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## The commodification of yoga in contemporary U.S. culture

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The Commodification of Yoga in Contemporary U.S. Culture

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Religious Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## The Commodification of Yoga in Contemporary U.S. Culture

Michelle E. Demeter

### ABSTRACT

Yoga is an increasingly visible and versatile commodity in the United States health market. Though its origins stretch to pre-Vedic India and its traditional religious purpose is linked to Hinduism, it is evident that yoga has undergone much change since its transmission to U.S. culture. In its popular, widespread incarnation in the United States, yoga is not usually learned at the feet of a guru, but at exercise centers and gyms. These secular locales of yoga's practice help define the "yoga phenomenon" in contemporary America. This phenomenon has resulted in yoga's wide acceptance and high visibility in American popular culture — especially within the "cultic milieu" as it is expressed in the "spiritual marketplace" and "therapeutic culture."

Yoga's apparent transformation from an explicitly Hindu religious practice to one located in cultural environments that appear non-religious on the surface (such as gyms or therapeutic regimens) is a topic of interest in religious studies. Of even greater interest to religious studies, however, is the argument put forward by some scholars that these non-religious environments are actually profoundly religious in character and suggest that yoga's apparent transformation is a manifestation of a new type of religious experience within the United States.

This thesis is interested in the various questions surrounding this apparent transformation. The central question here is what happens to yoga in U.S. culture? More specifically, what is yoga's religious status in the context of contemporary U.S. culture and religion, and what forms does yoga take within various environments that are devoid of explicit Hindu connections?

To engage these questions, this thesis will analyze yoga's religious status in the context of the theories of secularization and the cultic milieu as put forth by Steve Bruce, as well as the concepts of the spiritual marketplace and therapeutic culture as presented by Wade Clark Roof. Data culled from various sources and independent research will also be used in understanding yoga in contemporary U.S. popular religion and culture.

## Introduction

### Brief Description of the Problem and Thesis Statement

Yoga is an increasingly visible and versatile commodity in the United States health market. Though its origins stretch to pre-Vedic India and its traditional religious purpose is linked to Hinduism, it is evident that yoga has undergone much change since its transmission to U.S. culture. In its popular, widespread incarnation in the United States, yoga is not usually found at the feet of a guru, but at exercise centers and gyms, and perhaps more interestingly, specifically in regard to this thesis, yoga is also found in the form of marketable products (mats, clothes, DVDs, seminars, retreats, etc.) that create a multibillion-dollar industry.

These secular locales and products of yoga help define the “yoga phenomenon” in contemporary America. This phenomenon has resulted in yoga’s wide acceptance and high visibility in American popular culture — especially within the “cultic milieu,” as it is expressed in the “spiritual marketplace” and “therapeutic culture.”

Yoga’s apparent transformation from an explicitly Hindu religious practice to one located in cultural environments that appear non-religious on the surface (such as gyms or therapeutic regimens) is a topic of interest in religious studies. Of even greater interest to religious studies, however, is the argument put forward by some scholars that these non-religious environments are actually profoundly religious in character and suggest that yoga’s apparent transformation is a manifestation of a new type of religious experience within the United States.



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To engage these questions, this thesis will analyze yoga's religious status in the context of the theories of secularization and the cultic milieu as put forth by Steve Bruce, as well as the concepts of the spiritual marketplace and therapeutic culture as presented by Wade Clark Roof. Data culled from various sources and independent research will also be used in understanding yoga in contemporary U.S. popular religion and culture.

It cannot be denied that yoga has certainly found a lucrative niche in the American health industry. A simple stroll through the sporting goods department at the local Wal-Mart or Target will yield at least one aisle of yoga-related products from a variety of manufacturers. How and where Americans choose to market yoga can tell us much about how yoga fits into Americans' fascination with the body and consumer culture, which signifies a substantial shift from yoga's traditional religious practice. Furthermore, yoga's solid holding in the U.S. health market may provide insight into how Americans idealize the health and the body and the extent to which this idealization may be understood in a religious context. The concepts of the spiritual marketplace and therapeutic culture in connection with the cultic milieu will be utilized to address this issue.

This thesis will address what yoga's apparent transformation and contribution to American popular religion tells scholars about the changing landscape of religious

experience in contemporary U.S. culture. In order to accomplish these tasks, Chapter One will offer a brief discussion of yoga's origins in India and its later historical development in the United States, with particular emphasis on U.S. popular culture, the cultic milieu, therapeutic culture, and the spiritual marketplace. This discussion will incorporate the author's field research, which includes analyses of yoga's representation at bookstores and retail chains with particular attention given to how yoga is marketed as a mass consumer commodity. Data compiled from various polls and surveys accessed by the author will also be utilized.

Within the spiritual marketplace, there is an alternative interpretation of yoga held by conservative evangelical Christian groups that see yoga not so much as a fitness fad but as an explicit religious practice. Their viewpoint is included in Chapter One in order to illustrate that, despite the fact yoga is practiced within implicit religious environments (such as the spiritual marketplace and therapeutic culture) and decidedly non-religious environments (such as gyms), there is a small group of people that refuses to acknowledge yoga's transformation and instead staunchly asserts its Hindu religious connections, insisting that to do otherwise is misleading and wrong.

Chapter Two will engage questions related to the data presented in Chapter One through an analysis of yoga within the aforementioned categories developed by Bruce and Roof. Bruce's concept of the cultic milieu, as outlined in *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* and *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, provides a technical category in which yoga is appropriately classified. Bruce's notion of the cultic milieu is further explored and analyzed using Roof's definitions of therapeutic culture and the spiritual marketplace as he explains them in *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby*

*Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion.* Furthermore, the theory of secularization (as defined by Peter Berger and Bruce) will be employed to illustrate that yoga's contemporary structure is consistent with the tenets of secularization and that yoga does not pose a significant challenge to this process. Using these theories, yoga's religious status will be evaluated with attention given to contemporary cultural factors affecting this status, including those noted above, as well as individualization, commodification, and the idealization of the body and its health.

Chapter Three will offer a tentative conclusion addressing yoga's impact on religion in the United States in light of the various theories evaluated in this thesis. While yoga's transformation clearly adheres to the tenets of secularization, the conclusion will argue that yoga has accommodated itself to secularization by transforming itself from an explicit religious practice to an implicit one, which is extremely well adapted to American popular culture.

As yoga's popularity has grown, so have questions about its appropriation into and influence on U.S. culture. However, before its influence can be adequately measured, it must be determined what yoga is considered to be in the United States. In other words, it is important to determine in what ways and to what extent yoga has transformed. The acceptance of yoga in America has helped open the door to other East and South Asian religious practices and ideas to enter U.S. popular culture. However, if the door is opened only for a practice that has been stripped of its original, explicit religious content, what are the implications for the acceptance and distribution of other religious practices in the United States? Only by exploring these questions can yoga's influence and importance in contemporary American culture and religion begin to be properly understood.

## Chapter One

### Yoga's Origins and Emergence in 19<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. Culture



#### South Asian Origins

Yoga began millennia ago in India. This spiritual practice was meant to bring a person closer to achieving unification with the ultimate power, Brahman (the unifying force found within Hinduism). It is found within all things and, like air, pervades all things but is contained in no one thing. Thus, Brahman is located in all living things on Earth, as well as the cosmos, uniting all that exists into one uniform force. However, it should be noted that the search for Brahman, like all transcendental powers, is not an external one but instead is internal and individual. A primary vehicle used in this search is yoga.

Yoga was first introduced as a vehicle to liberation millennia ago in India. As one of the six major commentary traditions of Hinduism, yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root “yuj,” which means “to link together,” “yoke”<sup>1</sup> or “to join, unite.”<sup>2</sup> Yoga “refers to these technologies or disciplines of asceticism and meditation which are thought to lead to spiritual experience and profound understanding or insight into the nature of existence. Yoga is the means whereby the mind and senses can be restrained, the limited, empirical

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patanjali and Yoga*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 9. Eliade, Gavin Flood and A. L. Basham, as cited below, provide the main sources of information used in this brief historical sketch. For more detailed information concerning Hinduism and yoga, their books would be ideal places to begin

<sup>2</sup> Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 94.

self or ego (ahamkara) can be transcended and the self's true identity eventually experienced.”<sup>3</sup>

The unification with Brahman is not an easy task. The main problem is the veil of ignorance that prohibits people from realizing that they are already one with Brahman. Yoga helps to regain that realization so the two can be consciously reunited and cosmic harmony can be achieved, which then results in being liberated from the wheel of samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Humanity is chained to this life of repetition until the realization that atman and Brahman are one is achieved.

Evidence of yoga can be seen even before the emergence of the Vedas. On the walls of the archeological site of Mohenjo-Daro, a city that existed in the Indus Valley around 2,500 B.C.E., a figure with horns protruding from his head can be seen sitting in a cross-legged yoga-type posture.<sup>4</sup>

The word yoga appears in the Vedas and can be traced back to the oldest of these texts, the Brahmanas, though the actual term “yoga” is first used later in the Upanishads.<sup>5</sup> Another important Hindu text that addresses yoga is the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* describes several types of yoga. However, yoga's explanation and impact are most advanced in the work of the Yoga-Sutras, composed by the Indian philosopher Patangali

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>4</sup> A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New Delhi, India: Rupa & Co., 1999), 22-3. Flood also mentions the findings of the proto-Siva in his *Introduction to Hinduism*, dating the figure to circa 3000-2750 BCE and provides an illustration of the figure on page 29. Eliade also alludes to the proto-Siva in his text *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 355.

<sup>5</sup> Flood, 94-5.

around the second century BCE.<sup>6</sup> It is Patanjali's interpretation of yoga that is still used today in understanding its practices and is "the best known in the West."<sup>7</sup>

However, yoga did not remain isolated to South Asia. As borders around the globe opened and travel to other countries and continents expanded, so did the exchange of ideas. During the Western colonial period, Hindu and Buddhist culture and religion entered the West.

### Transcendentalism, Immigration, and Religious Carriers

The United States has been uniquely affected by this immigration of religious values and practices. The 1830s saw the rise of Transcendentalism in the United States. Such visionaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were largely responsible for popularizing unitive consciousness themes, ecology that was very Buddhist in nature, and themes of an equality and collectiveness not found in Christianity. Emerson and Thoreau, along with Walt Whitman, have had a significant influence on writers, poets and philosophers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though the Transcendentalists were interested in these ideas, it was others to come, people new to the country, who would have a greater effect on the development of Eastern<sup>8</sup> religions in the United States.

The first major group of people to expose the country to these religions was Chinese workers during the 1849 Gold Rush of California, which brought the first

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<sup>6</sup> Richard H. Davis. "A Brief History of Religions in India" in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Eliade, *Patanjali and Yoga*, 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this thesis, the terms "East" and "Eastern" will be used to refer to South and East Asian culture, peoples, religion and/or religious practices or ideas.

significant wave of Asian immigrants to America. This influx of immigrants formed a solid East Asian religious community in the western states. Several Buddhist temples were built and other, smaller, communities were formed, as well. Hawaii, not yet a state, already had experienced the immigration of large numbers of Buddhists from Japan.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to this influx of immigrants, another event to have a major impact on the introduction of Asian religious concepts to the United States was the 1893 World's Parliament of Religion held in Chicago. The parliament was an ecumenical gathering of many of the world's major religions, including Roman Catholicism and Islam, sparked much interest in East Asian religions. Representatives from several Buddhist schools and Hinduism were welcomed to the Parliament.

Of particular significance to this thesis was the introduction of Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu proponent of Vedanta and disciple of the Hindu religious leader Rama Krishna. Vivekananda, who received a Western education, was one of the most popular speakers at the Parliament.<sup>10</sup> He brought the school of Vedanta to the United States and sought "to bring the spirituality of the East to the West."<sup>11</sup> Included in this package of "spirituality of the East" was yoga (of varying types as they were specifically employed by different new religious movements).

The year 1875 saw the birth of the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Blavatsky. "The Theosophical Society was founded to discuss ideas regarding ancient

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<sup>9</sup> Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths* (Upper Saddle, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 169.

<sup>10</sup> Robert S. Ellwood and Harry B. Partin, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988), 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

lore, supernatural phenomena, and the expansion of human powers of mind and spirit.”<sup>12</sup> Very much influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism, Theosophy’s followers employed techniques of meditation and yoga in order to better gain spiritual knowledge.

Import religions held yoga in an even higher regard and helped introduce it to upper and middle class Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Vedanta, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and the Self-Realization Fellowship all contributed greatly to the introduction of yoga in American culture.

The yoga imported into the United States by way of these groups varies greatly. The above-mentioned new religious movements imported a religious practice that helped foster community relations. Though many of these groups practiced yoga that was specifically focused on the devotion to a deity, others, such as Theosophy, did not. Instead, it was the groups that focused on hatha yoga, which does not require the intense devotion to a deity or anything else that would explicitly link the practice to Hinduism, that helped develop the yoga that would become popular during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Hatha yoga is comprised of breathing techniques and postures (asanas) meant to help control the physical body in an effort to help the individual on his path to enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Of the various types of yoga, only hatha yoga is of significance to this thesis because it is the form that secured a foothold in the United States through the efforts of many of these new religious movements and later the New Age religions. Hatha

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>13</sup> J. Gordon Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1990), 207.



yoga gained a newfound popularity mostly due to its adaptation from a strictly religious practice to one that was more focused on its physical benefits.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Theosophy and Vedanta worked hard to emphasize the scientific and holistic benefits to be gained through the practice of yoga. Annie Besant, who was head of the Theosophical Society for several decades, gave many lectures explaining yoga. The third lecture, included in *An Introduction to Yoga*, was titled “Yoga as Science” and sought to connect yoga to ethics, metaphysics and psychology using the “scientific method.”<sup>15</sup> Vedanta and Self-Realization<sup>16</sup> have also done much to scientifically prove the benefits of yoga. In fact, scores of yoga centers dedicated to the study and promotion of yoga exist and can be found on the Internet, though it should be noted that these centers do not focus solely on hatha yoga (if they do at all).<sup>17</sup>

While their success as new religious movements is debatable, what is clear is these groups did much to promote the practice of yoga, though each group emphasized different types and aspects of yoga in their teachings. However, the events of the 1960s were about to open the door to a much more widespread acceptance of yoga in popular culture.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>15</sup> Annie Besant, *An Introduction to Yoga* (Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1972), 85-115.

<sup>16</sup> For further details on these new religious movements and other religious carriers of yoga, including the New Age, please see Appendix 1.

<sup>17</sup> A rather large and comprehensive list of American and international yoga centers and organizations can be found at <http://fiy.yoganet.org/fiyorganizations.htm>.

## Yoga in the United States Today



### Popular Culture, Commercialization, and the Spiritual Marketplace

The 1960s marked a period of experimentation in the United States and yoga was one of the experiences involved. One major factor in the development of yoga in America occurred in 1965 when the United States relaxed Asian immigration laws. As a result, tens of thousands of immigrants entered the country, bringing their unique lifestyles, languages, and religions with them. This influx did not go unnoticed, especially by celebrities, who continued to pave the way for the acceptance of Eastern ideas and practices.

Many celebrities, such as the Beatles, certainly influenced the acceptance of yoga in the United States when they became involved with the practice through the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation. Arguably one of the most popular new religious movements of the '60s, TM's short-lived glory exposed thousands of people to yoga and meditation practices. Yoga (and consequently Hinduism) continued to gain popularity through the 1970s and '80s as Americans became enamored with health and exercise, as well as the increasingly visible New Age religions, which often included alternative and complementary health and medical options.<sup>18</sup>

However, the yoga being practiced in the United States began to lose much of its religious connections as people realized the theistic Hindu qualities of yoga could be separated from its practice while retaining its physical and mental advantages. Thus, yoga began to be stripped of its traditional Hindu qualities when various new religious

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<sup>18</sup> Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia*, 506.

movements attempted to legitimize it through science and forged ahead in a way that allowed it to be included in secular gyms and later even in the YMCA, which owes its roots to its Christian founders.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1990s, many musicians and actors began to again extol the health benefits inherent in Eastern practices, helping to spark a nationwide interest in yoga that moved it and its products into gyms and retail chains across the nation. This time, instead of touting the calming effects of meditation and yoga, many celebrities, such as Sting and Madonna, proudly announced that they used yoga for other purposes and showed off their chiseled figures as evidence of yoga's physical health benefits. Today, the number of celebrities practicing yoga has grown, as have the variations of yoga itself (though, each variation is usually a twist on hatha yoga).

As yoga has moved from India to the United States, it becomes clear that changes have been made (however subtle they may be) to its practice, and a variety of yogas have emerged in U.S. culture. For Hindus and adherents to NRMs, such as Vedanta, ISCKON and Self-Realization, yoga retains an explicitly religious connection to yoga's Hindu roots. However, these practitioners are in the minority as this Hindu-infused yoga has not become the prevalent form practiced throughout the United States today.

In contrast, and due in part to the changes yoga has undergone through the past decades, yoga has become a thriving enterprise in the health and fitness market. However, even in this context, there are different variations of yoga. There are Americans

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<sup>19</sup> Though the YMCA was founded by Christians, it should be noted that its focus on Bible study and other explicit religious activities has been greatly reduced since its inception. However, its religious history along with the fact that some Christians (though they largely appear to be in the minority) have spoken against including yoga in YMCA programs makes the organization of interest to this thesis.

who do yoga as an exercise, just as they would take any other class that interested them at a gym. But there is also a growing number of Americans who are doing yoga as a way to heal their physical, mental and emotional ailments. It is this final category of yoga practitioners that is of important interest to this thesis because it seems to represent a majority and has begun to impact other spheres of society, especially in regard to medical fields and consumerism.

In order to fully understand yoga's place in U.S. culture and to what extent it may be considered to be influencing other aspects of society, it is imperative to consider how average Americans encounter yoga. Although this encounter is wide-ranging and diverse, central to this consideration is how it is marketed and consumed.

First, it is important to note how and to whom yoga is marketed. Studies conducted by NAMASTA (North American Studio Alliance), *Yoga Journal*, and The Yoga Alliance show that in 2004 about 15 million Americans practiced yoga.<sup>20</sup> According to *USA-Today*, the *Yoga Journal's* survey indicated a 43% increase since 2002.<sup>21</sup> About \$27 billion was spent on yoga products annually and the majority of yoga practitioners were female (77 percent).<sup>22</sup> By knowing this market, and attempting to target the 12 percent of Americans who have expressed interest in learning yoga, companies that market DVDs, classes, retreats, clothing lines, and other accoutrements have made yoga accessible to consumers across the economic spectrum, from the most

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<sup>20</sup> Kirsten Orsini-Meinhard. "Yoga Industry Gains Strength," *The Coloradoan Online*, July 10, 2005, <http://www.bikramyoga.com/News/TheColoradoan071005.htm>. Accessed January 29, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Mindy Fetterman. "Yoga Copyright Raises Questions of Ownership," *USA Today*, June 28, 2006, [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-06-28-yoga-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-06-28-yoga-usat_x.htm). Accessed June 29, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Orsini-Meinhard, "Yoga Industry Gains Strength."

wealthy to college students on a budget, as well as persons of lower income levels. With an estimated 25 million Americans expressing interest in trying yoga,<sup>23</sup> it is clear that this practice has gained both popularity and economic clout in the health and exercise markets.

A survey of national retail chains, sporting goods retailers and, interestingly enough, bookstores revealed much about how Americans are influenced in how they think about yoga.<sup>24</sup> Sporting goods stores, such as The Sports Authority, offer clothing, DVDs, a variety of mats and blocks, as well as kits (which typically include a mat, DVD and yoga strap) targeted at beginners, children, or advanced students. Chain retailers, such as Target and Wal-Mart, carry a similar array of yoga products, all categorized as sporting goods. The fact that these items are offered at all at these stores reveals that yoga has progressed into mainstream markets and can be bought at reasonable prices by anyone.

To perhaps best understand how yoga is marketed, it is helpful to consider how popular religious products are advertised at bookstores, which offer straightforward categories that specifically include religious books and items year round, unlike general merchandise and discount retailers, which usually stock and sell sacred items only when they coincide with a holiday (i.e., Christmas, Easter, Passover). For instance, a consumer may purchase a Buddha in a Box or other religious pop culture items at several bookstores, but would unlikely be able to find such a product at a Target or Wal-Mart.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The information gathered concerning retailers, book and sporting goods stores was collected by the author in June 2005 and followed up in January 2006.

Several large national bookstore chains were closely examined. At least two had a four-sided, standalone display that included DVDs, mats, bags to carry mats, shirts, yoga straps and books. Also included in this display were media products for other exercises, including Tae-Bo and Pilates. When seeking books about yoga, a trip to the religion sections would yield few books, if any at all (some bookstores had none in their religion sections). The few books that were found were usually either biographies of yogis or compilations of testimonials from people praising the benefits of practicing yoga.

However, it is easy to see how yoga has been classified in the United States for marketing purposes when one considers where most of the yoga books are found. Just as Target, Wal-Mart and Sports Authority market toward the culture of health, so do bookstores. At each bookstore visited, there were no less than three shelves devoted to yoga products. These were categorized under such headings as Sports and Fitness, Exercise, and Health. The magazine racks offered similar categories. While one or two yoga journals were placed with other religious magazines, the majority could be found under Sports or Fitness.

Clearly, the commercialization of yoga is focused upon health and fitness. Just considering the titles of these categories, it becomes clear that most Americans may not consider yoga to be at all religious in nature. However, to make such an assumption would be foolish. Instead, a closer analysis of the titles of the yoga books, articles, and magazines should be addressed.

Such titles as *Yoga for Beginners* and *Yoga for Women* are definitely secular in their offerings. In fact, the fragmentation of the types of yoga is impressive itself. Books, and even specific courses offered at gyms and yoga studios, offer a variety of yogas

spanning from yoga for pregnant mothers to yoga for dogs, and from rock ‘n’ roll yoga to children’s yoga. Beyond this commodification, however, comes such titles as *Complete Yoga: The Gentle and Effective Way to Health and Well-Being* by Stella Weller, and *The Yoga Handbook: A Guide to Enhancing Physical, Mental and Spiritual Well-Being* by Sumukhi Finney.

Both of these latter titles evoke the influence of the New Age and what has been referred to as “therapeutic culture,”<sup>25</sup> which focuses on self-help, as well as “lived religion,” which is defined as “religion as experienced in everyday life.”<sup>26</sup> Here is a recognition, not of yoga’s traditional religious goals, but of more private and individualized goals of the self, which are no more or less important than Hinduism’s goal of unitive oneness with Brahman. In fact, the authors of the above-mentioned yoga books seem very intent on helping others in a way that seems religious or spiritual, as Finney reveals in her testimonial:

I always seemed to be tired, and didn’t really feel happy ... I wanted to get fit and lose weight, as like many of us I was not contented with how I looked and thought that if I had the ‘perfect’ body all would be well. ... After just one lesson I felt physically comfortable — a new experience for me. ... I gained a greater understanding and acceptance of myself and of the world around me. ... Life still had its challenges and its ups and downs, but yoga has given me the tools to deal effectively with it.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> A full treatment of the term “therapeutic culture” is provided in Chapter Two of this thesis. The theory given is specifically developed by Wade Clark Roof in his book *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), and is widely used by other scholars. Also see Appendix 2 of this thesis for a more in-depth definition.

<sup>26</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39-41.

<sup>27</sup> Sumukhi Finney, *The Yoga Handbook: A Guide to Enhancing Physical, Mental and Spiritual Well-Being* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Books, 2004), 6-7.

It is obvious by this woman's testimonial that she sought and found something more than nice muscle tone and a flat stomach. She found something spiritual that she felt compelled to share with others. If such claims are taken seriously, then yoga appears to contain some religious significance, even if it is not the primary objective of the practitioner. However, despite this implication of implicit religiosity, it should be noted that yoga's religious status seems consistent with the theory of secularization, especially in the context of the cultic milieu<sup>28</sup>, as will be further explored in Chapter Two.

### Conservative Christian Reactions/Interpretations

In fact, conservative Christians offer an unexpected endorsement of yoga's connection to traditional theories of secularization (which will be addressed in more detail in the following chapter) because while many Christians come to terms with yoga by seemingly stripping it of its traditional religious roots, others think it is misleading to view it non-religiously. One woman, Laurette Willis, felt so deceived by the presentation of yoga as non-religious that she created a form of exercise that resembles yoga but that she claims focuses on God and Jesus so that Christians are not compromising their faith.<sup>29</sup> Notably, each "PraiseMoves" posture in Willis' system corresponds to a scripture

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<sup>28</sup> A full treatment of the terms "cultic religion" and "cultic milieu" is provided later in Chapter Two. The theories used in this thesis are specifically outlined by Bruce in his books *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002). Also see Appendix 2 of this thesis for a more in-depth definition.

<sup>29</sup> Holly Vicente Robaina. "The Truth About Yoga," *Today's Christian Woman*, March/April 2005 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2005/002/14.40.html>. Accessed June 6, 2006.



from the Bible.<sup>30</sup> Willis' therapy is marketed to Christians who worry that practicing yoga compromises their religious beliefs and has found a niche in what Wade Clark Roof calls the "spiritual marketplace."<sup>31</sup>

Willis attacks the New Age movement in her critique against yoga, comparing the movement to Burger King "because it's like the fast-food restaurant's motto: 'Have it your way.' That's what the New Age movement tries to do, to achieve God on its terms."<sup>32</sup> In this sense, Willis' critique is not unlike that of Steve Bruce, who notes that New Age practitioners, whose religious ideas and rituals comprise the cultic milieu, seem to consider the exchange and acquisition of religious ideas only in the context of what "works for you."<sup>33</sup> Regardless of Willis' animosity toward yoga and its association with the spiritual marketplace's religious buffet, her development of an "alternative to yoga" operates in the very same marketplace, only she specifically targets a Christian audience and aims to keep her product in the realm of Christianity.

Willis' view of yoga is positive insofar as its physical benefits are concerned, but her issues with such Hindu terms as "om" and "namaste" and the poses, which referred to Hindu deities, drove her away from yoga.<sup>34</sup> She found this religious residue to be completely antithetical to her faith and, according to Robaina's article, "numerous

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<sup>30</sup> "What Does a PraiseMoves Class Look Like?," PraiseMoves: The Christian Alternative to Yoga at <http://www.praisemoves.com>. Accessed June 6, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> A full treatment of the term "spiritual marketplace" is provided in Chapter Two of this thesis. The theory given is specifically developed by Roof in his book *Spiritual Marketplace* and is widely used by other scholars. Also see Appendix 2 of this thesis for a more in-depth definition.

<sup>32</sup> Robaina, "The Truth About Yoga."

<sup>33</sup> Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 83.

<sup>34</sup> Robaina, "The Truth About Yoga."

Christian women have told Laurette they decided to quit yoga after learning about its Hindu roots. It's a hard decision for those who've invested many years and many dollars into the practice."<sup>35</sup>

Willis also warns against so-called Christian yoga, saying that because she was told that all yoga is Hindu, it is impossible for there to be such a thing as Christian yoga. Other Christians, however, do not agree. In a *Time* magazine article focusing on PraiseMoves, one woman stated, "It [Christian yoga] gives me time alone with God. ... As a mom of two small kids, I don't get that — even in church."<sup>36</sup>

Thus even among Christians there is disagreement about yoga's current religious status in the United States. The issues raised by this disagreement will be addressed more closely later in this paper. The next chapter of this thesis will engage the issues raised by yoga's popularity in U.S. culture and what they tell us about yoga's specifically religious status in this culture.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Lisa Takeuchi Cullen/Mahtomedi. "Stretching for Jesus," *Time*, 5 September 2005 at <http://www.praisemoves.com/timearticle.htm>. Accessed June 6, 2006.

## Chapter Two

### Yoga in Contemporary U.S. Culture

While the previous chapter outlined yoga's development and current status in the United States, the significance of yoga's origins cannot be left there. In fact, yoga's past and present forms in contemporary American culture are very important in determining in what ways yoga has changed and how the practice fits into the religious landscape of U.S. culture.

This chapter will address yoga's significance in the United States, with close attention being given to its status in what Steve Bruce defines as the cultic milieu, its relationship with secularization, commodification, and the New Age, as well as institutional structures related to the spiritual marketplace and therapeutic culture. To begin this line of inquiry, yoga will be analyzed using the traditional secularization theories of Peter Berger and Bruce. Much attention will also be given to Bruce's concept of the cultic milieu and its relationship to religion in contemporary American culture. In addition, alternative theories developed by Wade Clark Roof, Christopher Partridge and David Lyon will be used to understand yoga's inclusion in the cultic milieu.

Also of significant importance are the reactions of conservative Christians, as well as the effect of the New Age on yoga and the emergence of what may be seen as a different perspective on religion and its place in the United States.

## Religion and Spirituality Defined

Religion can be categorized in a number of ways. Borrowing from Roy Wallis' work, Bruce offers a simple system for classifying religions that helps illuminate the ways in which religion manifests in a secular culture. Through the use of four categories, religions are classified as churches, denominations, sects or cults.

Churches tend to be large, inclusive and co-extensive with society.<sup>37</sup> Their members usually were born into the religion, but outsiders were welcomed and even sought. Sects, on the other hand, are smaller and involve religious protest, but are similar to churches in that they also claim that they have exclusive access to the truth and the true path to salvation.<sup>38</sup> Members of sects are not necessarily born into the religion, but are members by choice. The denomination, like the church, is large and its members are largely born into the religion, though others may choose to join.<sup>39</sup> Denominations are inclusive, but they differ from sects and churches in that the denomination acknowledges the truth of other religions.<sup>40</sup>

Of particular interest to this thesis, however is the category of cult. To define cult, Bruce employs Ernst Troeltsch's definition. Cults are very different in that they offer "highly individualistic expression, varying with personal experiences and interpretations."<sup>41</sup> Cults are often small, loosely organized groups that are extremely

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<sup>37</sup> Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71. For a more detailed account of these categories, please see Chapter 4 of Bruce's book.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

tolerant of new ideas. Bruce refers to the members of cults as “consumers who pick and choose those bits of its product that suit them.”<sup>42</sup>

Within this category of cult, the terms cultic religion and cultic milieu<sup>43</sup> are developed. Bruce places New Age religions and all of the practices associated with them in the category of the cultic milieu. Bruce describes the ideas and practices of cultic religions as those that find “an audience and even, in a diluted form, infuse the general climate (as, for example, with the many holistic healing cults and alternative medical practices)” but are “unable to elicit or maintain the commitment of those people interested in its innovations.”<sup>44</sup>

It is the religious category of cult that is of relevance to this thesis because it connects to the religions of the New Age and targets religious ideas and practices (which are thus part of the cultic milieu) that are highly individualized, as yoga has become. As this thesis develops, the connection between Bruce’s cultic religion and Roof’s concepts of therapeutic culture and the spiritual marketplace will be made clear. However, for purposes of this thesis, yet another definitional distinction must be made, this time concerning religion and spirituality.

The roots of this distinction, which is particularly evident in New Age communities, can be traced to the 1960s. Certainly, the repeal of the United States’

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Cultic religion and cultic milieu are related terms, wherein the cultic milieu simply refers to the environment of cultic religion. It should be noted that Partridge offers a definition of these terms in Chapter Four of his book *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol. 1* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004). However, Partridge’s use of the terms focus on mysticism and an emphasis on community and shared beliefs within cultic religion.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, 91.

Immigration Act in 1965 opened the doors to tens of thousands of Eastern immigrants and helped fuel the “turn to the East” that spiritual seekers embraced during the 1960s.<sup>45</sup> Robert Wuthnow, sociologist of religion and culture, has remarked how the 1960s offered people new ways of seeking not the so-called religious, but the spiritual.<sup>46</sup>

It is important to note that for many Americans there is a stark contrast between these two terms. The dichotomy between religion and spirituality is important to understanding how many Americans view their practices, beliefs, and ethics. A number of scholars, such as Christopher Partridge, are now going to great lengths to distinguish what they consider to be the main differences between religion and spirituality, either of which can be labeled positive or negative depending upon the point of view of the observer. As explained by Partridge:

Spirituality is vital and subversive. Spirituality breaks boundaries. Spirituality is the life-enhancing. Religion is about cataloguing. Religion is about comprehending experience (rather than, I suppose, simply *experiencing*). Religion belongs to the past. Religion is lifeless collections of words. Religion is the end of vitality.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, it must be understood that what many Americans consider religious is under great change and stress. In the case of East Asian practices and beliefs, such as yoga, it becomes evident that the repackaging they often encounter upon entering the United States is largely influenced by how Americans define them, whether they be religious,

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol. 1* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 97.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

spiritual, or something else. This thesis will later return to this line of analysis in the context of yoga and its acceptance and understanding in U.S. culture.

Yoga has, of course, undergone serious change during the past century. The yoga practiced in the United States does not necessarily mirror or resemble the yoga of India. But does this mean that the yoga practiced in the United States is less religious than that of its Eastern counterpart? Has yoga been stripped of its religious tenets and been reduced to a mere exercise, secularized and commodified to the point it is no longer relevant to religious study?

### Secularization Theory and the Cultic Milieu

Various interpretations of the secularization thesis have been posited by a number of scholars. This thesis employs a rather basic definition derived primarily from the work of Peter Berger. As Berger states, secularization is considered to be “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”<sup>48</sup> Notably, secularization is not just a “social-structural process;” it also impacts the thought-world of individuals through what Berger calls “the secularization of consciousness.”<sup>49</sup>

Following Berger, the roots of secularization are anchored in early Judaic monotheism. Berger argues in *The Sacred Canopy* that the roots of secularization can be traced to the ancient Israelites who separated God from nature and made nature

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<sup>48</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 107.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-8.

subservient to a creator god, thus pushing nature itself from the forefront of religious experience and marginalizing its importance in a resultant non-sacred (mundane) realm.<sup>50</sup>

Building on Berger's definition of secularization, Bruce offers a three-part definition that seems more focused than that of Berger. Bruce sees this "social condition" in:

(a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy; (b) a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.<sup>51</sup>

It should be noted that Bruce considers secularization to be thriving and undermining the legitimacy of religion. He is careful, however, to emphasize that secularization is not so much inevitable as it is irreversible,<sup>52</sup> a distinction that he uses to debunk theories that the influx of the New Age and new religious movements (NRMs) are indicators of resistance or a reversal of secularization.

Additionally, Bruce states that "cultic religion lacks the *social significance* of the church and the sect. Furthermore, it is a form of religion that is particularly difficult to sustain and promote. Hence the number of adherents (if that is not too strong a term for the consumers of cultic religion) will decline. For those two reasons, cultic religion is unlikely to stem secularization."<sup>53</sup> Through his very detailed and specific definition of secularization and his stance on the social influence of cultic religion, as given above,

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<sup>50</sup> Berger, 115-6.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce, *God is Dead*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.



Bruce seems intent upon closing any loophole through which supporters of the New Age or NRMs might offer evidence that secularization may be slowing or, in fact, be reversible because these religious groups' membership does not offset the losses incurred by traditional religions.<sup>54</sup>

Using Berger's and Bruce's understandings, yoga's modifications are consistent with secularization theory because yoga has been, to varying degrees, separated from its explicit Hindu religious ties and is included in the non-religious exercise regimens found in YMCAs and gyms, as well as its increasingly diverse commodification in the form of mats, clothing, and accessories across the nation. When these observations are paired with the fact that the majority of Americans who do yoga want nothing to do with its Hindu concepts and focus only on the physical (health) benefits, it would appear that the yoga being done is non-religious in nature. By importing yoga into secular gymnasiums and health centers, much of its religious tenets are left out. Though teachings about proper breathing and the asanas may be retained, the purpose for them shifts from unifying atman with Brahman to simply seeking calm or physical well-being. Thus, yoga has been abstracted from its traditional, explicitly religious practice. This does not, however, mean that yoga has been entirely stripped of its religious connections.

Many Americans seek to feel better physically so they can devote their time and attention to both spiritual and mundane matters. Physical ailments can be distracting, painful and time (as well as financially) consuming when treatment is needed. Americans have been increasingly turning to alternative avenues of treatment, including yoga. Within this search for self-help is the concept of the therapeutic culture. The therapeutic

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 81.

culture, as presented by Roof, is a movement focused on the individual that “reflects a profound effort within contemporary culture to address psychological health and personal well-being openly and candidly in a supportive context and amounts to, as R. Marie Griffith observes, ‘a kind of spiritual shift in American life, in which the boundaries between the public and the private have been repeatedly challenged and redrawn.’”<sup>55</sup>

In this regard, yoga appears to be fulfilling the function of a secular exercise that many Americans seem to think is safe to be involved in without compromising their faith, while still doing something that will benefit them in a very personal manner. For some practitioners, this may also mean experiencing spiritual growth concerning the self without making any reference to a specific god or religion per se. Surely, this has an appeal to many people who do yoga for psychological health reasons, especially those related to relieving stress, anxiety or depression, but do not necessarily seek an explicitly religious outlet.

A major reason yoga appears to be so “safe” is due to its high visibility, which is driven by its marketability and commodification. But does this mean yoga loses its authenticity? Stewart M. Hoover, author of “The Cross at Willow Creek,” says no. “If ... the religious practice of today is rooted in the cultural practice of the marketplace, then the *symbolic* practices of the marketplace should be apparent in the world of lived religion.”<sup>56</sup> In this case, Hoover is in agreement with Roof’s concept of lived religion as it appears in both therapeutic culture and the spiritual marketplace.

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<sup>55</sup> Roof, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Stewart M. Hoover, “The Cross at Willow Creek” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, California: University of California, 2000), 155.

Bruce's cultic milieu is particularly helpful in located lived religion and the spiritual marketplace in the context of the broader secularization theory. With the spiritual marketplace placing emphasis on the individual and the self, as well as providing an environment that allows for the easy exchange of religious ideas and practices (that may or may not be explicit in their religiosity), it reinforces the diversity that is the cornerstone of cultic religions. While it seems Bruce may be correct in his charge that most cultic practices appear unable to maintain long-term commitments by its members,<sup>57</sup> the sheer number of participants involved in yoga warrant further inquiry into yoga's status as a religious contributor and its influence on various spheres of American culture, popular or otherwise.

In spite of yoga's resistance to be classified as an explicit religious practice under Berger's and Bruce's terms of secularization due to its transformation into a health and fitness regimen, yoga, if included in the cultic milieu and the therapeutic culture, does seem to retain some religiosity in an implicit sense. Thus, as has been suggested by many scholars, religion is not necessarily being eliminated from or replaced in society but the ways in which religion is practiced are shifting. People now seem comfortable in seeking experiences that are religious in function although they are non-religious in appearance.<sup>58</sup> Using the arguments put forth by Roof, Partridge, and Lyon, in the context of Bruce's notion of the cultic milieu, these seekers and their experiences suggest the proper categories for the classification of yoga in contemporary American culture.

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<sup>57</sup> Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, 91.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7. Bruce would likely express concern with this stance because he considers functional definitions of religion to be too inclusive.

## Therapeutic Culture, the Spiritual Marketplace, and the New Age

One way in which religion may be shifting can be seen in how Americans practice yoga, which has gained much popularity and enjoyed much success as a therapeutic exercise that has become quite prominent in the spiritual marketplace (as defined by Roof), as well as among cultic religions. Although yoga, in its popular commodified incarnation, does not maintain its traditional Hindu religious features, it has become very important to a subculture of Americans who have used yoga as a springboard into a completely new health-oriented lifestyle.

Roof offers a category into which these practitioners might be classified as religious, a growing movement related to the spiritual marketplace known as “therapeutic culture,” which focuses on physical and mental self improvement. This individualization of religion certainly conforms to Bruce’s concept of secularization, especially as manifest in the United States, and also opens the door to the establishment of the spiritual marketplace, where religion flourishes in the context of secularization. However, it should not be assumed that this marketplace is a direct challenge to secularization. Rather, the spiritual marketplace is evidence that, although relegated to a category of options for American religious seekers, it is nonetheless an indicator that religion is thriving and popular in U.S. culture.

As was explained in the previous chapter, the United States has always been a burgeoning marketplace of religious ideas and innovation. It should be noted that the spiritual marketplace is not a place of religion so much as it is a place that offers religious consumers the opportunity to choose from parts of religions. Thus, a person does not

enter the spiritual marketplace to find Hinduism being explicitly marketed so much as he or she will find parts of Hinduism, such as yoga and meditation, being offered for consumption.

This vast marketplace affects countless numbers of people throughout American culture, influencing such institutional structures as religion, politics, morality, education, economics, and health. However, in light of Roof's analysis, it is the *spiritual* marketplace, which has emerged as a place where seekers of religion and spirituality go to find solutions to matters concerning the mind, body and soul, that is of particular significance to this thesis.

Yoga, in particular, has contributed much to the legitimization of the spiritual marketplace. Like its parent religion, Hinduism, yoga is very malleable and, as a religious commodity, is a successful contributor and member of American popular culture. While some scholars, such as Bruce, view the spiritual marketplace as merely a product of secularization, others, such as Roof and Partridge, view this marketplace as evidence that religion is still a strong force in today's society even if it is not dominant. This is a significant disagreement in interpretation but is not of relevance here as this thesis is not arguing that religion in the United States, specifically yoga, represents a counterpoint to secularization theory. Instead, the distinction is made to show that where Bruce would likely dismiss the spiritual marketplace as only a contributor to cultic religion, other scholars see an indication that religion, despite its marginalization, is still a strong influence on American culture, both socially and individually.

One question that should be asked, however, is whether the spiritual marketplace "cheapens" religion by offering it in an a la carte fashion. Based on yoga's acceptance

and popularity, it can be argued that the marketplace is a positive influence on religion. If people come to the marketplace in search of religious or spiritual alternatives to mainstream religious options, the fact that there is such a search for other outlets shows the thirst for religion in America has yet to be slaked.

In Bruce's view, the spiritual marketplace commodifies religion and therefore pushes it to the margins of society, but according to David Lyon, author of *Jesus in Disneyland*, being part of the marketplace does not necessarily mean something has been stripped of meaning or been religiously devalued. In other words, a Christian who chooses to add yoga to his or her lifestyle does not have to disavow the values or beliefs of Christianity, nor accept or reject those of Hinduism for that matter. Nor does this mean yoga has entirely been stripped of its religiosity. Yoga's transformation in the United States has moved the practice to the realm of cultic religions and the therapeutic culture, where it retains an implicit religiosity that is markedly different from its Hindu ties yet religious regardless. In fact, mostly due to the increasing pluralism of the United States, it is quite commonplace to add yoga (or some other practice found in the cultic milieu) to one's spiritual repertoire, and instead of considering it to be a Hindu addition, many Americans of varying religious traditions have come to accept or embrace yoga by placing it in the category of health practices, or the therapeutic culture, which will be addressed in more detail in the following pages.

Yoga helped, in its own way, to develop alternative avenues for religious experience for such seekers — even if the experience is a significantly modified version of the original Hindu (or even the yoga of cultic religions) practice. The invention of PraiseMoves, as described in the previous chapter, provides evidence that “new spiritual

techniques' are thus not altogether new, only a repackaging and reinterpretation of older religious practices, as culled from both Western and Eastern religions."<sup>59</sup> It is with no small sense of irony that many of the people who emphasize and recognize yoga's classical religious ties to Hinduism are often conservative Christians. Other groups seem to have little problem relegating yoga to a more innocuous category of exercise and health, which clearly falls into Bruce's definition of cultic religion and is reinforced in Roof's spiritual marketplace.

With each passing year, Americans seem to become more focused on their bodies. "People are insisting on taking charge of their bodies, and Boomers, especially as their bodies begin to fail them, are looking for, and finding, new ways of taking control."<sup>60</sup> Magazines, newspapers, radio programs and television reports offer up the newest innovations and insight into diseases, ways to improve one's health, and medical procedures, both medically necessary and aesthetic.<sup>61</sup>

If yoga is considered as a part of the therapeutic culture then is it still a religious expression? In Roof's interpretation, it could be considered as such insofar as a person sacralizes his or her body and engages in practices designed to rejuvenate, heal, or purify it. Such practices are widespread in the New Age and reveal a connection between the therapeutic culture and the cultic milieu.

Bruce, however, is clear in his charge that the New Age is largely irrelevant to society because of its focus on individualized religion. He challenges the therapeutic culture, specifically as it relates to New Age religions, stating that the primary focus of

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<sup>59</sup> Roof, 92.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 96-9.

the major world religions is being misdirected by New Age ideas of holistic health and well-being.

All the major world religions have claimed that if we follow their teachings we will be happier and healthier people but those therapeutic benefits have generally been secondary or latent. ... In much New Age spirituality, therapy is the manifest, not the latent, function. Good health, self-confidence, prosperity and warm supportive relationships are no longer the accidental by-product of worshipping God; they are the goals sought through the spiritual activity.<sup>62</sup>

While granting Bruce's point, it should also be noted that health has always been an especially important issue for all of the world's faiths. While suffering can be viewed, and addressed, in a variety of ways, the idea that religious rituals may help to alleviate pain is certainly not new. This desire to heal need not make it any less of a religious experience/expression to change one's diet or to add new practices to one's standard way of seeking healing, which has traditionally involved religious ritual. At least this is the argument put forth by Roof. What seems to be at issue here is whether the body of therapeutic practices (including yoga) and the worldviews that sacralize such practices in therapeutic culture are adequate enough to allow classification under the heading of religion. Bruce accepts this insofar as it is a part of cultic religion, but does not place much credence in its social significance. Roof and others seem to disagree, and perhaps evidence of the therapeutic culture's social relevance can be found in studies conducted by medical institutions, such as those conducted by the National Center for

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<sup>62</sup> Bruce, *God is Dead*, 85.



Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), which is a division of the National Institutes of Health.<sup>63</sup>

To the degree that the quest for health and well-being inspires the search for therapies that ease the pain of people who are ill, the spiritual marketplace offers an almost limitless supply of alternatives to the stock therapies of prayer and meditation and the previously conventional explanations that pain and suffering are tests of faith. Acupuncture, herbs, teas, tai chi, and yoga are some of the more popular options today found in therapeutic culture and the cultic milieu, as well.

American yoga, in its non-religious, commodified form, certainly provides an avenue for healing and well being. However, for these people, yoga transcends explicit religious boundaries in its practice. Although this view of yoga removes it from its traditional Hindu trappings, it also clearly locates it in the spiritual marketplace.

For these practitioners, yoga can be considered religious in regard to its inclusion and dissemination through the spiritual marketplace and therapeutic culture. These particular people may not have sought an explicitly religious solution to their health problems, but their choice to seek alternative therapies with reputations for being effective (whether passed on by word of mouth or the media, understood through their respective religious histories, or consulted in the annals of scientific research) suggests a

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<sup>63</sup> “The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the United States,” National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), National Institutes of Health at [http://nccam.nih.gov/news/camsurvey\\_fs1.htm](http://nccam.nih.gov/news/camsurvey_fs1.htm). Accessed June 6, 2006. This organization set forth to survey which complementary and alternative therapies were being used by Americans in 2002. The site breaks down the data by a number of categories, including types and numbers of people participating in complementary and alternative therapies, types of therapies, and reasons for using these therapies. Some of this survey’s data will be used later in this chapter.

growing dissatisfaction with the modern, disenchanting American culture and its mainstream medical institutions that seem to be unable to provide adequate solutions to today's health challenges.

Due to secularization, religion has been largely removed from the mainstream institutions of medicine and science. However, a growing number of people dissatisfied with modern medicine and its therapies have been turning to the alternatives found in cultic religions and the therapeutic culture, as evidenced by the NCCAM and its studies concerning the multitude (and apparently high visibility) of such practices in the United States.

New Age groups and other NRMs, such as Christian Science, New Thought, and Scientology, play a large role in the therapeutic culture, as well as the cultic milieu. As Americans have grown increasingly interested in their health, whether it be physical, mental, or spiritual, they have discovered the New Age and other NRMs have abundant religious resources to satisfy most seekers' interests. With about 15 million Americans reportedly participating in yoga in 2004, yoga is perhaps the most visible and accessible of the resources available in the spiritual marketplace, as well as the mundane mass marketplace of American consumer culture.<sup>64</sup> It is notable in this regard, however, that although yoga is prominent in the spiritual marketplace, Hinduism itself is not. Yoga, thus, is more easily associated with New Age religions than its religious forbear, Hinduism.

Where Bruce dismisses the influence and success of the New Age due to what he considers to be limited participation and commitment, Partridge considers the

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<sup>64</sup> Orsini-Meinhard. "Yoga Industry Gains Strength."

contributions to American religion and “self” religiosity”<sup>65</sup> made by New Age religions to be meaningful. Roof also engages this issue in the context of Ronald Inglehart’s work, which claims that since World War II, Americans have increasingly turned

... toward self-expression, quality of life, environmentalism, peace and inner well-being [rather than religion] — values and concerns that take on greater meaning in advanced societies where material concerns either are largely met or have failed to make life sufficiently happy and satisfying.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, the therapeutic culture and the spiritual marketplace include these very goals and seek to fill the void many people seem to think they have. Another way to fill this void is consumerism. As described by Juliet B. Schor, consumerism is driven to a large extent by a desire to affirm the purchaser’s social status. However, her observations on “self-gifting” reveal much about how individuals seek to establish not only their status but their actual identities and to find validation and confidence through such purchases.<sup>67</sup>

The therapeutic culture offers similar validation and confidence, specifically through purchases of products that affect the body and its health. Providing a holistic approach to health, the spiritual marketplace provides a variety of products and services, such as yoga and meditation, that allow for individuals to attain the confidence they seek while also reaffirming their social status by buying the newest yoga clothes, DVDs, and related products. Though this may be a more secondary goal for yoga practitioners, it is notable for its coherence with Schor’s theory and Roof’s and Partridge’s theories about

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<sup>65</sup> Partridge, 21.

<sup>66</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 211, as quoted in Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), as quoted in Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 91.

the spiritual marketplace and its religious function. Further, to the degree that consumerism itself has a religious function in contemporary American culture, yoga and the spiritual marketplace certainly satisfy these criteria.<sup>68</sup>

### Yoga and Spirituality

In the spiritual marketplace, meditation, tai chi, acupuncture, and yoga, have become commodified and consumable by the masses. Though certainly not new in and of themselves, these Eastern concepts are repackaged and sold not as religious but as spiritual health alternatives to Western medicine and remedies. Thus, for many Americans (especially those in the Baby Boomer generation), yoga was stripped of its religious trappings and began to lose its importance as a vehicle to enlightenment. Instead, its health benefits were emphasized and its relationship to Hinduism was radically de-emphasized or ignored entirely. Special attention was given to the asanas, the poses taught in hatha yoga. Rather than serving as a preface to spiritual activities, however, the asanas have become an end in themselves — an exercise regimen and nothing more.

In practicing yoga, there is little evidence to suggest that Americans are seeking a new religion, but instead are seeking new ways to improve or maintain their health and well-being, as well as experience a new spirituality (which, as noted earlier by Partridge, is seen as separate and different from religion) that may bring them closer to understanding themselves or even God in context of their current religions or some

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<sup>68</sup> It is not the intent of this study to pursue this particular line of analysis. For more detail, however, see deChant's *The Sacred Santa*, especially Parts 2 and 3.

syncretistic system of their own creation — the “self-religiosity” discussed by Partridge that is also found within the cultic milieu. Thus, yoga has been appropriated in the sense that the practice loses its explicit religious characteristics, becomes oriented to American values, and is repackaged for individualized religious consumption in the spiritual marketplace.

With this repackaging for consumption in the spiritual marketplace, many Americans seemed unaware that yoga was religious at all, and some Christians expressed outrage upon learning of its Hindu roots, claiming they had been deceived, and interpreted this repackaging as a subversive affront on Christianity.<sup>69</sup> However, it should be noted that not all yoga centers were deemphasizing the spiritual benefits of yoga.

While few yoga centers promote explicit Hinduism and the unification of atman with Brahman, it should be noted that through the notion of “spirituality” and therapeutic culture, a religious aspect of yoga has been retained, reconfigured, or possibly even re-created in a new context. By deploying the more accepted and positive concept of spirituality (rather than religion) in advertisements, many instructors promote their classes as opportunities to reduce stress and improve mental health (by offering ways to reduce anxiety and combat depression) in addition to alleviating health problems

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<sup>69</sup> Several Web sites were found expressing similar sentiments. The Web site “Reclaiming Yoga” at [http://www.classicalyoga.org/reclaiming\\_yoga1.htm](http://www.classicalyoga.org/reclaiming_yoga1.htm) contains emails from people commenting upon proper instruction of yoga, but also includes attacks on yoga as a religious practice, attacks on the New Age and one Christian who expresses anger at “being duped” into practicing Hinduism. As mentioned previously, Laurette Willis, founder of PraiseMoves at <http://www.praisemoves.com>, warns Christians of the dangers involved in practicing yoga and has developed her own “Christian alternative to yoga” that she claims is compatible with Christian beliefs. Informal discussions held by the author with a number of yoga practitioners revealed similar responses concerning the religious origins of yoga, including ones from persons with advanced degrees.

(including, but not limited to, childbirth pain, high blood pressure, asthma, back and muscle pain, and heart conditions).<sup>70</sup>

American culture has always allowed for a variety of religious ideas to be expressed and accepted. This also means it is not unusual in contemporary American culture that pieces of a religion are lifted from their origins and appropriated by other groups or added to an individual's personal belief system. This relates directly to the concept of the spiritual marketplace, which Roof defines as "an open, competitive religious economy ... which, like any marketplace, must be understood in terms both of 'demand' and 'supply.'"<sup>71</sup> As yoga has been reinterpreted in the United States, so have other aspects of Eastern religion, to the point that an interested seeker need only "shop around" for what he or she feels is missing in his or her own life. Such activity is visible in both the cultic milieu and the spiritual marketplace.

Such shopping easily thrives in a global market, like that of the United States. Here, a variety of religious "images, rituals, symbols, meditation techniques, healing practices, all of which may be borrowed from eclectically, from a variety of sources such as Eastern spirituality, Theosophy and New Age ... and, of course, all the great world religious traditions" may be found.<sup>72</sup> In such a dynamically syncretistic culture, questions are often raised as to the authenticity of the belief systems that emerge. Moreover, questions also arise about the religious identity of amalgamated religions.

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<sup>70</sup> "You Said: Reader Comments on Yoga as Healing." *Yoga Journal*, 25 July 2005 at [http://www.yogajournal.com/views/992\\_1.cfm](http://www.yogajournal.com/views/992_1.cfm). Accessed March 24, 2006. This article provides dozens of testimonials detailing the personal healing people across the United States say they have benefited from by doing yoga.

<sup>71</sup> Roof, 78.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

These questions are easily answered in the context of Bruce's concept of the cultic milieu, which accounts for religion's fragmentation and syncretistic amalgamation due to secularization. However, other scholars, such as Partridge and Hoover, disagree and see this expansion of the spiritual marketplace as encouraging personal religious autonomy and the sacralization of health and happiness by placing it in the context of the New Age. Thus, for Partridge and Hoover, the spiritual marketplace is an environment of meaningful religious practices. This would cohere precisely with Bruce's observation that the New Age provides meaningful options for practitioners, even though he asserts that it is culturally insignificant due to its location within the cultic milieu.

According to Partridge, the New Age, and consequently the cultic milieu, falls right in line with the ideals of the "spirituality" movement: personal autonomy, health, and wellness of body, mind, and soul. These ideals are consistent with the goals of therapeutic culture and serve as the market drivers for the spiritual marketplace. The importance of personal autonomy is equally significant to the rise of non-traditional "therapeutic religion." As argued by Hoover, who employs Roof and Robert Bellah's analysis of therapeutic culture: "the rise of personal autonomy" leaves "little room for institutions or for classic religious dimensions such as structure, authority, or legitimacy."<sup>73</sup>

Again, the type of understanding advanced by Partridge and Hoover is problematic since, as Bruce would argue, it misses the point of authentic religion and focuses on practices that are superficial. However, others (Roof, Partridge, et al.) claim such practices should not be dismissed merely because they do not look or act like

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<sup>73</sup> Hoover, 149-50.

traditional religion. Instead, these practices and the worldview that legitimates them call for the development of new understandings of religion and new categories of analysis. These new categories can be found in therapeutic culture generally and the spiritual marketplace specifically, “where an inventory of symbols, networks, movements, groups, sources, relationships, and practices is made available to religious seekers. This marketplace is, increasingly, a commodified, media-based marketplace.”<sup>74</sup>

If indeed, Americans are involved in a therapeutic culture or religion of well-being and health, which is practiced in the spiritual marketplace, then it could be stated that yoga does not lose its authenticity as a religious practice, although it does lose its traditional religious lineage. Obviously, the loss of yoga’s ties to Hinduism is a sign of secularization as viewed by Berger and Bruce. However, where its traditional religious character is most challenged (i.e., in the spiritual marketplace), is where it reveals a new type of religious identity — one predicated on the sacralization of self-autonomy, health, well-being, and commodities that facilitate all three. Where the therapeutic culture serves to sacralize these features, the spiritual marketplace also serves to commodify them, thus neatly compartmentalizing them in the category of Bruce’s cultic milieu.

While this conceptualization is consistent with secularization theory, some observers are dismayed by the increasing commercialization and commodification of a practice begun millennia ago by ascetics and renunciates seeking truth and

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 150.



enlightenment. Many in the industry are torn between making a good living and distorting the purpose of yoga for corporate success.<sup>75</sup>

This struggle is certainly not new to religion. Protestants encountered similar ethical quandaries when they became successful in their entrepreneurial enterprises. As Weber points out, their successes were seen as a reward from God, but as many Protestants made more money and kept it for themselves, some began to consider it an abuse of authority and worried about the fate of their souls. Likewise, the commercialization and commodification of religion is not restricted to yoga and other spiritual marketplace practices. Indeed, Christianity itself has experienced massive commodification recently, with the popularity of Christian-themed rock groups, T-shirts (“Jesus is my homeboy”), novelty items (Wash Your Sins Away products, plastic finger puppet nuns, Bible action figures), mass-market apocalyptic novels (the *Left Behind* series), recent blockbuster movies (*The Passion of the Christ*, *The Da Vinci Code*) and jewelry, to name a few.

For many observers (from professionals to the laity to those in academia), this is a sign of religious health and vitality. Religion is promoted in a new way, packaged for the denizens of popular culture (and especially the youth culture), who are informed by marketing and commodity consumption. Not all observers see this as positive, of course. Some critics regard the rise of the spiritual marketplace as evidence that religion is losing its potency and being watered down in a way that will lead to its eventual collapse.

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<sup>75</sup> Anne Cushman, a contributing editor for *Yoga Journal*, specifically addresses this particular issue in her op-ed piece, “Marketing the Soul: Has the Commercialization of Spiritual Life Gone Too Far?” in *Yoga Journal*, January/February 1999 at <http://www.yogajournal.com>. Accessed July 25, 2005.

Yoga, however, seems to be a major conduit into this marketplace because it was embraced and endorsed by a myriad of influential pop culture icons.<sup>76</sup> Its asanas (poses) are seemingly innocuous and look like simple exercises. One does not have to be a super athlete to do yoga, and yoga has been modified many times and repackaged for scores of different groups, including pregnant mothers and infants,<sup>77</sup> teens, and even dogs.<sup>78</sup> Thus, yoga is hip, accessible, heavily commodified, and “spiritual” without being explicitly religious.

With such a cultural resume, it is no surprise that many people attracted to yoga are unaware of its religious features, as they are seldom mentioned in secular gyms or YMCAs. In fact, American yoga is unique in that while it seems to be devoid of its Hindu roots, it is being converted into a whole new religious function most accurately characterized as “spirituality.” This new function is especially important. Yoga remains a ritual activity that appears to have healing effects on the body, which allow the mind to focus its attention elsewhere. Freed from the focus on the body, especially when pain is a factor, one is able to redirect energy to other things, which do not necessarily have to be religious in nature, although practitioners understand them as “spiritual.” As Roof points out, such “spiritual” experiences:

... appeal to primitive desires for ecstasy, for bonding, for health, for hope and happiness, for the resacralization of everyday life. ... they redefine

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<sup>76</sup> Such celebrities as Madonna, Sting, Gwyneth Paltrow have contributed to yoga’s popularity just by discussing its personal benefits in various interviews.

<sup>77</sup> Toni Lydecker. “Exercise for Body and Soul,” *Parenting Magazine*, November 1998 at [http://www.parenting.com/parenting/archive\\_search/0,8170,1856,00.html](http://www.parenting.com/parenting/archive_search/0,8170,1856,00.html). Accessed April 12, 2002.

<sup>78</sup> Susan Scott Schmidt. “Yoga for Your Hounds? Sure, it’s Called ‘Doga,’” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 27 April 2004 at <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/04118/306899.stm>. Accessed June 6, 2006.

older religious language in ways to make it more acceptable or create alternative concepts altogether to such older notions as sin, grace, and discipleship. In all these ways, *spirituality* ‘invades’ pre-existing religious forms, reconfiguring and revitalizing life-experiences.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, even reduced to a seemingly non-religious activity, in the guise of “spirituality,” yoga becomes a vehicle for what Partridge calls the “re-enchantment of the secular” and exposes its practitioners to “new ways of being religious” As he notes:

Western re-enchantment may be characterized by new hybrid forms of religion which are the result of a dialectical process of the re-enchantment of the secular and the secularization of the sacred. ... perhaps the first characteristic of contemporary re-enchantment to note is that it is *not* a return to previous ways of being religious, but rather the emergence of new ways of being religious, ways which meet the new wants and needs of new Western people.<sup>80</sup>

### Mass Market Yoga

Partridge’s wants and needs seem to generate demands for new remedies and therapies. The NCCAM conducted a survey of 31,044 adults ages 18 and older in 2002 that sought to determine Americans’ use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), including acupuncture, chiropractic care, massage, meditation, prayer for health reasons, reiki, tai chi, and yoga.<sup>81</sup> The results showed that 36% of American adults were using some type of CAM, excluding prayer and megavitamin therapy. However, with

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<sup>79</sup> Roof, 91. Italics were added by the author for emphasis.

<sup>80</sup> Partridge, 44.

<sup>81</sup> “The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the United States,” National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), National Institutes of Health at [http://nccam.nih.gov/news/camsurvey\\_fs1.htm](http://nccam.nih.gov/news/camsurvey_fs1.htm). Accessed June 6, 2006

those two items added to the results, the number doubles to 62%. According to NCCAM, Americans spent “an estimated \$36 billion to \$47 billion on CAM therapies in 1997.”<sup>82</sup>

This is a significant percentage of people and amount of money that has been and is still being directed into therapeutic culture. Most of the CAMs listed on the center’s web site are found in the spiritual marketplace. People’s desire to consume these healthy commodities has even reached beyond exercise and is influencing popular culture in more direct ways.

For example, McDonald’s, an American icon of consumerism that spans the globe, has been accused in the past of not offering enough healthy options on its menu. In the response to this criticism, McDonald’s put an increased assortment of salads and other healthy items on its menus. McDonald’s has also created adult Happy Meals (called Go Active! Meals) that currently consist of an “Asian salad” (a salad with mandarin oranges, edamame, and ginger dressing), a Diet Coke or bottled water, and the choice of an exercise DVD, one of which was yoga.<sup>83</sup> Needless to say, McDonald’s yoga DVD capitalizes on yoga’s place in the spiritual marketplace (without reference to traditional Hinduism) as a vehicle for promoting health and fitness free of explicit religious content to allow for mass-market promotion and distribution.

The yoga DVD option exemplifies a whole new type of consumerism linked with the spiritual marketplace, as well as the broader consumer culture. According to Lyon, “Beliefs and practices that once were sealed within an institutional form now flow freely over formerly policed boundaries. Syncretism, previously a problem peculiar to certain

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> The information gathered here was the result of observations made by the author during a visit to a McDonald’s in Tampa, Florida on May 30, 2006.

intellectual and theological settings, is now generalized and popularized, in practice as in belief. New possibilities emerge, creating liturgical smorgasbords, doctrinal potlucks.”<sup>84</sup>

For Lyon, the McDonald’s DVD option illustrates a new religious dimension, one to which yoga has contributed much over the past decade. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s argument that “contemporary subjects choose their daily life-paths or ‘practices’ within a ‘habitus,’” Lyon explains that “habitus has an impact on how one is perceived — identity — but also on patterns of interaction, and on the frames that guide social outcomes.”<sup>85</sup>

Yoga, as a ritual and a commodity, helps to solidify the spiritual marketplace’s importance as “consumerism has become central to the social and cultural life of the technologically advanced societies in the later twentieth century. Meaning is sought as a ‘redemptive gospel’ in consumption.”<sup>86</sup> It is this consumerism that continues to fragment previous ideas and rituals and reorganize them into a new pattern that becomes much more individualized, while still retaining their marketability. Lyon states that it is this process that “is also at work in religious identity-construction: how people make sense — or, rather, make a life — religiously, at the ordinary, mundane, everyday level.”<sup>87</sup> And it does not get much more mundane than Wal-Mart or McDonald’s offering yoga products for mass consumption.

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<sup>84</sup> David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, U.K., Polity Press, 2000), 43.

<sup>85</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) as quoted in Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 51.

<sup>86</sup> Lyon, 74.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

Lyon suggests that the “relocation of the religious” affirms the possibility that the influence of religion is no less than it has ever been.<sup>88</sup> Certainly this relocation is a product of secularization, yet for Lyon, it is an indicator that religion is not losing its popularity. If religion is being relocated, then the specific instances where this has occurred should be designated and explored. Specifying the sites of their re-location, such as at Wal-Mart and McDonald’s, is crucial to identifying yoga’s religious function in contemporary American culture.

This pursuit should not minimize the traditional religious function of yoga as a component of Hinduism, even though it does appear that such a function is recognized by only a small fraction of yoga enthusiasts. Whichever form of yoga is considered — whether it be an exercise, health therapy, or explicit religious practice — it is abundantly clear that American yoga is enjoying a massive popularity that, for many practitioners, provides a “spiritual” outlet (which is arguably religious) that is entirely compatible with their other beliefs, religious or otherwise — and entirely compatible with secularization theory.

It is quite possible that yoga is at one level merely a health fad that is detached from its explicitly religious roots. However, it is yoga’s significant cultural presence, wide-ranging popularity, and prominent presence in the spiritual marketplace, as part of the cultic milieu, that seems to reveal much about the changing face of religion in contemporary American culture. What yoga specifically reveals in these areas will be addressed in the conclusion, which follows.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 34.

## Conclusion

### What Yoga's Transformation Means Today

In light of the theories presented in this thesis, several questions remain to be answered, the most important of which is what is the religious status of yoga in the United States today. In light of the previous analyses provided, there may exist more than one answer.

As a traditional religious practice, yoga certainly seems to cohere to Peter Berger's and Steve Bruce's depictions of the secularization thesis. In the context of their work, yoga in contemporary America clearly conforms to the expectations of the secularization thesis insofar as it has been stripped of its Hindu religious trappings and been transformed into a health and fitness regimen so non-religious that few practitioners would have qualms about taking a yoga class at a YMCA or gym.

Even the critique offered by some conservative Christians that yoga cannot be entirely separated from its traditional religious ties does not change the fact that many gyms and yoga instructors have done just that and teach yoga as an exercise devoid of any religious meaning. Saying the words "om" or "namaste," or meditating before performing the asanas no longer occur in the context of Hinduism or Buddhism, but have been so absorbed by American popular culture that they have lost most (if not all) of their original religious meaning. To many Americans, these words and actions lack any religious significance whatsoever.

Religion does not only exist in traditional forms in the United States, however. Religious innovation in the United States has had a long history, and recent innovations

have led to new understandings of religion; understandings that may allow seemingly non-religious yoga to be classified as a religion. The traditional religious practice of yoga does not have a strong foothold in American culture, but as part of the cultic milieu as expressed in therapeutic culture and the spiritual marketplace, yoga's presence is indeed significant, though it cannot be regarded as a challenge to secularization.

In this regard, alternative theories (such as those posited by Roof, Partridge, and Lyon) offer new categories that can allow contemporary yoga to be classified as a religious practice. Yoga apparently provides its practitioners, regardless of religious affiliation, physical and mental benefits in a wide range of commodified forms accessible in what Roof refers to as the spiritual marketplace, and increasingly the general retail market, as well. It is yoga's prominent presence in the marketplace (both spiritual and mass consumption) that is of particular importance to this inquiry. When considered in light of the theories of Roof, Partridge, and Lyon, yoga becomes a component part of a new type of religious practice entirely accounted for in the context of secularization theory. Specifically, its commodification has helped to move it from one realm of religiosity (explicit and traditional) to another that is new (implicit and alternative). It is this new realm that allows yoga to be so popular in a secular culture, just as Berger and Bruce would expect.

Yoga's commercialization and subsequent commodification in the spiritual marketplace should prompt further study of how religion and secularization are defined, as suggested by Lyon. Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on evaluating how and why religion has been marginalized or even eliminated in contemporary culture and



not enough on understanding the new expressions that religion takes as it adjusts to its marginal existence, specifically its new myths, rituals, moralities, and cosmologies.

The new forms that religion has taken in response to the needs and concerns of the postmodern world are important to consider. Such a consideration may require reconsideration of what is meant by religion itself in order to account for those responses that are distinctly religious, though not the type of responses offered by traditional religions or so-called new religious movements.

The significant therapeutic needs and consumerist desires of contemporary Americans can create problems for traditional religions. Certainly, in many instances, traditional ideas and practices are being exchanged for more mundane ones, such as the acquisition of self-help products, alternative therapies, and health/fitness regimens. What must not be ignored, however, is that although such products, therapies, and regimens are not typically understood as expressions of traditional religion, as commodities of the spiritual marketplace, their function may indeed be religious for their consumers, or so Roof, Partridge and Lyon argue.

In this context, yoga may indeed be quite religious and an important feature in the changing landscape of religion in America today. If evaluated in a way that reflects its malleability, yoga's success in U.S. culture signifies that religion (at least in this instance) responds to secularization in ways consistent with Berger and Bruce, but in terms of categories appropriate for contemporary American culture. Indeed, yoga may reveal a way in which religious practices and ideas adapt to consumerism, therapeutic culture, and specifically the spiritual marketplace of postmodern America. It is the dynamic nature of

yoga's adaptation that makes it an especially good example of how secularization impacts religion and how religion is modified under this impact.

On the other hand, if the study of religion in contemporary culture is restricted only to traditional religions or groups that conform to the same or similar structures of traditional religions, then yoga, as it is generally practiced in America today, fails to meet the qualifications of a religious practice. A verdict has yet to be reached on this matter, however, and deliberations may continue for quite some time. This thesis has aimed to help clarify the importance of yoga in contemporary America in regard to these deliberations and perhaps, in some small way, contribute to them, as well.

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## Appendices

## Appendix 1

### Yoga in New Religious Movements and the New Age

Theosophy was the first notable new religious movement to attempt to legitimize yoga's practice and acceptance in U.S. culture. As far back as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Helena Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society worked to link the benefits of yoga with science in an effort to legitimize yoga as a spiritual practice that held rational, quantifiable results. Blavatsky's efforts led to other new religions seeking to legitimize their own practices in a similar way.

Vedanta, under Vivekananda, saw the creation of a Yoga Research Foundation, which was "set up to examine the efficacy of yoga practices and to develop yoga courses to solve the basic problems of the high-tech era."<sup>89</sup> Vedanta thus stresses the religious and ethical dimensions of yoga, but also focuses on the physical and psychological benefits of its practice.

Like Vedanta, the Self-Realization Fellowship, founded by Swami Paramahansa Yogananda in 1920, acknowledged that yoga was spiritual but also considered it a benefit to a person's physical and psychological health. Understanding the typical Westerner's attachments to Christianity and/or science, Yogananda promoted a form of yoga that ensured practitioners of any religion that they could perform yoga and reap its benefits while still maintaining the integrity of their own religious practices, whatever they might be. To accomplish this, the Fellowship promotes yoga as scientific and also "teaches that

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<sup>89</sup> "About US" in Swami Vivekananda Yoga Research Center Web site at <http://vkyogas.org.in/aboutus.html>. Accessed April 19, 2003.

## Appendix 1 (Continued)

the yoga philosophy and methods, accessible as they are to empirical and scientific verification, underline all the great religions and scriptures.”<sup>90</sup>

In contrast, ISKCON recognizes only a religious application of yoga. Founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in 1966, this new religious movement practices bhakti yoga, which did not catch on in popularity due to its stringent emphasis that devotion to Krishna was the only path to realization and unification with Brahman.

Another group popular during the 1960s that focused on yoga and meditation was the Transcendental Meditation movement, founded by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The Maharishi's teachings combined science and religion, which has been characterized as “quite deliberately a popularized Vedanta.”<sup>91</sup> Though its focus was on meditation, the group’s popularity with the Beatles helped popularize Eastern traditions in general, thus showing the power celebrities can have upon religious ideas and trends (in the sense of a religion’s direction and influence).

Swami Vishnu Devananda who founded the Sivananda in 1959 most likely reaped many benefits from the vogue popularity of Eastern philosophy and practices of the 1960s. Devananda established yoga camps or retreats where people interested in learning about the various health benefits associated with yoga could go and learn together in a supportive environment. Here we find an emphasis on hatha yoga, which is the current popular form practiced in most gyms and YMCAs around the country.

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<sup>90</sup> Robert S. Ellwood and Harry B. Partin, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988), 190.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.



## Appendix 1 (Continued)

The New Age movement emerged in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and combined beliefs, rituals, and ideas from both the East and West. These religious groups are often classified as “spiritual,” whether by the groups themselves or outside observers. New Age religions tend to focus on seeking individual solutions to personal problems, often revolving around healing (whether it be of the mind, body or soul). This healing is not only for the individual, but also focuses on the healing of the community at large and earth itself.

Within the New Age, there is a significant movement involving holistic healing, which J. Gordon Melton describes as a “form of healing — [that includes the] healing of the body, mind, relationships, or the effects of spiritual traumas.”<sup>92</sup> The holistic health movement included therapies from a wide range of religions and cultures. Many of the therapies associated with this movement can be found in both therapeutic culture and the spiritual marketplace. The therapies include, but are not limited to, acupuncture, chiropractics, vegetarian or macrobiotic diets, reiki, herbs, aromatherapy, and of course, yoga.

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<sup>92</sup> Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia*, xviii.

## Appendix 2

### Glossary

Cult — This term is derived from Steve Bruce’s classification of religion which is outlined in four categories: church, denomination, sect and cult. To define cult, Bruce employs Ernst Troeltsch’s definition. Cults are very different in that they offer “highly individualistic expression, varying with personal experiences and interpretations.”<sup>93</sup> Cults are loosely organized, often small groups that are extremely tolerant of new ideas. Bruce refers to the members of cults as “consumers who “pick and choose those bits of its product that suit them.”<sup>94</sup>

Cultic milieu/ religion — Within the category of cult, the terms cultic religion and cultic milieu<sup>95</sup> are developed. Bruce places New Age religions and all of the practices associated with them in the category of the cultic milieu.

Religion — There are a number of ways to define religion. However, this thesis uses a more general definition in which religion is a system of myths and rituals that connect communities and relate individuals to the sacred (or ultimate power, which could be defined as God, nature, gods, though it is certainly not limited to those expressions).

Secularization — Various interpretations of the secularization thesis have been posited by a number of academic scholars. This thesis employs a rather basic definition derived primarily from the work of Peter Berger. As Berger states, secularization is considered to be “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”<sup>96</sup>

Spiritual marketplace — The definition of this concept comes from Wade Clark Roof’s work.<sup>97</sup> He defines the spiritual marketplace as an environment that allows seekers of religion to find or exchange religious or spiritual ideas and practices that affect the mind, body, and soul of the individual.

Spirituality — Increasingly, people have been making distinctions between what is religious and what is spiritual. Depending on the point of view, either term may be

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<sup>93</sup> Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, 82.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Cultic religion and cultic milieu are related terms, wherein the cultic milieu simply refers to the environment of cultic religion.

<sup>96</sup> Berger, 107.

<sup>97</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

## Appendix 2 (Continued)

considered to have a positive or negative connotation. It should be noted, however, that it is not the purpose of this thesis to make a judgment on the values inherent in these term. Instead, this definition from the work of Christopher Partridge is used here for the purpose of clarifying the term in the context of this thesis:

Spirituality is vital and subversive. Spirituality breaks boundaries. Spirituality is the life-enhancing. Religion is about cataloguing. Religion is about comprehending experience (rather than, I suppose, simply *experiencing*). Religion belongs to the past. Religion is lifeless collections of words. Religion is the end of vitality.<sup>98</sup>

Therapeutic culture — This term refers to Wade Clark Roof’s description of a movement that focuses on issues of health and well-being. This movement contains “characteristics similar to popular religious meaning systems: it privileges the felt needs of the ordinary person, offers direct access to God ... and encourages moral and spiritual transformation.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Partridge, 48.

<sup>99</sup> Roof, 39.