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# Yogis of Faith, Part 1: Transformation

written by Jennifer Oliver OConnell | Sep 19, 2016



LOS ANGELES, September 19, 2016—My pastor opened his sermon this week with the illustrative poem by Godfrey Saxe about the elephant and the blind men of Indostan. The one where each blind man touches a part

the elephant, describes what they feel, and assumes that this must represent the whole element. To paraphrase one point of his very excellent sermon in a nutshell: God wants us to pray and see the whole elephant. We can be fixated on the part we understand.

The last two stanzas of the poem read:

“And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,  
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,

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Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!  
So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,  
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,  
and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!”

That so reflects many Christian's viewpoint concerning Yoga. There is much limited, anecdotal, and downright wrong information that traffics around Christian circles; from San Diego, California parents wanting to ban from their children's schools, to crazy Pat Robertson saying it's a satanic ploy to get Christians to speak Hindi.

In 2010, **Dr. Albert Mohler**, then the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, started what a mother would call “a tempest in a tea cup” over Christians and Yoga. Dr. Mohler launched off Stefanie Syman's book, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*, which he deemed, “a masterpiece of cultural history.” For a book representing one person's viewpoint on Yoga, Dr. Mohler came to this startling conclusion: “When Christians practice yoga, they must either deny the reality of what yoga represents or fail to see the contradictions between their Christian commitments and their embrace of yoga. The contradictions are not minor nor are they peripheral.”

He went on: “The embrace of yoga is a symptom of our postmodern spiritual confusion, and, to our shame, that confusion reaches into the church. Stefanie Syman is telling us something important when she writes that yoga “has augured a truly post-Christian, spiritually polyglot country.” Christians who practice yoga are embracing at minimum flirting with, a spiritual practice that threatens to transform their own spiritual lives into a “post-Christian, spiritually polyglot” reality. Should any Christian willingly risk that?”

Dr. Mohler received legitimate blowback from Christians who have embraced Yoga, but found a different transformation than what he warned against. In Indostan-blind-man fashion, Dr. Mohler wrote a follow-up post to loudly crow that the responses received were a clear indication that he was right!

“Sadly, almost every protest email makes my point better than I ever could myself. I have heard endless claims that there is no incompatibility between yoga and Christianity because it makes people feel better, helps spirituality, it is a better way to know God, etc. There is no embarrassment on the part of these hundreds of email writers that they are replacing biblical Christianity with a religion of their own invention.”

Dr. Mohler cut bits and pieces from some of the respondent’s emails to further reinforce his point, and even reading them a few times, this writer failed to understand how he came to the conclusion that Christian Yoga practitioners “are replacing biblical Christianity with a religion of their own invention.”

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What was evident from these Christians is that Yoga is a practice that reaps the benefits of finely tuning the body, healing pain, and drawing them closer to God and giving them a deeper understanding of Christ, as opposed to the opposite. A complement to the Christian disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, church attendance etc., rather than superseding it. So how is that “creating your own religion” or transforming their spiritual lives into a post-Christian reality?

Dr. Mohler, Pat Robertson, and other misguided spiritual leaders are welcome to their conclusions; it doesn’t mean that Christians will subscribe to them. At the very least, it is a vein of discussion which will be explored on this Page over the coming weeks.

As a devout Christian and a regular Yoga practitioner and instructor, I am one of those people that Dr. Mohler sees as having been transformed wholesale into this post-Christian polyglot.

However, in my study of the Holy Bible, I see no problem with transformation that shapes us more into what God created us to be, and less of sin, and the troubles and circumstances of life have shaped in us.

Romans 12: 2 (NLT) says to not “copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”

Many believers in Jesus Christ have found this transformation that Paul speaks about through the inclusion of regular Yoga practice with their regular spiritual disciplines. I deepened my own practice six years ago after



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particularly stressful series of years that began with my sister's death, followed with the loss of a job, a home, then my husband's health. Despite our entire church congregation and many others praying and supporting me, this season was an ugly season that had little reason, little relief, and few answers. Yet, through the practice of Yoga I was able to be still, to know that he was God, and to trust his heart, even when I could not trace his hand.

Despite Dr. Mohler's rebuttals to the contrary, I have walked with Jesus for 34 years, know, and practice all the Christian disciplines. I would not have been able to move forward from the place I was at had it not been for Yoga practice. It was God's gift to me that helped me to hear his voice again, and discover a window of sanity during an insane time.

I will go even further and say the practice of Yoga is God-breathed. Just because one culture chose to discover it further and insert its own stamp upon it, does not mean it was not originally created by God for man's benefit.

God's laws are not just spiritual, but natural and practical. As much as he has set up the law of gravity and reciprocity, he also set up laws that govern our body and soul, and I believe Yoga assists us on this path. In the coming weeks, I will have conversations with other "Yogis of Faith"; some who share my faith, and others who come from different faith walks. They will discuss how their faith translates on the mat, and ultimately transforms the world, and the world around them.

Let's discover the whole elephant, and not just the part we understand.

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