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What Can Postural Yoga Contribute to an Embodied Christian Spirituality? An Analysis of the Strengths and Weaknesses of Postural Yoga in the Light of Kashmir Śivaism

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Abstract: In this article, I propose to examine how the practice of *āsanas* (postural yoga) offered in Western yoga studios might contribute to an embodied Christian spirituality. I will do this with reference to Kashmir Śivaism, which links postural yoga to the “way of action” (*kriyopāya*) and considers it to be ‘inferior’ to the two other paths to supreme liberation, that of energy (*śāktopāya*) and that of will (*śāmbhavopāya*). In my critique of the widespread contemporary emphasis on postural yoga, I will point out both its strengths and its weaknesses, and reaffirm the role of the body in our relationship with God.

Keywords: yoga; Christianity; Kashmir Śivaism; spirituality; body; theology; contemplation; discernment



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1. Introduction

The benefit of being attentive to the body is one of the reasons for the success of yoga in the West, where the practice of postures (*āsanas*) is virtually the only kind of yoga that is practiced. Hatha, Ashtanga, Iyengar, Bikram, Vinsyasa, and Swasthya are among the most widespread styles of yoga that, despite their differences in approach and techniques, feature bodily exercises linked to breathing for the purpose of physical and mental wellbeing (Jain 2012, p. 5). Hence, they are referred to by the generic term “postural yoga” (Jain 2014) in order to distinguish them from a yoga that aims at a mastery of the mind for spiritual awakening. Postural yoga does not usually follow a specific religious orientation; it is more in line with the contemporary medical conception of the human being (Jain 2012, p. 5). However, certain currents—*Anasura* yoga, for example—attempt to draw on Hindu spirituality in making use of postures, the principal aim of which is to foster good health.

Postural yoga contributes to and benefits from a body culture that is now dominant, having promoted personal development and individual freedom since the 1960s in reaction to a traditionally Christian conception of human life that is characterized by a moralistic, doctrinal, and dualistic approach to the body. Body culture thrives in what Peter van der Veer calls a “therapeutic world view” linked to the global capitalism that emerged after World War II (van der Veer 2007, p. 317). The much sought-after “wholeness” refers more and more to a harmony within oneself and around oneself understood in secular terms. In other words, it is detached from a relationship to the transcendent and from the individual and collective salvation that is proper to religion. It is therefore not surprising that some believe yoga and Christianity are in opposition to one another, even if the nature of this opposition is more nuanced than it seems.

Postural yoga is generally detached from its Hindu context and promoted without religious reference. This is often done so that it will be more acceptable among those who are especially distrustful of religion. The followers of this type of yoga are often not very interested in Christianity, some having left it in search of a spiritual path that promises them an actual experience of fulfillment. Indeed, it is symptomatic that “churches are emptying; the yoga centers are full, especially on weekends” (Rock 2005, pp. 950–52). Nevertheless,

this modern form of yoga is meant to be neutral and open to all, regardless of religion. In fact, it is not uncommon for Catholics to adopt it with such fervor that it is sometimes difficult to make a clear distinction between their Christian beliefs and their practice of *āsanas* (Ylönen 2012, p. 39). We should also add that this secularized vision of yoga is criticized by the proponents of a more traditional yoga, one that is rooted in the sacred texts. In their eyes, this is the only true yoga. They cannot accept “that postural yoga can be reduced to a profit-driven market featuring products that corrupt an authentic Hindu system” (Jain 2014).

Furthermore, even if representatives of the “Hindu origins position” (this expression comes from Andrea R. Jain) readily believe that yoga is compatible with all religions, including Christianity (Sheveland 2008, p. 54), it should not be surprising to see them condemn the attempts of retrieval that result in a “Christian yoga”. On the other hand, while some Christians believe that it is possible to practice yoga as a kind of areligious gymnastics that can make one more disposed to prayer and devotion, others—subscribing to what Jain calls the Christian yogophobic position (Jain 2014)—assert that yoga is a threat to the Christian faith and to the salvation of souls (Jain 2012, pp. 1–2), going so far as to condemn it as a diabolical practice (Malkovsky 2017, pp. 10–11) connected to foreign deities.¹

For our part, we agree with Hanna-Leena Ylönen that yoga is not “only a phenomenon of modern non-institutionalized spirituality, but that it can also offer something for believers with no spiritual emptiness” (Ylönen 2012, p. 38). It provides Christians with an opportunity to rediscover the spiritual dimension of the body, provided that the necessary discernment is made. While it is true that Western Christianity has not managed to put into practice the anthropology that its theology of the Incarnation deserves,² it is also fair to say that certain approaches to yoga encourage a disembodied spirituality. John N. Sheveland rightly points out that the “reception of yoga in the West is an example of enculturation, but an impoverished one that fails to appreciate the holistic vision of human life on which the practice was originally founded long ago in India” (Sheveland 2008, p. 52).

If a truncated vision of yoga is commonly found in the West, this is no reason to reject it, especially in its new forms. One cannot reduce authentic yoga to an entity frozen in time which is necessarily Hindu.³ Throughout its history, it has been transformed by adapting to different religious and cultural currents, giving rise to various schools and approaches.⁴ The point, therefore, is not to be suspicious about new forms of yoga from the outset, but to be all the more vigilant about the ascetical and theoretical coherence of each of these forms. The stakes of this encounter between East and West are high, one of them being the challenge of contributing to a re-understanding of the meaning of the Christian “way” through self-knowledge that takes the body into account.

We will respond to this challenge in three stages. First, we will define the meaning of an embodied Christian spirituality. This will allow us to examine the contribution of postural yoga. Like many yoga practitioners (Jain 2014), we will consider the practice of postures according the “eight-limbed” (*aṣṭāṅga*) system of Rāja yoga, as laid out by Patañjali, the goal of which is spiritual, i.e., “liberation from the suffering and despair that result when the two are entangled, ‘so that consciousness becomes free from every movement of nature and enjoys the bliss of pure contemplation, untouched by any taint of mortality’” (Gustafson 2008, p. 42). This approach has the advantages of situating yogic practice within a secure and recognized frame of reference that has been proven over time, and of considering the postures within an ascetic context that reminds us of their role and relevance.⁵

The fact remains that deviations are always possible no matter what framework is envisaged, especially in the tense situation of conflict between Rāja yoga and Hatha yoga (Jain 2014; Birch 2020a, 2020b). Therefore, we propose a critical examination of the ability of postural yoga to emphasize the bodily dimension, doing so in light of the Trika philosophy of Kashmir’s Śivaism, which, while granting a central place to the body, relativizes the practice of *āsanas*. This Hindu Tantric tradition allows us to question postural yoga in order

to make known the strengths and limitations that it brings to the urgent effort to recover the contemplative dimension of Christian spirituality.

2. What Is an Embodied Christian Spirituality?

To speak of an embodied spirituality may seem redundant insofar as any spirituality worthy of the name necessarily includes the body. There is no contemplative life outside the body. According to Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century Cappadocian father, ecstasy means a departure from a purely intellectual state, rather than a rapturous ejection from the sensible world (Panikkar 2012, p. 274). Certainly, the Desert Fathers taught us to fight the passions through ascetic practices such as fasting and abstinence, but never with the intention of rejecting the body or denying its reality. James Wiseman makes a similar point when he writes of Saint Anthony of Egypt: “Clearly this saint’s asceticism—his fasting and nighttime vigils—did not in any sense produce a lugubrious, emaciated specter but rather a vibrant person full of joy in the Holy Spirit” (Wiseman 2005, p. 141).

The body is not an obstacle to the spiritual life, to a life in the Holy Spirit, but rather the place where the obstacles proper to that life must be overcome. “It is in these bodies,” says Thomas Ryan, “that we will work out our salvation. Human bodies are part of God’s image and the means through which absolutely everything we can learn about God must come to us” (Ryan 2005, pp. 299–300). This is the place of the many battles waged against demons and evil thoughts (*logismoi*), as is perfectly illustrated in the life of the father of Christian monasticism, as recounted by Saint Athanasius. These battles can be won precisely because the body is also the temple of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). It is therefore not evil in itself, as a certain Christian vision has long suggested. On the contrary, it is part of the process of divinization (*theosis*)—the Western Church speaks more readily of sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:18)—and is therefore destined to radiate divine glory.⁶ The miracles of the saints, the bodily transfiguration of some of them, and, above all, their love of neighbor and enemy are among the signs of this participation of the body in the divine life.

Thus, from the Christian point of view, an embodied spirituality designates life in the Holy Spirit, which is only possible because the Spirit fills the innermost being and the daily life of the believer. The Spirit is neither a concept nor an objectifiable reality detached from oneself, but the symbolic connection to a power that acts at the very heart of the visible world. Never abstract, its power is always displayed in matter. It is interesting to note that at the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit descends upon him in bodily form (*σωματικῶς εἶδεν*) (Luke 3:22). However, the Spirit is not reduced to any particular form. That does not mean that it is some kind of disembodied essence hovering over our heads but that the Spirit freely pervades every form without depleting itself in any. To live spiritually coincides with the awareness that all of creation, including oneself and others, is transformed under the motion of the divine will, a will that is beyond us. It is therefore necessary to recall that the distinction made by Saint Paul between the spirit and the flesh is not intended to oppose what is corporeal to what is not, but to dissociate a life guided by the divine presence from one that is prey to the lusts and inclinations that are rampant in each person.

In light of the above, when we feel the need to speak of an embodied spirituality, it is because something has been lost in our relationship to the Sacred. It no longer satisfies our deep desire to be saved, to live in fullness here and now; it no longer allows us to feel alive. We feel cut off from the source, above all from ourselves, and the obvious sign of this is the crying lack of spontaneity in our lives. Our words no longer give voice to our feelings, nor do our actions represent our deepest desires. We are divided internally and run the risk of taking refuge in a certain kind of traditionalism, seeking to cling to values, codes, or dogmas that reflect our rigidity—because we believe that our survival depends on them—and our fragility as well, which becomes apparent if they are questioned. However, sooner or later, life takes over, feeding the desire to reconnect, to be in tune with oneself, with others and with the world, to the point that one has no choice but to move on, to leave one’s comfort zone, and finally live an “embodied spirituality”.

This spirituality is characterized above all by its being integrated in the body, outside of which no spiritual awakening is possible. Indeed, the “holistic union of body and mind provides the climate, the ‘environment,’ for a spiritual, intuitive experience of God” (Ryan 2005, pp. 908–9). Note that the body is not conceived of as a separate entity alongside other constituent components of what is human, such as the soul and the mind. Rather, it refers to the fragile and ephemeral nature of the human being in its totality: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). In their efforts to rank the various anthropological components, some theologians have regarded the body’s fragility as an indication that the body is inferior to the immortal soul. However, bodily fragility is actually the very foundation of an authentic spirituality, as can be demonstrated by the following three points.

First, the body is not opposed to the soul but is its reflection. According to Karl Barth, “It is equally true to say that human persons are ‘besouled bodies’ as to say they are ‘embodied souls’” (Sheveland 2008, p. 59). The breath of life sculpts the psychosomatic features of our personality on the basis of complex interactions between sensations, emotions, and thoughts; it also gives shape to the “body language” through which our desire to return to God is expressed (Ryan 2005, pp. 607–9). An embodied spirituality does not try to repress sensations, nor the objects of the senses, but to master the thoughts that always interpret, in a more or less biased way, the emotions, which are themselves aroused by sensations. It is within this psycho-corporal complex that the spiritual combat then takes place so that our relationship with God may be strengthened. We are far from the idea of liberating the soul from its bodily prison. On the contrary, it is a question of becoming aware of our conditionings without fleeing from them, so that we might better overcome them. Finally, to welcome our bodily nature is to accept our vulnerability. Suffering can then be the opportunity to reconnect with what is essential, to remind us that humility is the first condition for life in the Spirit.

In short, an embodied spirituality is a matter of experience, not only of thought and belief. The Word of God is not reduced to the letter; it becomes alive when its spirit is integrated into our heart and our flesh. The body is not thought; it is experienced. However, it is true, as Ryan rightly reminds us, that we “are inclined to translate the embodiment of God into an idea and turn away from our bodies, rather than locating the presence of God in our bodies” (Ryan 2005, pp. 513–16). An embodied spirituality remedies this by inviting us not to limit ourselves to thinking about the visible and invisible world, to imagining our relationship to the Sacred. It aims much more at embarking on a total transformation of the self, beyond the point of no return. It points to an integral experience that not only involves all of the anthropological dimensions—body, soul, and spirit—but also calls for entering into relationship with others, the world, and all of the living.

There can be no authentic self-knowledge without this kind of experiential approach, a process proper to all authentic spirituality by which one awakens to one’s true nature to one’s capacity to be in God and to live according to the divine will. It should be noted that self-knowledge is distinct from self-understanding, which is complementary to it. The first refers to an introspective and existential approach based on experience and intuition, through which I am able to answer the question: “Who am I?” The second is a particular vision of the world, of the human, of the Sacred, that enables me to define myself as a being in a relationship, someone on the way to a destiny, whatever it may be. The first allows me to feel alive beyond mental projections; the second gives me a direction to follow by shaping me psychologically and socially. One is a matter of conversion and grace, the other of a rational, thoughtful and matured effort. Now, self-knowledge always flows from and follows a certain understanding of oneself, even if that understanding might also be questioned in this process. The process of awakening to our deepest reality takes place in a hermeneutic framework that orients it and allows it to happen, while avoiding as much as possible the pitfalls inherent to the spiritual quest.

However, even though experience is essential and central to an embodied spirituality, it is not sufficient. It can be just as misleading as relying solely on a rational approach,

because “Rationality is made out of ego” (Kadowaki 1992, p. 51). Discernment is necessary. Experience must be accompanied by appropriate teaching if we are to have a proper understanding of its nature and implications. The example of the Jew Apollos in the Acts of the Apostles is illuminating. Although the text says that when he spoke of Jesus, he was fervent in the Spirit (ζέων τῷ πνεύματι), which can be literally translated as “bubbling with the Spirit”, Aquila and Priscilla, a missionary couple, “having heard him, took him with them, and expounded to him more exactly the way of God” (Acts 18, 25). To be inhabited by God is salutary, but it is also necessary to be instructed on how to live out this state of grace.

It is indeed possible to be seduced by altered states of consciousness, and to become so attached to them that they block all progress on the path. There is a great risk of being caught up in the enjoyment of these states while cutting ourselves off from our bodily reality and putting the experience at the service of a disembodied spirituality. Hence this very apropos aphorism of desert wisdom: “... if you see a young monk ascending to Heaven of his own free will, take him by the feet and throw him to the ground, for what he is doing is not good for him” (Merton 1987, p. 72). The Christian contemplative life does not consist in withdrawal into an ethereal state. The body is not an obstacle to life in the Spirit but the place where the difficulties proper to that life must be recognized and overcome.

It is important not to give in to a form of spiritual materialism that consists in maintaining the pursuit of an ideal from a voluntaristic striving for personal comfort and wellbeing. Certainly, the body can participate in the bliss experienced by one’s purified consciousness. John of the Cross is quite clear on this point:

At times, some of the soul’s bliss is poured out on the body, as a result of the union that it has with the spirit. The sensitive part, the limbs, the bones, and the marrow of the bones are imbued with enjoyment [. . .] with impressions of delight and glory so intense that they are felt even in the last joints of the feet and hands. The body then participates very abundantly in the beatitude of the soul. (Jean de la Croix 2001, p. 1121)

The clear meaning of these words is that the body takes part in the spiritual awakening. However, we must also remember the Spanish mystic’s insistence that we should not not crave anything of a spiritual nature; no ecstasy, no consolation is to be desired for its own sake. Consequently, as paradoxical as it may seem, an embodied spirituality is based on the injunction to detach oneself from the body. It is not, as we have said, a matter of rejecting the body. On the contrary, detaching oneself from the body involves fully assuming its reality so that we can ferret out the ways in which it is conditioned. Doing so will allow us to cease being its plaything and, at the same time, to take care of it and not worry about it. One “enters the realm when one no longer hates or desires anything” (Kadowaki 1992, p. 140). The body is the reality with which we most identify, the place par excellence where our fears and hopes are rooted.

Discernment allows us not to fixate on phenomena (sensations, suffering, pain, pleasures, ecstasies, nights of the spirit, etc.) but to keep our eyes on the objective to be attained, which is an abundant life (Kadowaki 1992, p. 142), always doing so according to the principle of non-contradiction. That is to say, we are to welcome our body while detaching ourselves from it, to learn to know ourselves in a way that surpasses our ego, to have a goal without waiting for anything.

On this last point, Raimon Panikkar distinguishes between motive and motivation, recalling the 16th-Century German mystic Angelus Silesius in saying that “the rose has no why”. Contemplatives see love as the ultimate motive, but they nonetheless act without motivation (Panikkar 2012, p. 96). A full life does not consist in any particular experience, such as a non-dual gaze into the heart of duality, an experience that is beyond all experience. It is therefore impossible to reach it by our own strength and according to our limited knowledge. We can only be led to it by the impulse of the heart as long as we agree to let ourselves be moved without any will of our own.

We touch here on two other characteristics of an embodied spirituality. The first makes reference to the body as the temple of the Spirit. A spiritual person (πνευματικός) is one who is transparent to the divine presence within, allowing it to act in full consciousness and freedom. Such a person thus becomes the instrument, the vehicle, for the love and self-communication of God (Guyon 2005, p. 77).

The second characteristic follows from the first, and refers to the dimension of otherness. An embodied spirituality is not individualistic, closing people in on themselves. It is turned outward, inviting us to come out of ourselves by virtue of our relationship to the utterly Other. This relationship is personal insofar as it is uniquely embedded in the intimacy of one's being, even in the smallest cells of one's body. Otherness is embedded not only in one's bodily being, where it is the driving force of one's sanctification or divinization, but also in one's relationship to others, to all that lives, and to the world in all its dimensions, understood as the privileged place where this transformation of oneself and of all creation takes place.

The incarnation is not limited to the outer extremities of the body, to the skin that covers it, but, as implied by Paul's reference to the mystical body (see Romans 12: 4–5), extends to the body's relation to the whole phenomenal world. Martin Buber affirms that it is by the virtue of our power to relate that we live in the Spirit, which is not located in the "I". It is like the air we breathe and not like the blood that circulates in us (Buber 1970, p. 89). To understand oneself as the temple of the Spirit is therefore to discover oneself as a relational being.

An embodied spirituality is not only a spirituality of otherness but also, by consequence, a spirituality of dialogue. It is incarnate because it does not turn away from a face-to-face encounter, nor does it take refuge in a politically correct attitude. "God is present", Buber writes, "when I confront You" (Buber 1970, p. 28). Difference is assumed but not radicalized. Conflict is not discarded but is regarded as an opportunity for dialogue when the other is not blamed for what he or she is, believes, or does but becomes the mirror of how we have been conditioned, and thus how we need to change. Even without our being aware of it, otherness is thus similar to the master who teaches us and tests us so that we can become more humble and draw closer to God.

Let us end this section, which is far from being exhaustive, with a final point: spirituality is also embodied in the particular relationship one has with a spiritual master. In this unique and spontaneous face-to-face encounter, disciples receive not just words but even more the spirit that animates them, which will fuel their ardor until they acquire inner freedom. It should be noted that the transmission here is oral, which is an unmistakable sign that the tradition to which we refer is alive and well.

3. The Contribution of Postural Yoga to an Embodied Christian Spirituality

The undeniable success of yoga in the West is due in part to its response to the need to live the kind of embodied spirituality that Christianity has struggled to hold onto. Certainly, this spirituality is not foreign to the Christian contemplative tradition, for which the body is the temple of the Spirit, and is called to participate in the glory of God. The fact remains that this tradition has been somewhat neglected and is not very accessible to the general public, even if it is true that important efforts to propagate it have been crowned with success. We can point to the community of Christian meditation inspired by John Main, and that of the Prayer of Consent (aka the Centering Prayer) popularized by Thomas Keating. Both have helped thousands of people become familiar with the contemplative spirit, and to welcome it into their lives.

Admittedly, this development owes much to the spiritual practices of the East. Main rediscovered the ancient Christian practice of the sacred word through his Hindu master (Blée 2020), and Keating drew on the success of Zen and Hindu masters in the United States when he taught contemplative prayer to his contemporaries, using an approach and a language that were appropriate to the spirit of the times.

In Christian circles, yoga, which also comes from Eastern religions, is similarly a source of inspiration to live the Gospel message more deeply. The way was opened by the French Benedictine Jean-Marie Déchanet, who was the first to publish a book on the meeting of yoga and Christianity (Déchanet 1964). Following his lead, Christian yoga practitioners have formed networks, for example through the association *Christians Practicing Yoga*, in order to reflect on the challenges and benefits of such an encounter. The contribution of yoga to a Christian spirituality of the body is indisputable, as we will make clear in the following five points.

The first point has to do with yoga as an empirical spirituality. One learns by doing. The instructor does not give grand speeches but demands the right posture and leads by example. An embodied spirituality is also honored when words are put into action (Clifford and Johnson 2019, p. 273). Teaching happens on the mat. Learning is putting knowledge into practice. This means discovering the effects of the exercises and integrating their finer points into one's experience. The Christian approach, on the other hand, is often very cerebral; one must intellectually understand the message before living it. As the Jesuit Zen master Kadowaki points out, Christianity starts from reason and goes to the body, whereas Zen—which is a form of yoga understood in its broadest sense, in which *padmāsana* is the only posture retained (note that the term *āsana* means “seated posture”)—proceeds in the opposite direction, from the body to reason (Kadowaki 1992, pp. 25–26). Yoga thus offers Christians a return to the origins of their own monastic tradition where, according to the Desert Fathers, it is not doctrine that teaches and saves but the cell. What gives access to divine realities is the face-to-face encounter with oneself, welcoming the mind–body drama that is played out in each person—in an unconscious way for the most part—which is revealed with new insight when the senses are put to rest. From the cell to heaven!

By making its doctrines the criterion of truth par excellence, Christianity is inclined to adopt a legalistic approach to faith by confusing it with a set of beliefs to which it is sufficient to give one's assent. In so doing, it risks cutting itself off from the life that is its source and *raison d'être*. Christianity is above all a way, *ὁδός*, sometimes translated as a doctrine, which unfortunately sidelines the experiential dimension of faith that is associated with the action of walking. Yoga, which is more about experience than belief (Paul 2009, pp. 160–61), is an opportunity to rediscover a way that gives the body its full place in the process of death and resurrection.

Secondly, the body is seen as energy rather than a symbol. In Christianity, the body is certainly not absent from spiritual practice, but it is mainly symbolic. Kneeling as a sign of reverence, raising one's hands to heaven to welcome divine grace, opening and raising one's eyes to testify to one's attention to celestial realities, and striking one's breast as a sign of contrition are all bodily attitudes that express feelings, devotional impulses, or fervor. When the symbol no longer speaks, the body tends to become an abstract reality. The symbol draws its strength from the consciousness of the divine presence that pervades it. However, the problem, according to Charles Davis, is that the churches have lost the authority to arouse and nurture this consciousness (Rock 2005, pp. 961–67).

One way to reclaim the body as the locus of spiritual life is to learn about its energy. Yoga postures are effective primarily because of their ability to influence the currents of energy that flow through the body, and to connect them to pure consciousness. These currents are linked to the circulation of energy, to the breath that calms the mind, to the purification of the body through the composite of body-breath-spirit. Arnaud Desjardins speaks of yoga as a science of energy.⁷

While the body as a symbol and the body as energy are present in both Christianity and yoga, the former dominates in the first and the latter in the second. Let us note that each of these bodies has its own efficacy. The symbolic body is not less efficacious than the energetic body, but it obeys another dynamic.⁸ However, when the symbolic content of the body is lost, yoga can help to recover it by bringing the body back to life through awareness of the energies that enliven it. Becoming aware of the divine presence—called *energeia* in the Christian tradition—and of what it implies in terms of inner transformation

can shed new light on the symbolic meaning of certain traditional gestures. For example, to experience the Sublime (*majestas*) in one's flesh naturally leads to a grasp of the symbolic significance of the action of kneeling, which is to bear witness to one's humility, awe, and gratitude vis-à-vis the greatness of God.

The third point we wish to make has to do with the relationship between guilt and consciousness. Christian practice requires repentance, which is the recognition of one's faults in order to implore in all humility the grace without which no salvation is possible. This attitude may have given undue importance to guilt. Guilt can indeed draw us to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the sufferings Christ endured to free us from our sins, but it can also lead to self-pity, to considering oneself unworthy of being in the presence of God. In extreme cases, guilt drives people to extreme expressions of asceticism. An extreme emphasis on guilt has dominated Christian practice for a very long time (Rock 2005, pp. 959–60), and the pain it brought about has led many people to turn their backs on the Church in pursuit of a more positive vision of the human.

Yoga presents itself as an alternative by placing emphasis not on guilt but on consciousness (Paul 2009, pp. 32–33). The postures are certainly a form of asceticism, but their purpose is to open us to wholeness, to our true nature, which is already there, present within us, intact although not yet recognized. The approach here is positive. The human is divine. All that is needed is to realize this; performing the *āsanas* is a step toward this realization. The practice brings about an openness to self-knowledge by making us aware of the coarsest and the subtlest human realities until we come to a state of pure consciousness.

The influence of yoga on the way a Christian regards the search for a more positive vision of human nature is certainly beneficial. It does not mean abolishing the distance between Creator and creature by identifying *ātman* with *brahman*; it means following Paul Ricoeur's example of believing not in sin but in deliverance from sin. Consciousness of the body and the beyond of the body, of an ontological unity with God, reminds Christians of that which existentialist philosophy had already made them aware of: "The essence of Christianity is salvation; sin is discovered only in the very act that delivers one from it" (Ricoeur 2006, p. 314). The practice of postures coupled with non-judgmental attention can indeed reveal long-buried physical and emotional tensions that stand in the way of a spontaneous and transparent relationship with oneself, others, the world, and God. Mindfulness such as this is both painful and restorative.

The fourth point to be made concerns the present moment and a spirituality that is for everyone. Remorse for sins committed by guilt-ridden believers projects them into the past; fear of retribution projects them into the future. They are locked into their own thoughts, which are focused on obsessive self-reflection rather than healthy and necessary repentance. The mind cuts itself off from the grace that is available to believers in the present moment, which is the time of a Church in crisis, caught up in nostalgia for the past and fear of the future. The practice of *āsanas*—by directing attention to the body, the breath, and the energies—provides a way to reconnect with the here and now (Sheveland 2008, p. 58), leaving all reasoning behind and simply being present in what is. Here, there are no more distinctions or thoughts. There is no reason to believe that if the mind is concentrated on the self, a separation between self and body results. On the contrary, such a concentration leads to a sense of ontological unity by giving one an experience of liberating non-duality in a religious setting that has been dominated by an oppressive dualism between good and evil, God and the devil, mind and body, and faith and sin, etc.

This non-dual view is in keeping with the understanding that we are already living in the Reign of God, a Reign that is not outside, confined to an eschatological future, but within (Luke 17: 20–21), a Reign that is recreating us at every moment. The practice of yoga invites us to put aside the pernicious conviction of many Christians that, given the sinfulness of most people, holiness is only possible for an elite, and that salvation is something to be hoped for in the distant future, after physical death. A spirituality of the present frees us from such insidious thoughts by reminding us that it is not so much the body that must be mastered as the thoughts linked to the sensations it provides. Without

rejecting the past or the future, it allows us to go forward in hope, whatever our state, with the freshness of a beginner, and in this it is inclusive.

The fifth and final point is about the body as the locus of spiritual transformation. For a long time, Christianity has supported an unbiblical anthropological dualism. The Scriptures propose a threefold view of the human being in which the spirit is not opposed to the body. For various reasons, however, notably the influence of Greek philosophies, this opposition has prevailed, and has influenced the practices and behavior of Christians. It is ironic, to say the least, that from the beginning, Christianity strenuously opposed the anthropological dualism of the Gnostic and philosophical movements of antiquity (Malkovsky 2017, p. 41), but then ended up adopting it. We can mention here the influence of Manichaeism; Saint Augustin was Manichaen for a long time, and he brought many anti-corporeal ideas into Christianity. Consequently, the body has become suspect, reduced to the locus of temptations that we have to tame if not nullify. At best, the body is regarded as a peaceful and docile instrument at the service of a life of prayer. Contemplative theology supports a more positive and profound approach that yoga can help to recover, that of a divinized body, emerging from a process of the transformation of the believer by the fire of the Spirit. The practice of the postures is required to relax the body and free it from blockages so that it can support the deployment of subtle energies without suffering negative consequences. Yoga is based on an anthropology in which breath (*prāṇa*) plays a primary role.

Is this a non-dualistic anthropology? There is some debate about this. Bradley Malkovsky argues that the anthropology of classical yoga is dualistic because the ultimate goal of the spiritual life is not the body, which is ultimately rejected, but the soul (Malkovsky 2017, p. 41). According to him, this is extreme dualism compared to the moderate dualism of Christianity, which recognizes the resurrection of the body even if—here on earth—the body remains suspect. However, it cannot be denied that, from a practical point of view, yoga offers many western practitioners the discovery of a spiritual dimension of the body. While it is true that the body is ultimately mortal, it is often presented as being united with a set of subtle energies that allows it, if not to be spiritualized, at least to keep itself young and in a state of harmony for a longer time.⁹ Asha Persson describes yoga's anthropological unity as "intimate immensity" in order to refer to the fact that the body is the place of rootedness, the only place from which the feeling of infinite space can be experienced (Ylönen 2012, p. 54).

The body is indeed crisscrossed by a complex system of channels (*nāḍī*) and energy wheels (*chakra*). This system, subjected to a purification process, engages practitioners in a transformation of their entire being to the point where it is possible to experience liberation (*mokṣa*) from within their bodily condition (*jīvanmukta*). This way of looking at the body echoes Christian notions of divinization (*theosis*), sanctification (*sanctificationem*), or transfiguration, in which the body—each of its cells illuminated by the divine presence that is iconographically represented by a halo above the heads of saints—has a share in salvation. In short, it invites us to rediscover a biblical threefold anthropology.

4. Critiques of Postural Yoga in Light of Kashmiri Śivaism

The practice of postural yoga can help Christians to reclaim the body in their relationship to God, but it can also foster a disembodied spirituality. Certain approaches or certain deviations in their execution increase the risk of transforming the body into a place of alienation and self-enclosure, rather than liberation and self-transcendence. John Macquarrie reminds us of the paradox of the spiritual quest: it is precisely in surpassing oneself that one realizes who one really is (Macquarrie 2000, p. 67). Christians and postural yoga practitioners share the experience of "a passing beyond all self-centeredness and impurity [in] the spiritual awareness that 'we can only truly be ourselves when we go beyond the ego-self, beyond what we normally believe ourselves to be.'" (Malkovsky 2017, p. 10).

Going beyond ourselves is not the same as losing ourselves in ethereal states. Rather, we go beyond ourselves by ensuring that the thoughts that beset us (*logismoi*) do not distract us from the reality of our deep connection to the divine. Going beyond ourselves means taking a step back from the inclinations that prompt us to act in a particular way, more or less unconsciously. It is about going beyond our conditioning, about no longer identifying with thoughts, sensations, and emotions, and not about escaping into altered states of consciousness. It is, however, easy to confuse the latter with the state of being in God.

An embodied spirituality cannot, therefore, rely on experience alone, making it the only criterion of truth. Experience is essential, of course, but it is important that it be carefully managed. Hence the importance of remaining vigilant with regard to the adoption of the practice of the *āsanas* in a Christian context, and of being on guard against anything that might impede the effort to recapture the contemplative spirit in the Christian life. To this end, we offer a critique of postural yoga in light of the non-dual Tantric path of Trika, which is better known as Kashmiri Śivaism. It is based on the *Śiva Sūtra*, which was discovered by Vasugupta (9th Century), and reached its zenith with the monumental work of Abhinavagupta (10th Century, Blée 2021). There are three reasons for this choice.

First, Kashmiri Śivaism is a Hindu tradition. A critique of yoga, even when intentionally religious, has more weight if it is carried out with reference to a framework of which the anthropological foundations belong to the same religious sphere. To undertake such a critique from a Christian perspective would be to run the risk of giving in, or appearing to give in, to an apologetic approach of which the aim is not so much to understand another point of view as to discredit it on the basis of one's own point of view, which from the outset is considered to be the only true one. The conviction of several extreme but not-so-rare authors that yoga is a diabolical practice is an expression of this missionary attitude (Sadrin 1979, p. 99).

Secondly, Kashmiri Śivaism is a tantric tradition, and due to this very fact, it gives central importance to the body. André Padoux is unequivocal on this point: "The importance of the body in the world of the tantras is in fact so great that one could address almost any aspect of the tantric field from the perspective of the body" (Padoux 2010, p. 123). In short, there is no awakening outside the body (Padoux 2010, p. 126). Hence the idea, according to Abhinavagupta, that the greatest and most essential of rites is the fact of being born.¹⁰ Being corporeal is not an obstacle to awakening but its primary condition. In common with many forms of postural yoga, the Trika path also has a connection to the chakras and *kundalinī*, even though it often understands them differently (Clifford and Johnson 2019, p. 273). We should also note the interesting connection between Abhinavagupta and Patañjali reported by David Dubois: "In short, the *Yogasūtra* are clearly part of the heritage of the *kaula* tradition claimed by Abhinavagupta. Moreover, an oral tradition of the Kashmiri pandits made Abhinavagupta a reincarnation of Patañjali [. . .]" (Dubois 2015, p. 234).

Finally, if the body is at the center of the Trika tradition, the spiritual practices that refer directly to it are not the most important. They echo the "path of action" (*kriyopāya*), which is considered to be inferior to the other two paths, that of energy (*sāktopāya*) and that of will (*sāmbhavopāya*). Understanding the reasons for this makes it possible to put the role of *āsanas* into perspective, and places us in a better position to detect abusive practices.

In this final section, and in light of the points raised in the first part of this article, we will focus on three attitudes that we believe stand in the way of an embodied spirituality.

First, there is no practice without a philosophy. From the perspective of Kashmiri Śivaism, experience is essential; without it no liberation is possible. However, it is not sufficient; it needs to be situated in a philosophical framework that will direct it and will provide an anthropology and cosmology that clarify the goal and map out the way to reach it. Hence Jaideva Singh's statement in the introduction to the *Śiva Sūtras* that the practice of Kashmiri Śivaism requires a thorough knowledge of its philosophy: "Siva-Sutras are a treatise on Yoga, but this Yoga is based on a definite system of Philosophy. It will not be possible to understand this yoga unless there is a clear grasp of the philosophy on which it

is based.” (Singh 2003a, p. xix). This means that experience alone can be misleading if it is not supported by reason, which is one of the key elements of authentic spirituality, i.e., reason that allows for discernment according to a certain teaching.

It is important to remember this point, because the practice offered by many yoga centers is disconnected from any religious reference. This is not to defend the traditional view that the only true yoga is an explicitly Hindu yoga. Rather, we need to recall that many who practice yoga have bad memories of their previous religious affiliation and for this reason now avoid any doctrinal controversy in their quest for serenity in yoga (Rock 2005, pp. 961–67). However, such behavior has consequences, notably the lack of intellectual rigor and the superficial relationship to a multitude of spiritual currents that are mixed together to form a sort of pick and choose religion.

Experience is a place of growth and maturation provided that it is interpreted in a sound manner according to a coherent philosophy of the body. Lived experiences need to be named in order to bear fruit, which presupposes access to an appropriate vocabulary, and also to a hermeneutical framework which is capable of making sense of these experiences in a global understanding of things, as well as to a structure that can bring both the experiences and their fruit to life. Such a structure often rests on the spiritual guide who is its soul, the one who both preserves and transmits the spirit of the tradition. This is only possible if the teacher has himself integrated the teaching, and has been recognized as having done so by his own teacher.¹¹ However, there are yoga instructors who pretend to be masters without having the required qualification. Many present themselves as teachers after a few training courses, or after having been trained in schools of which the teaching is based on one or a few autodidacts. If this is the case, what is the value of the diplomas delivered, and what is the capacity of the teachers to protect their disciples or clients from possible abuses and pitfalls?¹²

Second, it is important to distinguish between wellbeing and liberation. Kashmir Śivaism aims at liberation from our human condition, from the body. As we have pointed out, the body is central to this Tantric school, but it is not the object of attachment. There is no preoccupation with the body, as is the case in some postural yoga circles where the goal is essentially to feel good, where pleasure and wellbeing are the main fruits sought after. Hence, needs are created, as well as new practices to answer them. We can do laughter yoga, aerial yoga, paddle board yoga, yoga in a room overheated to 105°, yoga in the snow with our feet firmly anchored in our ski boots, yoga for pregnant women, collective orgasmic yoga; the list is long. We are entering a mercantile logic that makes yoga a lucrative industry that obeys the logic of a materialistic culture in which having takes precedence over being. Having good health, experiencing less stress, keeping one’s youth—these are all “goods” that reinforce concern for oneself, and that concern becomes even more exacerbated with the spectacle of extreme postures that are propagated on social networks to challenge the competition in an ever more crowded market (Singleton 2010).

As long as we don’t fall into a cult of the body, this approach is not bad in itself. It can be seen as an expression of the laudable effort to give oneself the means to live a good life. However, it is not consistent with the principle of yoga, which is to neutralize the ego; nor is it a proper response to the urgency of recapturing an embodied spirituality, which requires, as mentioned above, a transcending of the body in the very act of fully assuming it. The Trika path summons us to detach ourselves from the body and from *prāna*, that is, from all subtle energy (Singh 2003a, p. lxxv), in order to free ourselves from the conditioning that forces us to identify with it. However—and herein lies the whole paradox—the way to detach oneself from the body is not by rejecting it (Ylönen 2012, p. 41), but by welcoming any sensation, pleasant or unpleasant, without qualifying it in such or such a way, maintaining ourselves in the spontaneity of the moment, in the acceptance of our vulnerability.¹³

It is interesting to note with Russill Paul that “It is often hard for Hindus—and as a result some Western yogis—to understand or appreciate spiritual vulnerability” (Paul 2009, p. 189). This is reinforced by the fact that, nowadays, yoga is called upon to treat

and heal various ailments, including depression, which is becoming more widespread. It is medically proven that yoga has many benefits for our physical and mental health, and this is often a good enough reason to practice it. However, the search for wellbeing that coincides with an excessive identification with the body can prevent us from facing suffering, death, and impermanence, which is the very condition for transcending these realities of human life. To flee from them or to delay their effects in an obsessive pursuit of pleasure is to deny bodily reality and to take refuge in a disembodied spirituality, albeit one centered on the body and its needs, that is incapable of making us more open to the divine. Ryan rightly states that “Sometimes being healthy and well narrows both our vision of human experience and God’s presence in all of it” (Ryan 2005, p. 335).

To put a stop to the identification of the self with the body, Kashmiri Śivaism suggests breaking the routine, stepping out of one’s comfort zone, and going against certain conventions, especially with regard to what is pure and impure (Padoux 2010, p. 200). For a cerebral person, who tends to want to control everything by his reason and thus to be wary of the unexpected and the chaotic, reconnecting with the body can be a liberation that is experienced as a real challenge, an event that is both terrifying and initiatory, insofar as one is confronted with one’s primal fears.¹⁴ This is the role of the subversive practices of Tantra, which are aimed at the decapitation of the ego by challenging a mind that has been reassured, but in vain, by its certainty about what is good, God, the world, etc. What is essential is doing away with all dualistic thinking and becoming like the yogi, whom Kashmir Śivaism characterizes as one “one who devotes himself to union”.¹⁵ However, doesn’t the practice of postures as proposed in the studios of large Western cities run the risk of establishing a routine of seeking mental and physical comfort at each session, thus distancing practitioners from the possibility of awakening to their true nature? In the case of doubt, isn’t it premature to identify anyone who practices postural yoga as a *yogi* or *yogini*, no matter what their level and intention? Unfortunately, this is something that happens all too often.

Third, grace takes precedence over personal effort. Divine grace is as much at the heart of the Trika philosophy as is the body. No liberation is possible without its help, and its intensity varies according to Śiva’s will. The difference in intensity determines the three paths to liberation:

1. the path of the individual (*āṇavopāya*) or ordinary human (*naropāya*), which is also called the “path of action” (*kriyopāya*);
2. the path of cognitive energy (*śāktopāya*);
3. the divine or supreme path (*paropāya*) or will (*śāmbhavopāya*).

According to Trika philosophy, the more grace is present, the less personal effort is required, and the higher the path. In the highest path, that of the will, one need only follow the impulse that springs from within to be absorbed into the divine;¹⁶ it is a “path without support, without effort, without recourse to the faculties; it is the path of pure desire, of naked intention. . . . It is meant only for the ardent person who is full of divine love (*bhakti*) and who aspires only to the simple and naked Essence” (Silburn 1981, p. 173). Even though the grace here is intense and the adept’s confidence unwavering, it is still true that this path, like the others, is characterized by the fact that there continues to be a self-centered attitude, that attention to the divine is mixed with a sensual relationship to things (Silburn and Padoux 2000, p. 41).

Here, too, it is a question of the degree. A path is considered to be inferior when the sensual relationship is strong, grace less intense, and more effort required. In the lowest path, that of action, spiritual practices dominate along with the relationship to the body, both the solid and the subtle. We see some correspondence here with postural yoga, provided, however, that we are clear that all three paths of the Trika philosophy are mystical and pertain to those who are assured of their liberation. They differ only in regard to the manner and time of its attainment. The same cannot be said of all those who attend yoga studios.

On the other hand, the comparison serves to highlight certain possible aberrations in the practice of postural yoga, such as the belief that the efforts made to master the postures are sufficient to acquire knowledge (*vidyā*) and experience wholeness. It should be remembered that the *āsanas* form the third limb of Rāja yoga. Their purpose is to pacify the mind so that the divine energy present in the body can circulate freely and begin to spiritualize the body until the eighth and final stage of Patañjali's system is reached, namely the ability to live once and for all in accordance with the divine consciousness.

It should be noted that the process of spiritualization should not be confused with the search for wellbeing. The former consists of dying to oneself, to one's old ways, in order to sink into the unknown, with all the risks of psychological destabilization and physiological imbalances that this entails. Such risks are increased by the belief, which is strong in the yoga world, that all results depend on personal effort. On the contrary, the blessed outcome of the process of spiritualization rests on our capacity not to interfere with the energies in motion, confidently allowing providence to do its work without recourse to oneself. However, it is tempting to want to initiate this process, to direct it, even to correct it, and that never augurs well.¹⁷

The fact remains that the western mentality prizes doing, action, the ability to produce, a mentality that reinforces yoga practitioners in their belief that effort is the key to success. This leads to the evaluation of the training of a yoga instructor in terms of hours of practice, as in the case of training an airplane pilot. This approach would make sense if the yoga instructor were no more than a gymnast, but in no way is this a satisfactory way to evaluate a spiritual practice. It is not the time spent meditating that produces the enlightenment of practitioners but the ardor of their desire to liberate themselves. Ardor is at the heart of Kashmiri Śivaism, and hence the essence of this Tantra is Love (Dupuche 2019, pp. 100–39).

According to Dubois, the ardor that emerges from deep within is another word for love (Dubois 2015, p. 43). In this tradition, the world is based on ontological desire; it is born from the union between *Śiva*, pure consciousness, and *Śakti*, the power inherent in that consciousness. Everything in this world is desire or will (*icchā*), a relationship of love (Padoux 2010, p. 150), a longing for union and wholeness (Dubois 2015, p. 42). This is true even if this desire is often limited or focused on transient objects. In fact, in a kind of self-emanation (*visarga*), *Śiva*, by an act of playfulness (*līlā*), takes pleasure in losing himself in the multiple forms he himself has elicited, and which constitute the world (Silburn and Padoux 2000, p. 77). Moreover, the energy of desire or will, "which originally is only acquiescence to fullness, becomes a definite desire [. . .]" (Silburn 1981, p. 142).

Even though it is limited, this desire is by nature the primordial desire. Under the impetus of *Śakti*, the grace of *Śiva*, this desire will recover its true nature in the act of following the impetus from below, or in adherence to "the original creative impulse of the divinity" (Silburn and Padoux 2000, p. 53). Now, this desire is not satisfied by any technique. It is direct, going to the essence, without wanting anything of its own. Everything is given here and now to the person whose ardor is intense. It is difficult for postural yoga practitioners to understand this if they are convinced that they have no choice but to walk the path in a progressive way, using postures and techniques, and taking one step after another. It is interesting to note that the first question posed to Mooji, during the *satsang* given at the International Yoga Festival at Parmarth Niketan in Rishikesh on 4 March 2019, was precisely to ask him for a technique to recognize the Self: "What sort of practices you might recommend to train the mind to be in the present moment, to be in presence, to be in our true nature?"¹⁸

Resonating with the path of cognitive energy (*śāktopāya*), the disciple of Hari Wench Lal Poonja, who was himself a disciple of Ramana Maharshi, favors an immediate recognition of our true nature, which is disconcerting to those followers of postural yoga for whom effort is a *sine qua non*. Russil Paul notes that

... this kind of unconditional quietude is difficult for the average Western Yogi, who is an effort-oriented and goal-oriented practitioner. It would, as a result,

be good for Yogis, Western Yogis in particular, to develop unconditional loving attentiveness and interior divine adoration. (Paul 2009, p. 167)

Let us remember, however, that the *Yoga-sūtra* do not attribute the salvation of the practitioners to their efforts alone, as they speak of the Lord granting them his grace. “The *Isvara-pranidhana* verses thus acknowledge the experience of practitioners who attribute progress in the goals of yoga to a source beyond themselves” (Sheveland 2008, p. 53).

Still, the contemplative approach to the higher paths of Trika does not render futile the practice of postures in the process of awakening, but it affirms three things about them. First, they are not always necessary for liberation. Indeed, as Silburn and Padoux state, “These practices are unnecessary for those mystics who have received the most intense grace, but they are a tiny minority” (Silburn and Padoux 2000, p. 28). Secondly, they are beneficial to us if the inner impulse drives us to practice them. Finally, they serve a cause greater than their own mastery. They have no spiritual value in themselves because they are unable to provide a permanent state of liberation (Dubois 2015, pp. 67–68). The proof lies in the fact that if one stops practicing the postures, their effects will automatically diminish.

Postural yoga is only one step towards a state that grace alone can establish and maintain. Hence the importance of not giving in to the certain rigidity in terms of discipline, behavior, diet, etc., that is sometimes found in yoga circles. The means are not to be confused with the end. In this regard, the Trika path reminds us that everything relates to pure consciousness as long as we do not fixate on one particular point but rather grasp the non-dual spirit underlying all phenomena, which requires the adaptability and flexibility of mind. It follows that the primary role of the *āsanas* is to make the body as well as the mind flexible in order to welcome what no longer depends on oneself. According to Abhinavagupta, “for the accomplished being, whatever attitude he takes is a *mudrā*; the rest is mere gesticulation” (Silburn and Padoux 2000, p. 36). We could say the same in the context of postural yoga: for the yogi who possesses this flexibility of mind and body, any attitude is *āsana*.

5. Conclusions

Although not exhaustive, this study—in line with other reflections (Ryan 1995; Sheveland 2008; Malkovsky 2017)—should suffice to show that a Christian spirituality that is concerned with the bodily dimension can benefit from involvement with postural yoga. We pointed out that such an encounter requires going beyond clichés, asking the questions and establishing the nuances which are necessary for it to take place in the best possible conditions and bear the best fruit. We have seen that even if Christian spirituality is fundamentally embodied, the adoption of yogic postures can help it can recapture some of the anthropological elements that may have been neglected in certain contexts at certain times. We have also seen that such an adoption prompts one to question these practices not only in light of their original spiritual framework (Rāja yoga) but also in light of spiritual systems (Śivaism of Kashmir) that come from the same religious universe, and are quite close and different at the same time. By contrasting practices, we can bring out their respective ascetic and philosophical coherences while at the same time purifying them of distortions and also correcting the prejudices of Christians who reject them *a priori*. If, for example, Christians are right to say that the practice of postures can lead to the worship of the body and lock the individual in an egocentric attitude, it is also true that this development would, in fact, be a distortion of the philosophy that underlies this practice, whether it is Rāja yoga or the Trika path.

If postural yoga can be beneficial to Christian spirituality, the reverse is also true. A contemplative theology, whether invigorated by a contribution from yoga or not, can in turn question the latter and suggest ways of strengthening some of its positions according to new intuitions; this would be the subject of another article. However, in order for this mutual enrichment to take place, it is important to consider the encounter in a dialogical way, and this is the point we want to raise in concluding this reflection.

The proponents of a Christian yoga willingly defend the idea that it is possible, and even recommended, to extract postural yoga from any Hindu context, and to consider it as a remedy for stress, an excellent way to achieve peace of mind, and no longer as a path to salvation in its own right. For some, this is the condition for adopting the practice of *āsanas*, which they downgrade to an exercise that better disposes one for prayer, in this way making it appear less threatening to the Christian faith (Wiseman 2005, pp. 215–18).

For our part, we have reservations about such an approach because it so easily leads to the assimilation of otherness. This is certainly not to condemn it; it has its advantages, and is sometimes the only way that *āsanas* can be adopted in certain settings (Sheveland 2008, p. 56). However, like Henri Le Saux, we believe that it shows little respect for the spiritual path of the other, or for the coherence that it has been given to it by successive generations of practitioners. It indicates that we are interested in it as little more than a technique that is useful to us, rather than for what it represents for the Hindu practitioner. For this reason, Le Saux refused an invitation to come to Canada to initiate “Christian yogis” at the Monchanin Intercultural Center (Blée 2008, p. 98).

In fact, postural yoga provides an opportunity to recapture the embodied dimension of Christianity, not only because it involves an experience of the body but also because its spiritual orientation is grounded in a specific philosophical system. The self-knowledge acquired through the practice of the postures needs to be inscribed in a hermeneutic framework that offers a vision of the human being, of the transcendent, and of the world, in order not only to serve personal, physical and mental wellbeing but also to refer to a beyond of the senses and thoughts, and to offer the sure means to access it.

It is precisely in relation to a yoga that finds its coherence in such a framework that Christians have the best chance of deepening their own spirituality. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, a yoga supported by a particular anthropological and philosophical approach is better able to prevent the aberrations of a materialistic spirituality that is enclosed in the bodily reality and the needs of the “I”, and which, as we have shown, is paradoxically equivalent to a disembodied spirituality. Secondly, this type of yoga—for example, the Rāja yoga system, like the tantric approach of Trika that we have referred to in this study—makes it easier to relate to a contemplative spirituality. It gives Christians an opportunity to reappropriate the elements of an anthropology grounded in the theology of the Incarnation. It invites Christians to return to the essentials of the contemplative life, that is, a life anchored in the body, a body understood as the temple of the Spirit, where grace conditions personal efforts and not vice-versa. Its goal is to go beyond the body, which is the condition for its spiritualization, and also to articulate what is “essential” about it on the basis of new intuitions and a new vocabulary. This is only possible in a dialogical relationship with the *āsanas*. Only an intra-religious approach to the *āsanas* allows us, in the very action of practicing them, to welcome within ourselves another way of thinking, of praying, of connecting with the Sacred. In such an inner dialogue the Christian discovers that religious otherness is not a threat to his or her faith but a privileged way of reaffirming it. It offers the opportunity of questioning oneself, of ridding oneself of the heaviness that encumbers one’s practice. It provides an opportunity for mutual impoverishment even before envisaging a mutual enrichment, and it also brings us back to the heart of the evangelical message—in particular to the love of the stranger—in view of mutual understanding.

Viewed in this way, the dialogical approach seems to us more fruitful than that of stripping yogic postures of their relationship to the transcendent and to the hermeneutical framework in which they are articulated. It is, however, more demanding, for example in the selection of partners for dialogue. One will privilege schools of yoga that relate to a Hindu philosophy that has proven itself over time, without neglecting others that adopt a secular and coherent teaching. It is important to remember that it is not a matter of giving in to the rigorism of a Hindu perspective that declares any practice that deviates from the tradition to be inauthentic. The essence of the dialogical approach is rather to maintain otherness, a *vis-à-vis* from which the bodily dimension becomes an opportunity to draw

out the elements for an embodied spirituality, and thus to contribute to the renewal of a contemplative theology which, consequently, cannot do without a theology of dialogue.

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Notes

- ¹ What follows is the very telling testimony of a convert to Christianity and former yoga practitioner: “Yoke is the root of the word yoga and we place ourselves under yokes by practicing it. We bind ourselves by practicing it to pagan deities that hide behind Hindu traditions. The cobra, the grasshopper, the corpse, the salute to the sun are occult postures that link us to spiritual entities and lead us on a path of death, not life.” *Les méfaits du Hatha-Yoga. Testimony of Rolande Bellein*. <http://www.seraia.com/seraiafr/temoignages/TemoignageRB.pdf> (accessed on 18 January 2022).
- ² Thomas Ryan is of the same opinion: “The Christian tradition has analogous though less developed practices such as hesychasm, a movement cultivating silence and solitude in Eastern Christianity, or the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius in Western practice. But overall we have not had the anthropology our theology deserves and requires” (Ryan 2005, pp. 917–18).
- ³ “Yet, today, a movement that assumes a vision of yoga as a static, homogenous system rapidly gains momentum. That movement opposes the contemporary popularization of yoga, maintaining that people have been fooled into thinking that yoga is simply a fitness product for enhancing well-being. Opponents target the most widely embraced forms of modern yoga today, those of postural yoga, which involve sequences of asana or postures that are, through pranayama or “breathing exercises,” synchronized with the breath. The movement warns that, although today millions embrace postural yoga as a physical fitness routine, yoga is in fact religious, and, more specifically, it is definitively Hindu” (Jain 2012, p. 1).
- ⁴ Jain rightly points out that “In the history of religions, there are no original ideas or practices, and there are no unchanging essences. Religious phenomena arise from continuous processes of syncretism, appropriation, and hybridization. Yoga is no exception. In short, the problem with any definition of yoga remains: who is to say which, if any, yoga practitioners have it all wrong?” (Jain 2014). See also (Sheveland 2008, p. 52).
- ⁵ It should, however, be noted that Rāja yoga refers to different philosophical postures according to periods and authors. If some modern Indian religious leaders developed yoga systems based on Patañjali’s aṣṭāṅgayoga and called them Rāja yoga, the “history of the term “rājayoga” reveals that it did not derive from Pātañjalayoga. Indeed, it was not until the sixteenth century that this term was used in a commentary on the Yogasūtra.” (Birch 2014, p. 399). See also (Birch 2020a, 2020b).
- ⁶ Ryan puts it this way: “In short, there is every indication that salvation does not mean getting out of this skin, but being transfigured and glorified in it” (Ryan 2005, p. 56).
- ⁷ Start Listening at 45’02”, [youtube.com/watch?v=PDTeHWukdnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDTeHWukdnU) (accessed on 18 January 2022).
- ⁸ “Notice his clear recognition that the posture of the body is helpful in inciting the desired attitude in the heart. When one seeks to experience sorrow for one’s sins, to kneel or lie prostrate before a crucifix is much more conducive to the grace sought than sitting in a comfortable recliner with feet up and arms folded” (Ryan 2005, pp. 560–62). “The posture of the body opened the door for what was in the heart and bid it come forth” (Ryan 2005, pp. 591–93).
- ⁹ From a philosophical point of view, it is important to note that not all yogas support the idea of a spiritualized body. In this respect, a clear distinction between the formal (dualist) Sāṃkhya metaphysics of Pātañjalayoga, the advaita of classical Vedānta, and the advaita of Kashmiri Śaivism might be helpful (White 2009).
- ¹⁰ Colette Poggi, *L’art de l’entre-deux, Antara, au coeur du yoga*, conference given at La Bellevilloise in Paris, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGKg6OOfU0&t=3s> (12’05”) (accessed on 18 January 2022).
- ¹¹ According to the Trika path, the master can be initiated and trained by one or more gurus, or they can be a *prātibho guru*, someone who received enlightenment without an intermediary. In either case, the guru must have perfect knowledge of the self (*ātman*) and at the same time have overcome tendencies toward duality. Grace is central here; it is what makes one fit for the role of master. Without grace, the relationship of the master to the disciple is meaningless: “Abhinavagupta distinguishes two species of humanity: those who are ‘sniffed out’ by grace and the others. The problem of master and disciple arises only for the former, and therefore in relation to grace [. . .]” (Silburn 1983b, p. 123).
- ¹² See the article, <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/enquetes/201904/09/01-5221563-les-derives-du-yoga.php> (accessed on 18 January 2022).

- ¹³ From the perspective of Trika, vulnerability can be understood as the transition from one phase of existence to another. There are many phases: from deep sleep to wakefulness, from one emotion to another, and from one form of bondage to another, etc. Usually, going from one phase to another generates uneasiness. On the contrary, in the awakened person, these phases are transfigured: “He moves ceaselessly from pure consciousness to consciousness of duality against a background of unity, only to plunge back into unity, interpreting each day as an endless dance” (Dubois 2015, p. 184). In other words, there is no awakening without the acceptance of the changing nature of our condition. Experiencing impermanence allows us to transcend it in the recognition of non-dual consciousness.
- ¹⁴ “Some bodies may have undergone invasive surgery. Some may have literally lost parts of themselves. Many have gone through childbirth. Some may presently be living with cancer. Some have had physical violence perpetrated against them. All such experience is still carried in the body. The yoga class is a place where we come up against those memories once again.” (Ryan 2005, pp. 1032–34).
- ¹⁵ See (Poggi 2016, p. 200). In the context of Kashmiri Śivaism, Singh defines a yogi as “one who is seeking to or has been able to unite with the Universal consciousness” (Singh 2003b, p. 158). Furthermore, according to Swami Lakshman Joo, ‘yogini’ refers to “spiritually perfect woman, also divinised [. . .].” (Swami Lakshman Joo 2002, p. 194).
- ¹⁶ This path (śāmbhavopāya) consists simply in tuning oneself in the creative Power of Śiva. Śāmbhava relates to Śāmbhu, a name of Śiva, which etymologically breaks down as follows: being or existing (bhū) for quietude and happiness (śam).
- ¹⁷ In his book on *kundalinī*, a popular topic in yoga circles, Silburn emphasizes mindfulness as a primary condition for the accompaniment of the unfolding of this divine ascending energy. Again, Kashmiri Śivaism identifies several levels in this unfolding, but in each case the key comes down to not identifying with the body in the act of returning inward (*acte de ‘s’interioriser’*) (Silburn 1983a, p. 84), i.e., absorbing oneself into the Universal Consciousness. It is interesting to note that the Trika path speaks here of “autonomous energy”, which reinforces the idea of being in a state of repose, allowing the energy to move according to its own laws. Conversely, any manipulation of it is to be discouraged. Referring to the *kundalinī* of consciousness (*citkundalinī*), which is perceived only by a yogi of perfect selflessness, and who is always recollected, Silburn states, “Kundalinī becomes as powerful as a tree trunk so that no practice is required [. . .] All that is required is perfect alertness. Having reached the top of the skull, autonomous energy (*svātantrya*) takes its seat in the Universal Consciousness and radiates boundless bliss into the whole person.” (Silburn 1983a, p. 84). With regard to *kundalinī* of breath (*pranākundalinī*), she writes, “as long as a yogin has not lost the sense of self, the gradual progression requires some preparation,” which “is by no means associated with breath exercises (*prānāyāma*), for alertness and samādhi are alone required here.” (Silburn 1983a, p. 86). As the vibrations of divine energy begin to spread throughout the body, effects such as jumping or shaking may be felt, which are signs that a yogi still identifies with the body, but also that erroneous impressions of this identity are weakening. Returning inward (*s’interioriser*) is crucial here. The risk here is to give in to anxiety, and at the same time to reinforce identity with the body and the importance of the phenomena.
- ¹⁸ begin listening at 11’38”, [youtube.com/watch?v=avBiFr-VavA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avBiFr-VavA) (accessed on 18 January 2022).

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