

A Spiritual Profit for Western Yogis? The Spiritual Significance of Postural Yoga for Religious “Nones”

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Abstract

Is postural yoga evolving beyond merely a fitness practice into an important component of the spiritual lives of religious “nones” in British Columbia and perhaps elsewhere in North America? This article looks at Christian and Hindu perspectives of contemporary debates over the westernization of yoga, and utilizes qualitative survey data to investigate the spiritual value that yoga is taking on for nonreligious millennials seeking to enhance the self. Societal shifts indicate a growing cultural value of discovering one’s individual authenticity through self-development efforts, and research suggests that yoga is one way that this is being pursued. Using media coverage of two controversial Canadian incidents — the cancellation of a proposed mass yoga class on Vancouver’s Burrard Street Bridge, and the cancellation of a free annual yoga class over concerns of cultural appropriation at the University of Ottawa — this article explores different perspectives of practicing postural yoga in North America. It is argued that postural yoga is evolving into a spiritually beneficial or profitable component of the lives of many religious “nones”, and that future contestations of the practice of postural yoga may require consideration of its value in the spiritual lives of a growing population who have no religion.

Keywords: Postural yoga; yogaphobia; religious “none(s)”; yoga on Burrard Street Bridge; yoga at University of Ottawa; spirituality of yoga; cultural appropriation of yoga

I. INTRODUCTION

Is postural yoga evolving beyond merely a fitness practice into an important component of the spiritual lives of religious “nones”¹ in British Columbia (BC) and perhaps elsewhere in North America? The rise of postural yoga in Western culture has sparked debates regarding the westernization of yogic practices. Research addressing such debates have primarily addressed Hindu and Christian perspectives, but have neglected to adequately investigate the spiritual meaning that postural yoga has taken in the lives of many religiously unaffiliated individuals in North America. Societal shifts towards a culture of authenticity, along with an increasing pervasiveness of ideals related to self-development and reaching one’s potential, have come to characterize a form of nonreligious spirituality that is centered around the self. Moreover, qualitative survey research has indicated that yoga is an activity many nonreligious millennials (defined here as those born in 1980 or later) are utilizing to engage in self-care and self-development. This suggests that some individuals find postural yoga to be spiritually beneficial or profitable, which in turn complicates discussions about whether this form of yoga is culturally appropriative of a Hindu practice.

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¹“Religious nones” refer to those who when asked what their religion is say “none,” or that they have no religion

The following article seeks to articulate how some of these yoga controversies have been playing out in Canada, and to outline why future incidents may become further complicated given the spiritual significance that postural yoga is taking on for many nonreligious individuals, particularly in terms of self-care and self-development. In an effort to do this, I will first discuss the methodology of a survey I conducted for a related research project, from which some relevant findings have been incorporated into this article. Second, the yoga debate will be explored, including an exploration of the rise of postural yoga in Europe and North America since the mid-nineteenth century and the perspectives of Christian and Hindu opponents to its spread in Western culture. This will be followed by an investigation of the characteristics of 1960s New Age “spiritual seekers,” and how values of these individuals have been transmitted into alternative spiritualities that are centered around the self. These characteristics will be incorporated with aspects of what philosopher Charles Taylor refers to as a ‘culture of authenticity,’ and some of my own survey findings. Collectively, these sources indicate that discovering one’s “authentic true self” (through reaching one’s potential and pursuing one’s calling or life path) and continuously working on self-development are primary goals for many millennials. Moreover, those who practice postural yoga do so not only to enhance their physical fitness, but also to engage in a self-care activity. With these factors in mind, the Hindu, Christian and religious “none’s” points of view are considered through media coverage of two controversial incidents: the backlash toward and subsequent cancellation of an event scheduled to take place on June 21, 2015, that would have entailed shutting down the Burrard Street Bridge in Vancouver for seven hours to allow a mass yoga class in celebration of International Day of Yoga; and the cancellation of a free annual yoga class at the University of Ottawa over concerns of culturally appropriating Hindu practices. I argue that while yoga is historically rooted in the Hindu tradition, the westernization of postural yoga is evolving into a spiritually valuable component of the lives of many religious “nones,” and that future contestations of the practice of postural yoga may require consideration of its value in the spiritual lives of a growing population who have no religion.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My argument incorporates findings from a survey project entitled “Investigating Contemporary Religiously Unaffiliated Spirituality in Cascadia” which builds on an earlier paper I wrote arguing that the phrase “spiritual but not religious” is no longer sufficient for capturing the spirituality of religiously unaffiliated individuals (Bahan, 2015). This paper was particularly focused on the millennial generation, who comprise a large portion of a growing population of religious “nones” in Canada and the U.S. The survey received ethics approval from the University of Victoria, as well as other post-secondary institutions that it was sent to. Participants received a Letter of Information for Implied Consent, and the survey (composed of 36 questions) was made anonymous and voluntary. It was distributed electronically through post-secondary institutions in British Columbia, Washington and Oregon from February to April 2016. Moreover, it was open to individuals of any gender, race, ethnicity, class or religion, but participants were required to have been born in the year 1980 or after and to have resided for at least one year in a city or town within British Columbia, Washington or Oregon since 2005. Using publicly available contact information, faculty and staff at various educational institutions in these regions were contacted and asked to forward the survey to their students. Utilizing a snowball sample method, I asked that participants pass along the survey information to other potential participants they know. 126 faculty and staff from 13 different institutions were emailed with the request to pass the survey link and its corresponding information to students in their current classes. Of those faculty and staff who were contacted in this way, 40 were in Oregon, 46 were in Washington, and 40 were in

British Columbia. Additionally, the survey and its information were distributed using Facebook group pages for various universities, yoga studios, and meditation groups in BC, Washington and Oregon. Readers were asked to share the post with their social media networks and, from these efforts, 253 individuals opened the survey and 225 met the participant criteria to complete it.² A majority of the participants who responded to this survey were white females under the age of 25, were predominantly nonreligious, and reported never participating in religious services or ceremonies; 81% of respondents reported living in the Vancouver Island/Coast region of British Columbia³. Overall, the findings from this study suggest that nonreligious millennials, at least in western British Columbia, are beginning to reject a “spiritual” label in addition to traditional religion, a trend that may become more prominent as these individuals age and instill their values and worldviews into the upbringing of their own children. Furthermore, the results of the survey suggest that millennial “nones” are engaging in activities related to nature and the self in order to foster a feeling of connectedness to something beyond themselves — a feeling that is often described through the various emotions it evokes, and which is understood as unrelated to religion, divinity, or even something metaphysical. These activities, such as practicing yoga and spending time in nature, are fulfilling the functions that religion has historically been identified as serving. Some questions in this survey investigated respondent’s engagement with postural yoga, and therefore are incorporated into the discussion later in this article.

It is important to note that the majority of participants who completed the survey were post-secondary students, and therefore may not be representative of the general population. According to data collected by the Canadian census since 1971, and the 2011 National Household Survey, college-educated Canadians are somewhat less likely to have a religious affiliation than Canadians without a college degree. This difference, however, has narrowed over time, from an eight-point gap in 1971 (12% of college graduates vs. 4% of those with less education) to a two-point gap in 2011 (23% of college graduates vs. 21% of those without a college degree) (Pew Research Center, 2013). Given this, the fact that most participants were post-secondary students does not necessarily mean that the percentage of those who reported having no religion is misrepresentative of the population in western British Columbia.

Lastly, before moving on to discuss the contemporary yoga debate, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of religion and spirituality. Scholars have demonstrated a multitude of approaches to understanding, defining, and discussing the terms “spirituality” and “religion”. For the purposes of this article, religion may be understood as historically consistent and unified social systems of beliefs, practices and rituals related to “the sacred,” which enhance the wonder of the world while offering explanations for evil, and are often related to the afterlife and divinity (Bramadat, 2005; Arnal, 2000; Tweed, 2006). Alternatively, spirituality is a personal and usually individual phenomenon that is largely independent of institutional settings, whereby a set of qualities may be cultivated in accordance with self-development or ‘self care.’ This may be done by either drawing on multiple faith traditions or through secular activities often including nature, such that a sense of healing or affirmation of the transcendent, their community, or themselves may be experienced (Bahan, 2015; Chandler, 2008; Killen & Silk, 2004; Shibley, 2008). With these

²The first questions of the survey asked in what year, after 1980, the participant was born, and if they had resided in a city or town in British Columbia, Washington or Oregon for at least one year prior to completing the survey; this was to ensure the respondent met the participation criteria. If the respondent indicated that they did not fulfill both of these requirements, the survey automatically ended to prevent them from completing the remainder of the survey questions.

³The fact that most survey respondents were female and under the age of 25 is not necessarily surprising, given that this survey was distributed and advertised in person to several undergraduate classes at the University of Victoria, which likely resulted in many of these students responding to the survey. At the University of Victoria, the male to female ratio for students is 40% to 60% respectively, according to the University of Victoria Mini Viewbook, <https://www.uvic.ca/assets/documents/pdfs/MiniViewbook.pdf>

factors in mind, this article will now focus on the rise of postural yoga in Europe and North America, and the subsequent debate among Christian and Hindu opponents to its popularity and practice in Western culture.

I. The Contemporary Yoga Debate

The popularization of postural yoga in North America and Europe has given rise to a growing opposition movement from both Christian and Hindu protesters who argue that yoga is essentially Hindu (Jain, 2014). Scholar Jain (2014) identifies these two oppositional perspectives as the “Christian yogophobic” position and the “Hindu origins” position. Christian protesters argue that yoga is incompatible with Christianity because of its Hindu origins, and in its popularized forms poses a threat to the Christian essence of American culture (Jain, 2014). Conversely, Hindu protesters criticize the popularization of contemporary yoga forms for failing to acknowledge their Hindu origins and therefore illegitimately co-opting yoga as a product for enhancing well-being and turning a profit (Jain, 2014). The problematic nature of these arguments has been articulated by Jain, who suggests that these positions are both polemical and prescriptive, and are therefore indicative of religious fundamentalist agendas which dictate narrow ideas of how an authentic Christian or Hindu *should* be religious. These two positions assume a conception of yoga as a static homogenous system, which Westerners have been fooled into conceiving as merely a fitness regime by a consumer marketplace (Jain, 2012). While the yogophobic and Hindu origins positions articulate perspectives of the contemporary yoga debate, it is important to note from the outset that these two positions are not representative of all Hindus or Christians, many among whom perceive the popularization of postural yoga to be unproblematic. These positions will now be contextualized through a brief overview of the rise of postural yoga in Europe and North America since the mid-nineteenth century.

The image one has of yoga practitioners today typically includes individuals who gather with their yoga mats and spandex yoga attire to engage in sequences of *āsana*, or postures, that are, through *pranayama* or “breathing exercises,” synchronized with the breath (Jain, 2014). Postural yoga classes of this nature can be found in nearly every city of the Western world today, and increasingly in the Middle East, Asia, South and Central America, and Australasia (Singleton, 2010). Despite its worldwide popularity and growth as a multibillion dollar business, scholar Mark Singleton (2010) explains that postural yoga has never been the primary aspect of any traditional Indian yoga practice. Rather, transnational postural yoga practices are a new phenomenon and a product of contemporary consumer culture (Singleton, 2010; Jain, 2014). In the late 1800s, a mainly Anglophone yoga revival began in India, with new techniques and theories beginning to emerge primarily under the teaching of Swami Vivekanada (1863-1902) (Singleton, 2010; Jain, 2012). Vivekanada was one of several early modern yoga reformers who sought to reconstruct yoga as a refined holistic and spiritual Indian system, censoring pre-colonial yoga body practices to align with his modern philosophical interpretation of the *Yoga Sutra* and Hindu nondualist thought (Jain, 2012). While Vivekanada is known for disseminating yoga to Americans, the yoga he promoted was very different from the popularized postural forms seen today (Jain, 2012). At the time of Vivekanada in the late nineteenth century, *āsana* (postures) and other techniques associated with hatha yoga were seen as distasteful and unsuitable as compared to yoga’s philosophical and meditative techniques that are often equated with raja yoga (Singleton, 2010; Jain, 2014). Postural yoga practices were associated with the term *yogin* or *yogi*, a term that was employed loosely to refer to a variety of ascetics, magicians, and street performers, and which came to represent hatha yoga’s backwardness, superstition, and incompatibility with the Hindu religion (Singleton, 2010). During the nineteenth century, quasi-religious forms of physical culture spread from Europe to

India, and fueled a reinvention of *āsana* as a Hindu expression of exercise, which later found its way back to Europe and North America and merged with forms of “esoteric gymnastics,” an activity that had garnered popularity independently from yoga traditions in Europe and America since the mid-nineteenth century (Singleton, 2010). Around this time, Christian leaders began warning that yoga, despite various understandings of its exact nature, represented a Hindu religious movement that posed a threat to Christian identities and commitments (Jain, 2014). The reinvention of *āsana* as established modes of stretching and relaxing gave rise to postural yoga in the twentieth century. Given this, postural yoga is the result of what Singleton (2010) refers to as “a dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West and the various discourses of ‘modern’ Hindu yoga,” reminiscent of techniques developed during the late nineteenth century yoga revival (p. 5).

As indicated by Jain, Hindu protesters in the contemporary yoga debate have rooted their objections in Western stereotypes about Indian people and culture, which leads to an omission of acknowledging yoga’s Hindu origins by postural yoga practitioners (Singleton, 2010). They argue that the body-centered hatha yoga practices that were reconstructed to assimilate Western fitness practices into indigenous Indian fitness techniques were recognized by the West for their partly Hindu origins, unlike the popularized forms of postural yoga today (Jain, 2014). The Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a Minneapolis-based organization that initiated the “Take Back Yoga — Bringing to Light Yoga’s Hindu Roots” campaign in January 2010, released an official statement that brought attention to problematic stereotypes that view Hinduism as nothing but “caste, cows and curry,” which subsequently make Hinduism “unmarketable.” (Jain, 2014). Instead, according to HAF, yoga is marketed as a practice that is “spiritual but not religious” and beneficial for both physical and mental health (Jain, 2014). Furthermore, the HAF has described postural yoga practitioners as “self-indulgent appropriators of Yoga” who practice yoga forms steeped in “new age blather” (Jain, 2014). Aspects of the Hindu origins perspective are shared with other groups as well, including several American Christian leaders who see the rise of postural yoga in Western culture as a threat to the Christian faith.

The New Age movement has been criticized in Christian yogaphobic rhetoric by Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Mohler considers the popularization of yoga to be a symptom of the “post-modern confusion of America,” alluding to a conception of American culture that is essentially Christian and which is under threat from Hindu and New Age traditions (Jain, 2014, 2014). Mohler warns that the United States is becoming a “nation of Hindus,” based on his interpretation of a 2008 Pew Forum survey that indicated Americans are becoming increasingly open to the idea that “many religions can lead to eternal life” (Jain, 2014, p. 440). His views express a desire to return to an historical period where Christianity dominated American political and social spheres, and traditions such as Hinduism and New Age practices were marginalized in society (Jain, 2014). The fear and suspicion of yoga promoted by Albert Mohler has been echoed by other religious leaders in America, including Mark Driscoll, pastor of the Mars Hill megachurch in Seattle, Washington who in 2010 stated that:

Yoga is demonic. . . It’s absolute paganism. . . Yoga and meditation and Easternism is [sic] all opening to demonism. . . if you just sign up for a little yoga class, you’re signing up for a little demon class. That’s what you’re doing. And Satan doesn’t care if you stretch as long as you go to hell (Jain, 2014, p. 137-138).

While the Christian yogaphobic position has garnered more attention over recent years, many Christians in North America and Europe have alternatively adapted postural yoga into a unique Christian religious practice. In “Christian yoga,” *āsanas* are taught with a meditative focus on the word of God, and are utilized to intensify practitioners’ relationship with Jesus (Alvarez,

2010). In contrast to the yogophobic views of figures such as Mohler and Driscoll, Christian yoga instructor Amy Russell explains that “one of the things that most Christians and most people don’t get is that yoga is not a religion. . . it does not belong to Hinduism any more than it belongs to Christianity” (Alvarez, 2010). Furthermore, reverend Anthony Randazzo, pastor at Notre Dame Roman Catholic Church in New Jersey, began a serious practice of yoga ten years after becoming a priest, and has even started teaching yoga at his church. Rather than Sanskrit chants swaying him from Christ, Randazzo has stated he actually feels “more deeply rooted in the Christian faith than ever” (Alvarez, 2010). A growing prevalence of Christian yoga classes in America demonstrates that not all Christians view their faith and their yoga practice as incompatible. The anxiety around yoga as expressed by Christian yogophobic protesters comes from the view that practicing yoga, given its Hindu origins, conflicts with Christian doctrine, ethos and worldviews and therefore contradicts Christian commitments and may even threaten the Christian essence of American culture (Jain, 2012, 2014).

Hindu origins protesters argue that the co-opting of yoga in Western culture for profit, and denial of yoga’s Hindu origins as a market-strategy, have consequently corrupted an otherwise authentic Hindu system of practice (Jain, 2012). These two positions are similar in that they both argue that postural yoga is essentially a Hindu practice. However, the problematic nature of this point differs between proponents of the Hindu origins position versus the Christian yogophobic position. For those arguing the Hindu origins perspective of the yoga debate, most notably by the HAF, the issue centers around a denial of yoga’s Hindu nature in contemporary Western yoga practices and products, and further, that this lack of recognition stems from stereotypes and discriminatory views of Hindus maintained in North American and European cultures. Alternatively, those arguing the Christian yogophobic side of the debate are concerned with yoga practices corrupting the Christian faith at an individual level and, for some Christian leaders in the United States, at a national level as well; this position may also be seen as maintaining discriminatory views of Hinduism. These two positions assume a conception of yoga as a static homogenous system, insofar as they both argue that the Hindu essence of the earliest forms of yoga which emerged as part of the Hindu religion, has remained unchanged in contemporary postural practices despite yoga’s present disguise as a fitness regime (Jain, 2012). However, as Jain (2012) argues, the history and development of yoga is anything but homogenous and unchanging. Rather, it is expressed in various brands, including Iyengar, Ashtanga and Bikram yoga practices, is practiced by both religious and non-religious individuals, and is viewed by many to be compatible with any religious tradition that values health and well-being and accepts a modern biomedical perspective on the human body. These qualities of contemporary postural yoga made it very popular among New Age ‘spiritual seekers’ in the 1960s, from whom many values have been transmitted into alternative spiritual forms among religious “nones” in western British Columbia; to this topic, the focus of this article will now turn.

II. The Value of Postural Yoga in the Lives of Religious “Nones”

Over recent decades, individuals in North America and particularly in Canada have been straying from mainstream religion at a rate that has piqued the curiosity of scholars interested in understanding the spiritual needs and lives of this population. Prior to 1971, less than 1 % of the Canadian population reported having no religion (i.e. were religious “nones,”) but by 2011, 29% of Canadians born between 1987 and 1995 and approximately 25% of the Canadian population overall reported this way (Statistics Canada, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2013). Religious “nones” are particularly concentrated in the province of British Columbia, with nearly half of the provincial population indicating they had no religion in 2011, and only 20 % both identifying with and

participating in traditional religious institutions (Shibley, 2008). Similarly, this trend is seen in the U.S.A. (though to a lesser extent) with religious “nones” being concentrated in the Pacific Northwestern states of Washington and Oregon. This region has always been dominated by an “unchurched” or nonreligious population, with its religious adherence rate reaching only 34.4% in 1970 — the United States as a nation reached a 34.4% adherence rate in 1890 (Killen, 2004). According to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008, “nones” increased from 8.1% of the U.S. population in 1990 to 15% in 2008 (jumping from 14 to 34 million); 22% of young Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 self reported as having no religion (Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun & Navarro-Rivera, 2009). In comparison, one quarter of the population in Washington and Oregon identified this way (Shibley, 2004, 2008). Given the predominance of non-religiosity in the Pacific Northwest, it is commonly assumed that these individuals are disinterested in religion and spirituality. However, research has shown that many individuals who do not identify with traditional religion do cultivate spirituality in their lives (Shibley, 2004, 2008; Soden, 2004). Moreover, it is estimated that only 5 to 7% of Oregon and Washington’s populations, and 14% of British Columbians, identify as atheist (suggesting these individuals are both nonreligious and nonspiritual) (Shibley, 2008). For Canadian teens in particular, the percentage of those identifying as atheist jumped from 6 to 16% between the 1980s and 2011, yet even among these individuals, 1 in 7 reported having “spiritual needs” (Bibby, 2009). Various studies looking at religiously unaffiliated millennials reveal that these individuals place importance on spiritual growth, have spiritual needs, or commit to integrating spirituality into their lives (Bibby, 2009).

In the Pacific Northwest, this has meant that individual spiritual quests have resulted in various expressions of New Age spiritualities, which emerged out of the eclectic spiritual practices of ‘spiritual seekers’. These range from neo-paganism, metaphysics, channeling, and “New Spirituality,” all of which center around a belief that the self is “sacred” (Shibley, 2009; Shibley, 2008). This can be understood to mean that individuals feel a sense of connectedness to something beyond oneself (the ‘something’ is perhaps what has traditionally been understood as “the sacred”), and in this form the ‘sacred’ is perceived as something that is internal and accessed through discovering one’s “authentic true self” (i.e. discovering the essence of whom one really is and pursuing an individual calling or reaching one’s potential). The New Age movement was a product of the 1960’s counterculture, characterized by post-war civil unrest and a growing trend to reject the restrictive dogmas associated with institutionalized religion in favour of an independent spiritually awakened way of living; this trend was subsequently carried forward among the Baby Boomer generation (Bahan, 2015; Chandler, 2008). The New Age spirituality that emerged incorporated aspects of Eastern religious teachings that emphasized individual enlightenment, and promoted alternative medical practices focused on holistic healing. Furthermore, the New Age movement instilled values of self-care and self-exploration into mainstream culture (Chandler, 2008). As such, the orientation of contemporary New Age and alternative spiritualists is to transform the human condition, uncover one’s “authentic self,” and encourage individual spirituality and enlightenment over the dogma of institutionalized traditional religions; personal enlightenment is seen as a precursor to societal change (Shibley, 2004, 2008).

Given that postural yoga’s central feature is a body-centered approach to self-development — an approach that has been valorized in capitalist consumer culture — its popularity among the religiously unaffiliated in Europe and North America as a means for self-care and personal development is not surprising (Jain, 2014). Popular brands of postural yoga include Iyengar yoga which incorporates the use of fitness tools, Ashtanga yoga which is characterized by its emphasis on the sequential flow from one posture to another, and Bikram yoga where single sequence postures are performed in a room heated to one hundred and five degrees Fahrenheit with 40% humidity (Jain, 2012). Each of these brands use postures synchronized with the breath to achieve

modern ideals of physical fitness and health (Jain, 2012). While none of these brands are linked to any conventional religious orientation, they tend to take place in yoga studios and may be seen to represent distinct flavours of a broader yoga culture. Given this, the experience of other postural yoga practitioners outside of these brands may be considered more casual, including those who take yoga classes at their local gym or who practice at home following instructional videos online. For many religious “nones” in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere in North America, postural yoga has promoted a popular nonreligious means of fostering self-development, enhancing one’s overall health, and even facilitating the discovery of one’s “authentic true self.”

These ideals are reflective of some of the broader defining changes of modernity effecting Western society; renowned philosopher Charles Taylor refers to this as a culture of authenticity (Taylor, 1991). Since the 1960s, the growth of individualism and self-fulfillment as ideals has resulted in tendencies to focus on the self while simultaneously shutting out awareness of issues or concerns that transcend the self, including those which are religious, political or historical (Taylor, 1991). While this form of individualism has been criticized by academics, including Allan Bloom and Christopher Lasch, the latter of whom refers to this as a “culture of narcissism,” Taylor explains that the moral ideal behind self-fulfillment is that of being true to oneself, insofar as individuals feel their life may be wasted or unfulfilled if they do not pursue what they believe they are called to do (Taylor, 1991). This view supports a liberal society that must remain neutral on questions of what constitutes living a good life, in order for individuals to resolve this question in their own way (Taylor, 1991). What is particularly new about this is that, as a society, views of morality and fulfillment are less linked to a connection with a source such as God or the Idea of the Good, and more connected to a source found within the depths of our individual selves (Taylor, 1991).

The values of self-care and self-exploration from the New Age movement, and the societal shift towards a focus on individual self-fulfillment, are both ideas consistent with findings from my own survey research investigating spirituality and the importance of postural yoga in the lives of predominantly nonreligious millennials in western British Columbia. According to this research, 80.44% of 179 respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed to the statement “it is important to me to discover my authentic true self.” Moreover, 92.78% of 180 respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement “it is important to me to continuously work on self-development.” Lastly, of 80 respondents, 61.73 and 50.62% reported that their motivation for practicing some form of yoga was “to engage in a self-care activity” or “to maintain a sense of balance in my life,” respectively. These responses suggest that, at least among millennials in western BC, many young individuals view constructing “the self” as quite important. Moreover, engaging in some form of yoga, even if it is once or twice a week, seems to be a means for engaging in such self-care, especially for religiously unaffiliated individuals who see yoga as a nonreligious activity. These points of view will now be considered, along with those of the Hindu origins position and the Christian yogaphobic position, through an analysis of two controversial incidents in Vancouver and Ottawa in 2015.

III. A SPIRITUAL PROFIT FOR WESTERN YOGIS?

I. Yoga Controversies at the Burrard Street Bridge and the University of Ottawa

“Only in Vancouver? Burrard Bridge to close for mass yoga class;” was the title of a *CBC* article from June 5, 2015 which reiterated BC Premier Christy Clark’s announcement earlier that day that Vancouver’s Burrard Street Bridge would be closing for seven hours on June 21 to host a one-hour yoga session and the largest International Day of Yoga event outside of India (*CBC*

News, 2015). An article by the Globe and Mail explains that Ms. Clark conceived of the event following a visit with India's Prime Minister, as a means of strengthening ties between Canada and India and celebrating International Day of Yoga with more than 100 other countries around the world (Bailey, 2015). The week following the announcement saw a great deal of backlash and politicization of the event, particularly regarding the expected \$150,000 cost of the Burrard Street closure, and the inherent disrespect of holding the event on National Aboriginal Day (Bailey, 2015). An interview with Terry McBride, the CEO of yoga-studio company YYoga, explained that the Burrard Street Bridge was intended to be a symbolic transformation of a busy place into a space for reflection and pause, as is done in Times Square for International Day of Yoga in New York (Bailey, 2015). Furthermore, McBride explained that the event was never intended to take away from Aboriginal celebrations at Trout Lake, which would have taken place in the afternoon long after the morning yoga class had been conducted (Bailey, 2015). Moreover, ethical concerns were raised by IntegrityBC regarding Lululemon's sponsorship of the event, given that the company had previously made donations to the Liberal Party (CTV News, 2015). By June 12, event sponsors Lululemon, YYoga and Altagas (a liquefied natural gas sponsor who also stirred controversy among BC environmentalists) announced they were backing out as a result of the backlash and planned protests against the event, explaining that they were responding to the community's concerns and would be exploring other options to celebrate International Day of Yoga (Crawford, 2015).

A few months later in November, the cancellation of another yoga event in Ottawa made numerous headlines and received international backlash. Yoga instructor Jennifer Scharf, who had led a free weekly yoga class for about 60 students at the University of Ottawa since 2008, was told her class was cancelled due to concerns over cultural appropriation (Helmer, 2015). The class was run through The Centre for Students with Disabilities, which stated that because yoga practices come from cultures which "have experienced oppression, cultural genocide and diasporas due to colonialism and western supremacy... we need to be mindful of... how we express ourselves while practicing yoga" (Helmer, 2015; Kozicka, 2015). President of the Student Federation Romeo Ahimakin explained that the yoga session was undergoing consultations to make it more accessible and inclusive "to certain groups of people that feel left out in yoga-like spaces," and to conduct the sessions in a way that "students are aware of where the spiritual and cultural aspects come from" (Helmer, 2015). This was missing the point according to Scharf, who explained that the purpose of the class was to have students become more mindful of their physical health, not to educate them on "ancient yogi scripture." Scharf even offered to rename the class "mindful stretching," a proposal that was denied over issues of finding an accurate French translation (Helmer, 2015). The cancellation of the event sparked international backlash, primarily on social media over what was seen as an overuse of political correctness (Duffy, 2015). For example, a tweet by Canadian Conservative David Frum stated "Yes, so unacceptable the way Indians appropriated European calisthenics to create modern yoga" (Duffy, 2015); this comment refers to the history of postural yoga's rise in the West as a product of both European and Indian influences. The incident brought to light different perspectives on the popularization of postural yoga in Canada. For example, Andrew Foote of CBC discussed this issue with a husband and wife at the Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton (both of whom practice or teach yoga), who stated that they did not believe yoga taught by a non-Hindu instructor was culturally insensitive, that yoga is more a spiritual than religious practice, and that the benefits reaped by practitioners outweighs issues concerning yoga's commercialization (Foote, 2015). In January, the free yoga sessions were brought back to the University of Ottawa under new instructor Priya Shah (Helmer, 2016). Shah reported to the Toronto Sun that she admits wondering whether she was hired to instruct the yoga classes because she is Indian (Helmer, 2016).

The proposed Burrard Street Bridge yoga event and the temporary cancellation of free yoga classes at the University of Ottawa are both concerned, at least in part, with acknowledging yoga's historical roots in the Hindu tradition. Christy Clark proposed using the Burrard Street Bridge to celebrate International Day of Yoga and pay tribute to Canada's relationship with India, recognized as the birthplace of yoga. The student federation at the University of Ottawa was concerned with culturally appropriating a traditional Hindu practice without acknowledging its Hindu roots, and therefore resumed the classes under the leadership of a young Indian woman who presumably was believed to provide a more "inclusive" and culturally sensitive yoga experience. In these ways, both incidents are supportive of the Hindu origins and the Christian yogaphobic positions that the practice of yoga, even Western adapted postural yoga, is essentially a Hindu practice. Furthermore, both events demonstrate instances of yoga being perceived as insensitive to the beliefs of spiritual or religious traditions such as Christianity (though this view was not explicitly covered by the media), Hinduism, or Indigenous practices; for these reasons, both events received extensive backlash. However, these events did not necessarily discourage the practice of postural yoga in the West, as the Hindu origins and Christian yogaphobic positions might desire. While there are various perspectives espoused in the coverage of these two yoga incidents, there is little to no consideration given to how the decisions related to these events impacted the yoga practitioners who participated (or would have participated) in these classes, which neglects the spiritual importance and value of yoga to non-Hindu practitioners and, more specifically, the growing population of those with no religion.

II. The Meaning of Postural Yoga for Religious "Nones"

Postural yoga evolved from both Indian and European cultural influences which, as has been discussed in this article, complicates questions of whether this contemporary form of yoga is purely a Hindu practice. It is important to recognize that nonreligious yoga practitioners in Canada represent a privileged population, and it is not my intent to suggest that this group should determine whether or not postural yoga — including those who participated or would have participated in the classes at the University of Ottawa and on the Burrard Street Bridge — is culturally acceptable or appropriated. Rather, my hope is to acknowledge that postural yoga provides physical, mental and even spiritual benefits to this nonreligious population, particularly in terms of self-care. The actions taken by the student federation at the University of Ottawa suggest that incorporating more Hindu culture into their free yoga class (by hiring a yoga instructor who is Indian) makes it more inclusive. While this action is sensitive to Hindu yoga practitioners, it also neglects the possibility that, for those who participated in the class under the instruction of Jennifer Scharf, did so in part to engage in a nonreligious form of self-care and self-development. Moreover, critics of the cancelled mass yoga event in Vancouver saw the closure of the Burrard Street Bridge as unnecessary for hundreds of people to engage in a fitness practice, and as disrespectful for taking attention away from more important spiritual celebrations for National Aboriginal Day. While the recognition and celebration of Indigenous peoples in BC are very important, this reaction similarly negates the possibility that engaging in a mass yoga class in celebration of International Day of Yoga with hundreds of other countries around the world would be an experience of great personal value for many, and an opportunity to collectively embrace the essence of individual self-development and self-fulfillment that have become central values in the modern age. Given that Vancouver is part of a region home to the largest population of religious "nones" in North America, where alternative spiritual forms centered around a belief that the self is of central importance are highly prevalent, I believe this is a possibility deserving of consideration. Furthermore, my survey research is beginning to reveal that yoga is spiritually

meaningful for many who are religiously unaffiliated because it serves as a medium for self care and self-development, and given that the extensive growth of North America's "no religion" population shows no indication of subsiding, it seems plausible that consideration of yoga's spiritual meaning for religious "nones" will eventually be necessary. With these factors in mind, it is evident that postural yoga is evolving beyond merely a fitness practice and into a spiritually valuable component of the spiritual lives of religious "nones" in BC, and perhaps elsewhere in North America. For the 60 or so students who participated in Jennifer Scharf's free yoga class at the University of Ottawa, or the hundreds of practitioners who intended to gather to practice yoga together on the Burrard Street Bridge, the cancellation of these events impacted their ability to foster their spirituality through a nonreligious act of self-development. Given this, and the likelihood that discovering one's "authentic true self" is a reflection of a broader societal shift towards a culture of authenticity in the modern age, future incidents contesting the practice of postural yoga should, and perhaps eventually will have to, take into consideration its value and importance in the spiritual lives of a growing population who have no religion.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rise of postural yoga in the West since the mid-nineteenth century has subsequently given rise to an ongoing yoga debate. Christian opponents to the popularization of postural yoga maintain that practicing yoga, given its Hindu origins, conflicts with Christian doctrine and contradicts Christian commitments, while proponents of the Hindu origins perspective argue that postural yoga has been co-opted in the Western world for profit and in doing so, has denied yoga's Hindu origins as a market-strategy (Jain, 2012). These two positions assume a conception of yoga as a static homogenous system, which scholars Jain and Singleton have demonstrated is an inaccurate claim. Furthermore, societal shifts towards a culture of authenticity and the increasing pervasiveness of New Age ideals to transform the human condition, uncover one's authentic self, and empower individuals over the dogma of traditional religions, are reflected in the alternative spiritualities in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere in North America. The backlash and subsequent cancellation of the proposed closure of the Burrard Street Bridge in Vancouver for yoga, and the cancellation of a free yoga class over issues of cultural appropriation, demonstrate differing perspectives on whether postural yoga is, or should be, merely a secular fitness practice. Moreover, both events demonstrate instances of yoga being perceived as insensitive to the beliefs of spiritual or religious traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, or Indigenous practices. They do not, however, take into consideration the spiritual importance and value of yoga to non-Hindu practitioners and, more specifically, the growing population of those with no religion. While it is true that yoga is historically rooted in the Hindu tradition, postural yoga has never been the primary aspect of any traditional Indian yoga practice. Given this, over the past 20-30 years, postural yoga has become a popular medium for those who are religiously unaffiliated to nurture and develop their sense of self, which modern societal ideals directly relate to ideas of living an authentic life. In this way, postural yoga is taking on its own spiritual meaning in the lives of religious "nones," and future incidents contesting the practice of postural yoga should, and perhaps eventually will have to, take into consideration its importance in the spiritual lives of a growing population who have no religion.

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