body.

Yet another aspect makes Yogic Bible readings unusual. They help participants to let go of pretense, which simply cannot be kept up when one does downward dog pose and then reads a biblical verse. The poses encourage participants to be themselves because they confront everybody mercilessly with physical awkwardness and limitations. When we do the triangle pose and experience the weakness of our legs and the stiffness of our upper body, it is hard to stay in our minds. We must focus on our bodies. Mind integrates with body, and so pretenses become impossible, or at least hard to maintain. Depending on their experience with Yoga, it might be the first time that students engage in such integration in religious practice, a powerful experience.

Finally, Yogic Bible readings make it impossible to avoid one's body while reading the Bible. This unusual experience is also the cause for potential feelings of frus-

tration or even anger. Sometimes a lack of Yoga experience or Bible knowledge contributes to these emotions. Beginning students of Yoga told me that they wished for more Yoga practice after they experienced their first Yogic Bible reading. Beginning students of the Bible told me that they, in turn, wished to know more of the Bible. As a result, Yogic readings become a rich experience when people feel comfortable with basic Yoga poses and have some Bible knowledge. Clear instructions and background information minimize feelings of anxiety and frustration. Participants feel safer to release themselves into pose and text once the teacher acknowledges the difficulties and offers some training in the poses and additional information on the biblical passage. Still, the experience of physical limitation is ultimately good because it reminds us of the path ahead.

### *An Effect*

Yogic Bible readings make it necessary for practitioners to reconsider the centrality and necessity of the Bible. Although Yogic Bible readings center on the biblical text, they encourage questions about the need for Bible readings and, in fact, their desirability. After all, millions of yogis practice Yoga without the Bible, and even more Bible readers study the Bible without Yoga. Why combine both? Is it simply a habit or the “job” of some of us to keep the Bible in the picture? Is it perhaps anxiety that we do not want to let go of a tradition that guided so many people before us? Or is it a Protestant insistence that the Bible is supposed to be central, even for post-Christian religious-spiritual life? In my opinion, these questions must be answered in the affirmative, but above all Yogic Bible readings present the unique opportunity to correlate two areas of contemporary religious life: traditional Bible-centered religion and the spiritually dynamic New Age movement. In Yogic Bible readings the sacred texts of Christianity and Judaism nurture spiritual-religious awareness beyond the modern exoteric approach to the world. Read esoterically, the Bible is not valued for historical, literary, or cultural information about texts, writers, or readers, but for the spiritual-religious effect on its readers.

Ultimately, then, the Bible’s ability to nurture spiritual growth is at stake. Is the Bible really needed? If the question is answered in the affirmative, scholarly approaches become secondary to the Bible’s religious-spiritual potential. Yet for several centuries by now, biblical research has tried to disentangle the Bible from religious claims and authorities. By endorsing the Bible’s spiritual potential, the danger is thus twofold. On the one hand, it threatens to alienate biblical scholars. On the other hand, the very people who are targeted with Yogic Bible readings might not appreciate the Bible as a resource for esoteric meaning. Who needs the Bible? Yet so long as there are those coming from both camps, the traditional Jewish-Christian side and the spiritual seekers, Yogic Bible readings hold the promise to keep alive interest in the Bible in post-biblical societies. Interest in Yogic Bible readings exists, and as long as it lasts, this contemplative-meditative approach instills new meaning into the ancient words of the Bible. We have nothing to lose.

*Concerns*

As the previous comments indicate, the idea of a Yogic Bible reading gives also rise to some serious concerns. One concern relates to the practical difficulty. Students have to perform two things at the same time: complete Yoga poses and do the reading. Such multitasking creates tension because awareness alternates between the *asanas* and the text. Doing both well is a challenge because those practicing Yoga move from body to mind and vice versa until the reading is completed. It is difficult to become still, to listen, and to follow the text. Beginning students experience the tension the strongest. They worry if they do each task correctly and forget that the point of the *asanas* and the reading is not physical or mental correctness, but the release into the present moment. Yoga poses and Bible text work in between conscious and unconscious effort. Still, the dilemma is real since the physical and mental dimensions are at least initially dominating the experience of a Yogic Bible reading. Only practice resolves it. Students and teachers need to be patient with themselves and the tools—Bible and Yoga.

Another concern relates to a much more serious issue. An esoteric approach to the Bible teaches that neither the text nor anything else is ultimately central for our spiritual journey toward union with the divine. If this is the case, how can the intellectual tradition of Bible study remain central and not become obsolete? This question emerges when the Yogic approach is practiced because the goal is spiritual growth and not the text itself. Thus the question arises if, for instance, scholarly commentaries and research materials are needed. In one of my courses I assigned such literature, but students did not report that the research added much to their appreciation of the biblical texts under consideration. Since biblical scholarship is occupied with exteriorized approaches, the scholarly discussions seem often arbitrary and unrelated to the interiorized quest for meaning. How then can the intellectual tradition be kept vibrant? As an academic reader of the Bible, I find this question of utmost importance. No easy or quick solutions are available. Knowledge of the history and traditions of biblical literature is important, but is it from the perspective of an esoteric approach?

Perhaps it is our task to endure the tension between exoteric and esoteric readings while the latter continue to be developed further. Currently, esoteric readings are so thoroughly marginalized that revitalization appears crucial to keep interest in the Bible alive among secularized people in the West. Dismissing exteriorized approaches and practicing only esoteric readings is not a solution. Both are necessary to attract a wide range of people who are at different levels of spiritual and intellectual development. Only when esoteric Bible readings become more mainstream will it become clear if exoteric Bible readings can be neglected. So many exoteric readings seem pedantic, obsolete, and simply arbitrary for revitalizing the study of the Bible in our post-biblical world.

## TOWARD AN ESOTERIC BIBLE: A CONCLUSION

So how do we encourage the reading of the Bible in our post-biblical world beyond the Christian fundamentalist movement? This article suggests that a Yogic Bible reading, if done with pedagogical planning and under careful guidance, makes biblical literature spiritually nurturing for younger generations in Western societies. Mary Ganz, a Unitarian Universalist student, put it this way in a paper for my course at the 2003 Graduate Theological Union summer session:

Many Unitarian Universalists suffer in varying degrees from Bible allergy. A large number of us joined the faith as adults, often after a period of estrangement from organized religion. . . . Many of us fled from punitive theologies and fundamentalist use of the Bible to enforce social norms that did not make sense to us. . . . However, I believe that in rejecting the entire Bible along with this bad (fundamentalist) theology we are cutting ourselves off from a rich source of inspiration, and from a rich key to understanding our culture and our own religious roots. . . . Yoga is well accepted among Unitarian Universalists. . . . Some Unitarian Universalists are so alienated from the Bible, they would never put themselves in a class called "Bible Study." Adding "Yoga" to the Bible might help them overcome their reluctance. This, then, is a first answer to the question why one would want to combine the Bible and Yoga: Yoga might draw some people to take another look at the Bible, which I believe can be healing and valuable.<sup>21</sup>

When people learn to read the Bible while standing on their heads, they might find the process strange at first and wonder why anybody would want them to do such a thing. Yet, over time, they will develop a deeper relationship with the Bible, their bodies, and their questions related to religion, life, and the world. Although Christian mystics of the past rarely practiced Yoga to reach union with the divine,<sup>22</sup> Yogic Bible reading might nurture connection with the divine. After all, Yoga teaches us to turn inward and listen to the divine from within. If the Bible can be part of such a spiritual journey, who would oppose a practice that might lead us there?

## NOTES

1. See, for instance, Jeffrey Gettleman, "Judge Suspended for Defying Court on Ten Commandments," *New York Times* (August 23, 2003), A7; Francis X. Clines, "Ohio Board Hears Debate on an Alternative to Darwinism," *New York Times* (March 12, 2002), A16.

2. "Yoga" is an umbrella term for a spiritual practice with different emphases. Among the various types of Yoga are Hatha Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, or Raja Yoga. For further descriptions, see, for instance, Georg Feuerstein, *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga: Theory and Practice* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003).

3. Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy: An Annotated Translation of the Yoga Sutras* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), 15–17.

4. *Ibid.*, 15.

5. Ibid., 16.
6. Ibid., 17.
7. Richard Smoley, *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition* (Boston: Shambala, 2002).
8. For more information, see, for example, Thomas P. Ryan, *Prayer of Heart and Body: Meditation and Yoga as Christian Spiritual Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995).
9. Margret Distelbarth, *108 Gespräche über Yoga und Christentum* (München: Manfred A. Steiner, 1985).
10. Sami Venkatesananda, *Christ, Krishna and You* (San Francisco: Chiltern Yoga Foundation, 1983).
11. Ibid., 21.
12. For other publications of this category, see, e.g., Abhishiktananda, *Prayer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967); Thomas Matus, "The Christian Use of Yoga: A Theoretical Study Based on a Comparison of the Mystical Experience of Symeon the New Theologian with Some Tantric Sources" (Ph.D. thesis, Fordham University, New York, 1977); Thomas Matus, *Yoga and the Jesus Prayer Tradition: An Experiment in Faith* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1992); Muata Abhaya Ashby, *Christian Yoga: The Mystical Journey from Jesus to Christ* (Miami: Cruzian Mystic Books, 1998); Swami Paramananda, *Yoga and the Christian Mystics* (Boston: Vendanta Centre, 1915); Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity or the Lesser Mysteries*, 10th printing (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1989); A. K. Mozumdar, *The Life and the Way: The Christian Yoga Metaphysics*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (San Francisco: n.p., 1914); Cherian Puthenpura, *Yoga Spirituality: A Christian Pastoral Understanding* (Bangalore: Camillian Publications, 1997); Franz Hartmann, *Yoga und Christentum, oder die Geheimlehre in der christlichen Religion* (Buenos Aires: Schatzkammer Hans Fandrich, 1959); Justin O'Brien, *A Meeting of Mystic Paths: Christianity and Yoga* (St. Paul, MN: Yes International Publishers, 1996); Philip St. Romain, *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).
13. Jay G. Williams, *Yeshua Buddha: An Interpretation of New Testament Theology as Meaningful Myth* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978).
14. Ibid., 13.
15. Joseph Leeming, *Yoga and the Bible* (Punjab, India: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, 1978). For another publication in this category, see Noëlle Perez-Christiaens, *Le Christ et le Yoga* (Paris: Institut de Yoga B. K. S. Iyengar, 1980).
16. Nancy Roth, *An Invitation to Christian Yoga* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001).
17. Gilbert Carlo, *Christian Meditation through Yoga* (Pune, India: Ishvani Publications, 1999).
18. Ibid., 15.
19. For other publications in this category, see, e.g., Fr. Jacob Pareyil, *Christian Spirituality in Yogic Discipline and Meditation* (Bandra, Bombay: St. Paul Press Training School, 1993); Eric W. Hayden, *Everyday Yoga for Christians: Seven Simple Steps to Victorious Living* (Evesham, Worcester, England: Arthur James Limited, 1966); Louis Hughes, *Body, Mind & Spirit: To Harmony through Meditation* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991); Barbara Möller, *Christian Yoga* (video) (Canfield, OH: Alba House Communications, 1995).
20. My observations refer to mainline Protestant and Catholic churches in the United States and Germany.
21. Mary Ganz in her final paper titled "Reading the Bible While Standing on Your Head," Graduate Theological Union Summer Session 2003.
22. Thomas Matus suggested in his Ph.D. thesis that St. Symeon practiced some kind of Yoga; see his "The Christian Use of Yoga: A Theoretical Study Based on a Comparison of the Mystical Experience of Symeon the New Theologian with some Tantric Sources," (Ph.D. thesis, Fordham University, New York, 1977).