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Hinduism, Yoga and the Christian

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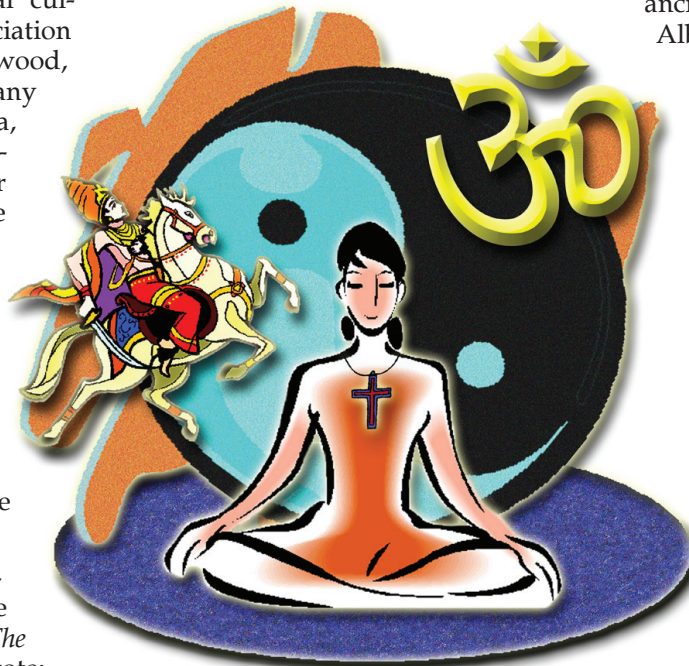
Hinduism, the primary religion of the subcontinent of India, has gained a firm foothold and wide acceptance in the United States since first attracting significant attention in the 19th century. Images of Hindu "holy men" are familiar in modern popular culture, due to their frequent association with those among the Hollywood, music, and literary set. And many Americans have taken up yoga, which is inextricably intertwined with Hinduism, for physical exercise. Some churches even offer yoga classes, going so far as to call it "Christian yoga."

But before taking a yoga class, the discerning Christian needs to consider the implications of yoga and whether it can be integrated into one's daily walk with the Lord Jesus.

No examination of yoga's influence and impact can exclude Hinduism. In his 1989 book, *The New Age Cult*, Walter Martin wrote:

"The great English apologist and writer C. S. Lewis saw the battle lines clearly drawn. He noted that in the final conflict between religions, Hinduism and Christianity would offer the only viable options because Hinduism

absorbs all religious systems, and Christianity excludes all others, maintaining the supremacy of the claims of Jesus Christ."¹



Hinduism has no identifiable founder and it does not require a belief in any god. It tends to absorb — or try to absorb — elements from other religions. The conventional wisdom is that Hinduism is the most ancient world religion. But Mark Albrecht writes:

"Modern scholarship has established that the earliest vestiges of the Hindu religion are to be found in the scripture known as the *Rig Veda*, which was probably compiled about 1500 B.C. at the earliest. This makes Hinduism the world's second oldest religion after Judaism, which was established by God's covenant with Abraham, somewhere between 2000 to 1800 B.C."²

Another states:

"Hinduism is not really one religion, but many religions that interact and

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67. Paramahansa Yogananda, *Why God Permits Evil and How To Rise Above It*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 2004, pp. 45-46.

68. The Bible clearly states that, "All unrighteousness is sin" (1 John 5:17).

69. Paramhansa Yogananda, *Karma and Reincarnation*. Nevada City, Calif.: Crystal Clarity Publishers, 2007, pg. 53.

70. Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998, pg. 197.

71. *Man's Eternal Quest*, op. cit., 2nd edition, pg. 300, italic in original.

72. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, op. cit., chapter 49, pg. 558.

73. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, translated by Mahadev Desai. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1983, pg. 119. An unabridged republication of the edition published by Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C., 1948, under the title *Gandhi's Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

74. Philip Graham Ryken, *Is Jesus the Only Way?* Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999, pp. 10, 11, italic in original.

75. *Ibid.*, pg. 37.

76. Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Yoga of Jesus: Understanding the Hidden Teachings of*

the Gospels, Selections from the writings of Paramahansa Yogananda. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 2007, pg. 1. This book is, in the main, excerpts from the 2-volume set by Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*.

77. *Ibid.*, pg. 2, italics in original.

78. *Ibid.*, pg. 5, italics in original.

79. *Ibid.*, pg. 4.

80. *Man's Eternal Quest*, op. cit., 2nd edition, pg. 235.

81. *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*, op. cit., Vol. I, pg. xxi, italics in original.

82. *Man's Eternal Quest*, op. cit., 2nd edition, pg. 292.

83. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, op. cit., chapter 34, pg. 362, italics in original.

84. *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*, op. cit., Vol. II, Discourse 68, pg. 1336.

85. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, Discourse 48, pg. 931.

86. *The Yoga of Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 13.

87. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, op. cit., chapter 49, pg. 568.

88. *Paramahansa Yogananda In Memoriam: Personal Accounts of the Master's Final Days*, op. cit., pg. 69. The entire text of Yogananda's short speech is given in this book. This book contains much good biographical material about Yogananda.

89. See Ronald Enroth, editor, *Evangelizing the Cults: How to Share Jesus with Children, Parents, Neighbors, and Friends Who Are Involved in a Cult*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Vine Books, 1990, pg. 21. This specific is taken from the chapter on "Hinduism" by Mark Albrecht.

90. *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*, op. cit., Vol. I, Discourse 18, pg. 308.

91. *Paramahansa Yogananda In Memoriam: Personal Accounts of the Master's Final Days*, op. cit., pp. 12, 32.

92. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.

93. *Ibid.*, pg. 68, emphasis added.

94. This book consistently takes great pains to make it appear that Yogananda knew about and gave intimations of his coming demise. However, from what he said here in his speech, it certainly doesn't sound like it. Otherwise, why would he point out the premature deaths of American millionaires?

95. "Swami Yogananda and the Self-Realization Fellowship," op. cit., pg. 41.

96. *The Yoga of Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 20, this statement rendered in italics in the book.

97. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on False Teaching in the Church*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1988, pg. 5, italics in original.

YOGA AND THE CHRISTIAN

(continued from page 1)

blend with one another. There is no known founder of Hinduism, no credal statements of faith to sign and no agreed-upon authority. In fact, one can be a good Hindu and believe in one god, many gods or no god at all!"³

Christian researchers John Ankerberg and John Weldon state:

"In its most simple definition, Hinduism may be defined as the religious beliefs and practices common to India. Defining Hinduism in a more precise manner is difficult because of the wide number of practices and teachings it offers."⁴

The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions says Hinduism is "The major continuing and connected religions of India, which have now spread throughout the world."⁵

It also says, "About 80 per cent of India's approx. one billion people

regard themselves as Hindu, and there are about 30 million Hindus elsewhere in the world."⁶

Hinduism does have scriptures and core beliefs. Hindu scriptures include the four Vedas; their commentaries, called the Upanishads (also known as Vedanta, "the last of the Vedas"); the Mahabharata (of which the Bhagavad Gita is a small portion); the Ramayana; and other lesser books.

One of the popular gods within Hinduism's pantheon is Krishna, the main character in the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita is sometimes called "the Gita" and, as noted above, is a portion of the larger Hindu epic called the Mahabharata.

As far as "core beliefs," Fritz Ride-nour states, "There are, however, two foundational assumptions that almost all Hindus believe without question: reincarnation and karma."⁷ Christian researcher Elliot Miller adds a third: "practice of some form of yoga."⁸

Reincarnation is the belief that, after death, one's soul is recycled in

another body — human, animal, or insect. Karma is the law of cause and effect, involving the idea that a person must somehow pay for the wrongs they have done, either in this life or the next. Hinduism also teaches the caste (or class) system, although some Hindus, such as Gandhi, opposed it. Seminary professor George Braswell explains:

"According to the Laws of Manu [a portion of the Hindu scriptures] the caste system is justified by the belief in Karma and the transmigration of souls. Hindus are not in their social position by accident, and there is no injustice in being in any caste. One gets what one merits. ... The caste system still remains in India."⁹

Braswell further describes the five broad castes within Hinduism:

1. "The *Brahmin* caste is the most privileged one. It is the protector and transmitter of the Veda scriptures and has general oversight of society."

2. "The *warrior* caste (Kshatriya) is the governing class. The kings, princes, politicians, army, and police populate this group. They make policy, collect taxes, and defend the people while recognizing the supremacy of the Brahmin in faith and moral instruction."

3. "The *Vaisya* is the third caste. It includes the middle class occupations, including merchants, traders, teachers, and craftsmen."

4. "The *Sudra* class is composed of farmers, peasants, and manual laborers."

5. "Another caste which has developed is called the *outcaste* or the untouchables. The untouchables are aliens who moved into India. They have little association with the other four castes. They perform such jobs as washing clothes, making shoes, and cremating the dead. They have no access to the religious rituals of the other castes."¹⁰

Most, if not all, Hindus are vegetarians and many believe in and practice astrology. Hindu religion bars the slaughter of cattle and the consumption of beef.¹¹ Regarding astrology, one source states, "In Hinduism, decision-making on all serious matters (e.g. the date and time of a wedding) and on many everyday matters is referred to astrology."¹²

HINDUISM COMES TO AMERICA

At least three factors contributed to Hinduism's rise to prominence in America in the 18th century. Concerning the first, Ridenour says:

"Hindu ideas began to influence Western thought in the mid-nineteenth century when Ralph Waldo Emerson, a leading American exponent of transcendentalism, steeped himself in Hindu writings. His doctrine of the 'Oversoul' was an expression of pantheism Henry David Thoreau, a contemporary of Emerson and fellow transcendentalist, was inspired by the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita* when he

wrote *Walden* and some of his other books."¹³

A second factor was the rise of the mind science religions, such as Christian Science and Unity, and other new religions, such as Theosophy, which borrowed from Hinduism.

A third factor arose in 1893. L.T. Jeyachandran describes it:

"The most memorable event that inaugurated the entry of Hindu thought into the West was the visit to the United States of Swami Vivekananda in 1893 when he took by storm the World Congress on Religions in Chicago. He began his speech with the politically correct phrase 'Brothers and sisters,' which was greeted by several minutes of thunderous applause. ... In his interaction with Christians at this conference, Swami Vivekananda also denied the existence of sin, because all reality was one and therefore there could be no *final* distinction between right and wrong. He is supposed to have made the memorable statement 'It is sinful to call man a sinner.' He substantiated his position by positing the ultimate unity of all things, including apparently conflicting beliefs."¹⁴

The next prominent guru was Swami Yogananda,¹⁵ who came to the United States in 1920, bringing his practice of *kriya yoga* with him. He has been called "the Father of Yoga in the West."¹⁶ Yogananda's authorized organization, Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), continues to publish his writings and speeches.

In the latter half of the 20th century, other gurus came to America. Among them were Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who developed the *yoga* technique of Transcendental Meditation; Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who gave impetus to the Hare Krishna movement in America; Guru Maharaj Ji, who was associated with the Divine Light Mission; Guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, whom the late cult expert Walter Martin said was "indisputably the preeminent Eastern guru of the 1980s."¹⁷

The modern day New Age movement has continued the influence of Hinduism, as have such contemporary New Age gurus as Deepak Chopra and Shirley MacLaine.

BREAKING DOWN HINDUISM

Hinduism comes in a number of varieties. John Ankerberg and John Weldon explain:

"In America the dominant Hindu belief is called *Vedanta*. Of all the conflicting schools of Hinduism, Vedanta has had the most profound overall influence: 'Vedanta ("the End of the Vedas") was the school which gave organized and systematic form to the teaching of the Upanishads. While the other schools are almost or wholly extinct, Vedanta is still very much alive, for nearly all the great Hindu religious teachers of recent centuries have been Vedantists of one branch or another.' Since the texts of Vedanta are contradictory and impossible to interpret uniformly, various schools of Vedanta have arisen. The dominant Vedantic school in America is called *advaita* or the 'non-dual' school. This belief teaches that there is only one impersonal God called *Brahman*. Brahman alone is real; everything else is considered a dream of Brahman — an 'illusion.' ... This idea that the world is an illusion 'hiding' Brahman is a key teaching of Hinduism in America."¹⁸

As one source says:

"[The Hindu philosopher] Sankara summarized his system [i.e., *advaita Vedanta*] in a single sentence, 'Brahman alone is real, the world is [only] appearance, *atman* [i.e., "the true self"] is nothing but Brahman."¹⁹

And so the philosophical underpinning of what we in the West think of as *yoga* is this *advaita Vedanta* school of Hinduism: A pantheistic belief that the only thing that truly exists is the impersonal Hindu god Brahman. Everything, including each individual, is also Brahman (God).

According to this brand of Hinduism, man's problem is that he has *forgotten* that he is God (or that God — Brahman — is him/her). Yoga is designed to cause practitioners not just to *intellectually believe* that they are God, but to *experience* that they are God. Yoga is also designed to cause the individual to *experience* the "truth" that the material world is an illusion, and that everything in existence is Brahman. The technique for accomplishing this is yoga, which does this by producing an altered state of consciousness in which the individual experiences these "truths."

As one Christian publication describes it:

"Our problem is not sin but ignorance — the fact that we have forgotten our divinity. ... We have to realize our own divinity, and yoga is the path by which to experience God-consciousness. Salvation, in other words, is a matter of perception or realization. In this context, perceiving is not a cognitive activity. It is not a matter of intellectually knowing or logically deducing our divinity, but rather transcending our cognitive, rational consciousness and experiencing a higher state of expanded consciousness, which is believed to be God, or our true self [also known as self-realization]."20

"To sum up, then, salvation in Hinduism is found in the realization, perception or experience of our so-called true nature, which takes place when we attain a 'higher' state of consciousness. We attempt to reach this state of consciousness through manipulation of the nervous system, and the techniques that help us do this — techniques developed over several millennia — are found in yoga."21

When most Americans think of yoga, they may think of various bodily poses and postures and/or breathing techniques associated especially with hatha yoga. This is, indeed, a *physical* form of yoga. How-

ever, not all forms of yoga "involve sitting in yogic postures, controlling one's breath, and concentrating on a mantra or mandala."22

It doesn't really matter whether one practices a physical or relatively non-physical form of yoga, however, because the goal is the same for all varieties. Elliot Miller explains:

"Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word *yug*, which means 'to yoke.' ... In Hinduism, as in many religions, union is desired with nothing less than God or the Absolute, and yoga is the system that Hindus have developed to achieve that end. The historic purpose behind yoga, therefore, is to achieve union with the Hindu concept of God. This is the purpose behind virtually all of the Eastern varieties of yoga, including those we encounter in the West. This does not mean it is the purpose of every practitioner of yoga, for many people clearly are not practicing it for spiritual reasons but merely to enhance their physical appearance, ability, or health."23

Certain forms of yoga that don't particularly involve physical poses are bhakti yoga, jnana yoga, and karma yoga.24 One source briefly delineates these non- (or less overtly) physical forms of yoga in this way:

"**Bhakti Yoga:** the Yoga of devotion. ... **Jnana Yoga:** the Yoga of wisdom. **Karma Yoga:** the Yoga of self-transcending action."25

One well-known form of bhakti yoga is practiced by the Hare Krishna sect, with its devotion to the Hindu deity Krishna. Classical yoga is called Raja ("royal") yoga or ashtanga ("eight-limbed") yoga. Hatha yoga is a subset of raja yoga, as is the relatively non-physically exerting yoga technique of Transcendental Meditation taught by the late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.26

Raja (classical or ashtanga) has eight steps or "limbs." One introductory yoga text briefly describes these eight steps and their intended results as follows:

"*Yama* (pronounced *yah-mah*): Moral discipline, consisting of the practices of nonharming, truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity, and greedlessness ... *Niyama* (pronounced *nee-yah-mah*): Self-restraint, consisting of the five practices of purity, contentment, austerity, self-study, and devotion to a higher principle. *Asana* (pronounced *ah-sah-nah*): Posture, which serves two basic purposes — meditation and health. *Pranayama* (pronounced *prah-nah-yah-mah*): Breath control, which raises and balances your psychosomatic energy, thus boosting your health and mental concentration. *Pratyahara* (pronounced *prah-tyah-hah-rah*): Sensory inhibition, which internalizes your consciousness to prepare the mind for the various stages of meditation. *Dharana* (pronounced *dah-rah-nah*): Concentration, or extended mental focusing, which is fundamental to yogic meditation. *Dhyana* (pronounced *dhee-yah-nah*): Meditation, the principal practice of higher Yoga ... *Samadhi* (pronounced *sah-mah-dhee*): Ecstasy, or the experience of unitive consciousness in which you become inwardly one with the object of your contemplation."27

As one source explains, hatha yoga is "the first five steps of the eight-step process" of raja yoga and "includes external preparations for transcending physical and psychological processes of the body."28 We are then told:

"When this [i.e., the first five steps] is done, one is to begin the three internal steps of *raja-yoga*. The first five steps of Yoga have been conscious external methods of preparation for the internal goals of *raja-yoga*."29

The occultic nature of raja yoga is revealed in a discussion of "Raja-yoga" given by *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. It states in part:

"The last three stages [of raja yoga], dharana, dhyana, and samadhi, collectively termed samyama, are stages of concentration very closely connected. ... Through practicing samyama the

yogin also develops various magical powers (vibhuti or siddha) such as knowledge of his own previous births ... telepathy ... knowledge of the past and future ... and levitation ... etc."³⁰

In a short entry on "Hatha-yoga," the *Oxford Dictionary* also states that hatha yoga was:

"Originally a part of Raja-yoga as taught by Patanjali [perhaps 2nd-3rd centuries A.D.], but now frequently detached as a yoga to seek mental and physical health. Its purpose is to locate and activate the cakras (centres of energy) and thus to raise the kundalini (dormant spiritual power) to life. It works especially through bodily postures (asana) and control of breath (pranayama), uniting the *ha* (breath of the sun) with *tha* (breath of the moon). The reputed founder is Gorakhnath."³¹

In an article on "Yoga and Hinduism," the authors wrote:

"In ancient Indian philosophy yoga was not meant to be a fitness regime. Rather, it was a means to salvation or liberation (*moksha*) through the isolation of the soul from the body. Out-of-body experiences are still the goal of some popular forms of yoga. Later, after other schools of Indian philosophy had adopted yoga, its goal was reinterpreted as the union of the human self with the cosmic self, or God."³²

So there is more to that hatha yoga class than physical exercise. Elliot Miller states:

"...many yoga teachers and advocates deliberately cover up the spiritual nature of yoga in order to extend its influence in secular culture, but, on the other hand, there is no shortage of yoga teachers and authorities who openly proclaim it. 'Why be covert?' Swami Param asks. 'Participants should be invited upfront to "come study Hinduism," which is what they're doing when learning hatha yoga.'"³³

Miller adds:

"Hatha (physical) yoga is not so overtly religious, but Hinduism lies just beneath its surface and often surfaces in unanticipated ways, and so it is unwise for Christians to practice it."³⁴

Likewise, in an article on "Yoga and Hinduism," Christian authors Vishal Mangalwadi and Ronald Enroth wrote:

"In our view, yoga cannot be dismissed as simply another aid to physical fitness. Someone has said that there is no Hinduism without yoga and no yoga without Hinduism. Yoga's connections to Eastern religious metaphysics are clear."³⁵

A former Hindu yogi who became a Christian has written, "No part of Yoga can be separated from the philosophy behind it."³⁶

In a 1993 publication, an American-born Hindu monk named Palaniswami predicted:

"A small army of yoga missionaries — hatha, raja, siddha, and kundalini — beautifully trained in the last 10 years, is about to set upon the Western world. They may not call themselves Hindu, but Hindus know where yoga came from and where it goes."³⁷

WHAT ABOUT "CHRISTIAN YOGA?"

Because yoga's purpose is to enable the individual to achieve union with the impersonal Hindu god Brahman, in an experience called "cosmic consciousness" or "self-realization," it is not too much to say that yoga is intended to be and is in fact a gateway into Hinduism itself.

Despite this, some Christians believe that yoga can be separated from Hinduism, or that *physical* yoga can be divorced from *spiritual* yoga³⁸ and/or that at least some Christians may safely practice yoga, at least under certain conditions and/or with certain stipulations.³⁹ Some have tried to divorce the physical exercises of hatha yoga from its Hindu intentions and

have gone so far as to claim that this is a ministry the Lord has given them. Among these is Brooke Boon, author of the book *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul*⁴⁰ and Susan Bordenkircher, author of *Yoga for Christians*.⁴¹ Without questioning their sincerity or their desire to serve the Lord, one can still question the whole idea of trying to "Christianize" a Hindu practice developed for Hindu purposes.

Brooke Boon, for instance, is aware that there are "people for whom the idea of 'Christian yoga' would seem oxymoronic."⁴² Because of this, she devotes a chapter in her book to dealing with objections that Christians might have to the practice of any form of yoga for Christians. One of Boon's arguments for a Christianized version of yoga is:

"...yoga predates Hinduism by at least one thousand years. Yoga was not created by Hindus but was indeed co-opted by Hindus as a major part of their religion. Because of this, I've heard numerous variations on the theme that yoga is inseparably bound up with Eastern religion and philosophy."⁴³

Boon's only citation to support that claim is a Website link (www.americanyogaassociation.org/general.html) which does state that yoga predated Hinduism.⁴⁴ However, other sources are less dogmatic about that claim.⁴⁵ Even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that yoga predated Hinduism, Miller counters:

"What makes the promoters of Christian yoga think that pre-Hindu yoga was spiritually safe? The fundamental reason why mixing Hinduism with Christianity is objectionable is because Hinduism is a pagan religion, but so was the Stone Age shamanism practiced in the Indus Valley 5,000 years ago. This argument therefore makes a distinction without a difference."⁴⁶

Miller adds:

"There is no evidence that raja or ashtanga yoga ... existed prior to

the second century BC or thereabouts, when Patanjali set it forth in his Yoga Sutras. The stretch postures that Westerners tend to think define yoga do not appear until around the fifteenth century AD in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. It is therefore meaningless to say that yoga predated Hinduism because what *we* mean by 'yoga' clearly developed in a Hindu context."⁴⁷

While religions such as Buddhism and Jainism include yoga, one must remember that both are offshoots of Hinduism. Additionally, yoga also is found in Sikhism, an example being the late Yogi Bhajan, who was a Sikh yoga practitioner. Again, however, Sikhism is an attempt to synthesize Hinduism and Islam; and, so again we see yoga's Hindu roots.

One might imagine that the objection to yoga is merely on the grounds of its Hindu origins and history. However, yoga is intertwined with Hinduism in such a way that it is difficult or impossible to separate yoga from its Hindu roots. Additionally, yoga is deliberately designed to produce an altered state of consciousness in which Hindu, anti-Christian goals are sought and achieved, beyond whatever physical benefits might also accrue to the practitioner.

One short reference work defines "yogic religions" as:

"A term used to refer to those religious traditions where the practice of yoga is the central experience and the doctrines associated with it, such as karma, form the basis of belief."⁴⁸

It then states, "Yogic religions are the main rivals to Abrahamic religions,"⁴⁹ which it defines as:

"Religious traditions that trace their ancestry to the patriarch Abraham. The major religions in this grouping are Christianity, Islam and Judaism."⁵⁰

Brooke Boon, who has called her attempt to Christianize yoga, "Holy Yoga," also states:

"The postures of yoga may have been co-opted by a religion but

they can't 'belong' to that religion any more than prayer can belong only to a single religion. The body is of God. Prayer is of God. Scripture is of God. Other religions may have used the techniques of yoga toward their own ends, ends that conflict with a Christian worldview. They may have used yoga to worship creation or anything in it. But in Holy Yoga we worship only the Creator."⁵¹

It should also be noted that Boon clearly believes that yoga is a spiritual practice and not merely physical exercise. She writes that some people:

"... think I'm trying to tell them that yoga exercises are really just 'physical in nature' and that they have nothing to do with spirituality, so yoga is not dangerous to Christians. That's *not* what I'm saying. Yoga absolutely does open a person up to spiritual influences. But in Holy Yoga, the only spiritual influence we are open to is that of Jesus Christ. ... We must *completely* co-opt the amazing gift of yoga for Christianity. That's what we're doing with Holy Yoga."⁵²

In an e-mail, Boon wrote, "Yoga is a spiritual discipline, much like fasting or prayer."⁵³ Because, in one of the above citations from her book, Boon brings up the matter of worship, it only seems fitting to cite the Scripture, in which the Lord warned the Israelites before they crossed into Canaan:

"When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for

they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods" (Deuteronomy 12:29-31).

A biblical example of disobedience to this principle seems to be found in the life of King Ahaz in 2 Kings 16:10-16. Note that in the above Scripture passage, the Lord warned Israel against trying to "co-opt" the pagan methods of Canaanite spirituality to serve the true and living God.

Miller states:

"One who practices yoga is participating in a system that deliberately was designed to lead participants ultimately to samadhi or union with Brahman, the Hindu deity. When dealing with a practice that is potentially idolatrous, should the Christian have the confidence that she will be able to avoid those elements?"⁵⁴

Miller also observes:

"There are some rather sneaky elements in hatha yoga that help explain why enrolling in the neighborhood yoga class would be a dubious decision for the Christian. First, teachers and students typically greet each other with the Sanskrit *namaste*, which means, 'I honor the Divine within you.' This is an affirmation of pantheism and therefore a denial of the true God revealed in the Bible. Furthermore, hatha yoga classes typically conclude with 'a 10-15 minute relaxation period to relax the body and still the mind.' As part of this process students often are given a mantra to repeat in meditation or chanting. Hindu mantras are generally the names of Hindu gods or goddesses."⁵⁵

Additionally, "The postures of yoga are not religiously neutral. All of the classic asanas have spiritual significance."⁵⁶ As just one example of this, Miller cites the sun salutation.⁵⁷

WHAT IS "OM"?

Anyone the least bit familiar with yoga has heard of the term "mantra," and one in particular: "Om" — some-

times rendered as "Aum."⁵⁸ It may be chanted by itself, or as part of a longer mantra. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, "Om" is:

"The most sacred syllable in Hinduism, which first appears in the Upanisads. It is often regarded as the bija (seed) of all mantras, containing, as it does, all origination and dissolution. ... Although it is made up of three ... connected but distinct elements (as sounded), the silence at its conclusion is regarded as a fourth, expressing the attainment of Brahman/atman."⁵⁹

Professor Winfried Corduan explains:

"A notion that came out of the Vedantic phase of Hinduism is that the essence of Brahman can be captured in the mystic syllable OM. OM has no meaning as a word. Its meaning lies in its sound as it is pronounced or chanted. The vibrations produced capture the essence of Brahman and put the chanter in touch with it and thereby with his Atman-Brahman identity."⁶⁰

The "Atman-Brahman identity" of which Corduan speaks above is the individual's mystical experience of being one in essence with Brahman. In the words of an introductory yoga text, "Hindus consider this syllable [Om] to be sacred and to symbolize the ultimate reality, or higher Self (*atman*)."⁶¹

"CHRISTIAN" YOGA: JUST SAY NO

Perhaps a good question to Christian promoters of yoga would be, "Why even *attempt* to Christianize a pagan practice such as yoga when there are non-pagan alternatives to yoga for accomplishing the same physical goals that Christian yoga promoters are attempting to achieve?"

One former Hindu yogi, who became a Christian, has written:

"If one desires to achieve physical fitness only, exercises designed for that specific purpose

ought rather to be chosen. No part of Yoga can be separated from the philosophy behind it."⁶²

There are fitness alternatives to yoga. Elliot Miller speaks very highly of PraiseMoves designed by Laurette Willis, a former yoga instructor. Of these exercises, Miller writes:

"PraiseMoves is designed to approximate all of the benefits associated with yoga, including relaxation and reduction of stress, within a consistently Christian context. I have thoroughly examined PraiseMoves and find nothing spiritually dangerous about it."⁶³

Miller also notes that some of the postures in PraiseMoves are similar to some yoga postures (due to the limited number of ways that the body can be positioned), however:

"She [i.e., Laurette Willis] has not used any traditional yoga postures or gestures that have clear-cut associations with Hinduism, such as the 'praying hands' gesture."⁶⁴

Additionally, Miller suggests the exercise program "Pilates (when not mixed with yoga)"⁶⁵ as another *spiritually* safe alternative to yoga, although he admits that he doesn't know how effective or physically safe Pilates is.

In a chapter called "Yoga and Hinduism," Vishal Mangalwadi and Ronald Enroth wrote, "Most exercises are good for us, though my physician says that walking is better for me than yoga."⁶⁶

And, regarding the matter of spiritually safe alternatives to yoga, Christian author Michael Gleghorn has written:

"It seems to me that if someone wants an exercise program with physical benefits similar to yoga, but without all the negative spiritual baggage, they should consider low-impact or water aerobics, or maybe even water ballet. These programs have the potential to be just as beneficial for the body, without possibly endangering the soul."⁶⁷

So for those who desire the physical benefits of yoga without having to be concerned for themselves (or for others who may be influenced by them) about spiritual dangers associated with yoga, there are spiritually safe alternatives.

The Hindu practice of yoga was specifically designed to produce an altered state of consciousness, in which the person "experiences" their essential identity with the impersonal Hindu supreme deity, Brahman. To be sure, yoga seems sort of "cool," contemporary, exotic, and avant-garde. It has certainly invaded popular American culture. For all this, however, it is a pagan practice designed with Hindu, anti-Christian goals and purposes in mind.

Even if one does somehow personally manage to avoid becoming influenced by the Hinduism with which yoga is so intertwined, one's practice of yoga could become a stumbling block for other Christians who might be spiritually weaker, less discerning, and more inclined to be influenced and/or led astray by yoga's Hindu underpinnings. Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 seems especially appropriate here.

HINDU TENETS

Some of Hinduism's tenets are karma, reincarnation, astrology, vegetarianism, polytheism, and idolatry. We will briefly consider each of these:

Karma (the relentless, unforgiving law of cause-and-effect). The Bible teaches, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). So the doctrine of karma does have some truth to it. However, karma is an impersonal, unforgiving law; whereas, God is personal and is also a God of forgiveness and second chances. The Bible also says, "If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Psalm 130:3-4).

Additionally, karma involves a belief that the consequences of our behavior may require us to live additional lives to pay off the debt of our sins. Hence, we see the necessity in

Hinduism for reincarnation, so that we may atone for our actions over the course of many lives until we achieve perfection and liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*). This is certainly a system of working for one's salvation. Contrary to the doctrine of multiple lives and reincarnation, the Bible teaches that "it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Also Psalm 78:39 says, concerning the Israelites, "For He remembered that they were but flesh, a breath that passes away and does not come again."⁶⁸ The Bible also teaches that we are saved by God's grace and mercy *alone* and not by our works of righteousness (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-7, esp. v. 5).

Astrology. God says, "You are wearied in the multitude of your counsels; let now the astrologers, the stargazers, and the monthly prognosticators stand up and save you from what shall come upon you. Behold, they shall be as stubble, the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame; it shall not be a coal to be warmed by, nor a fire to sit before!" (Isaiah 47:13-14).

The prophet Jeremiah said, "Thus says the LORD: 'Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them'" (Jeremiah 10:2).

Vegetarianism. The Scriptures neither command nor condemn it. Therefore, it is a choice left to each individual. Many Scriptures, including Mark 7:18-19, Acts 10:9-16,⁶⁹ 1 Timothy 4:1-5, and Colossians 2:20-23, address these matters.

Polytheism and idolatry. These are condemned throughout the Bible (Matthew 4:10). Scripture declares that there is only one true God (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6). In fact, the Bible shows that other so-called "gods" are actually demons (Deuteronomy 32:16-17; Psalm 106:35-38; 1 Corinthians 10:19-21). First John 5:21 says, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen."

The late founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, Bill Bright, once told of an encounter he had with a Hindu student. Bright said:

"After I had finished speaking at a midwestern university campus, a group of students remained to learn how they could become Christians. Among them was a young Hindu lad from India who was pacing up and down, very angry and impatient. As we talked he said, 'I resent you Christians. I resent the arrogance with which you say that you have the only way to God. I believe that Christianity is *one* way, but only one way. Hinduism is another. Buddhism, Shintoism and others are all ways to God.' I called his attention to the writings of the great Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi,⁷⁰ who, for all of his devotion to his religion, states in his autobiography, 'It is a constant torture to me that I am still so far from Him whom I know to be my very life and being. I know it is my own wretchedness and wickedness that keep me from Him.' This gifted young man said that he had once believed that Gandhi was God but, of course, he no longer believed this. ... He admitted also that he had not found the answer to his needs, though he was a devout follower of his religion, diligent in the reading of the sacred Hindu writings, and faithful in his times of prayer and all the ritual of his faith. He had to confess that he had never found God. I called his attention to the difference in the lives of his Christian friends. He admitted that they had something that he did not possess. It was obvious that that 'something' was the living Savior who had come to live within them and had forgiven them of their sins. ... Finally, the light came on. Now this young Hindu understood the great truth of pardon for sin through our Savior's sacrifice on the cross. Quietly he bowed his head. This dear young scholar who had sought after

God with all of his heart now prayed that Jesus of Nazareth, the risen, living Son of God, would come into his heart, would pardon his sin and become his Lord and Master."⁷¹

In the chapter on "Hinduism" in a book that he authored on world religions, Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton wrote:

"The picture of heaven painted in the Book of Revelation and in the words of Jesus offers us great joy and hope. When we stand before God, we will be asked, 'What did you do to deserve my grace?' Here is the answer: 'Nothing. I didn't do enough to build up any good karma from you. I am only saved by your mercy and love. So I'm only holding on to your grace, your forgiveness, and your righteousness, and to the work that Jesus did for me.' And God will say, 'Welcome, my child. Enter your rest.' Christians believe that when we die, we are not united with the divine Brahman like a drop of water in an ocean. Our soul is distinct from God. So we have a chance to see God face-to-face, ... At the time I began preparing this chapter, I had an opportunity to visit a family whose twenty-eight-year-old son had recently been killed. As I was driving to their home, I prayed that God would help minister through me and care for this family. Then I started thinking, *What would I offer them if I were a Hindu priest? What would I tell them would become of their son?* I could say, 'Your son will come back to try to learn his spiritual lessons. If he has more bad karma than good, his next life might be a little harder than this last one. You, his family, will never know him after he is reborn. But you can take comfort in knowing that, one day, after a long series of births and deaths and rebirths, he will be reunited with the divine Brahman.' That is not what I told this family when I came to their home. I said, 'Your son belonged to Jesus

Christ. He was not perfect. But all of Christ's righteousness [a Hindu would say his 'good karma'] was credited to your son. Jesus bore your son's sin on the cross. And there will be a day when you will see your son again, face-to-face. Until that time, your son is seeing the things we only dream about on this side of eternity.' Being able to say that made me very, very glad that I am a Christian."⁷²

In reflecting upon the definition of the word "yoga," which means "union" or "to yoke," one might remember Jesus' statement recorded in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Taking up Jesus' yoke was easy when compared with the yoke of the Jewish law as the Pharisees taught it. Taking up His yoke instead of the yoke of Hinduism is just as wise a choice. "Yoking with" by submitting to Jesus the Savior brings eternal life, while taking up the yoke of yoga and Hinduism can lead only to continued confusion and separation from God.

Endnotes:

1. Walter Martin, *The New Age Cult*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989, pg. 13. The title page of the book also notes that Martin wrote the book "with The Research Staff of CRI." Elliot Miller, Ron Rhodes, and Dan Schlesinger are mentioned by name as those who helped. Martin also lists them on the book's "Acknowledgments" page, along with Craig Hawkins, and some unnamed others on the staff "who assisted in the preparation and editing of this volume."
2. Ronald Enroth, editor, *Evangelizing the Cults: How to Share Jesus with Children, Parents, Neighbors, and Friends Who Are Involved in a Cult*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Vine Books, 1990, pg. 21, italics in original. This quotation is taken from the chapter on "Hinduism" by Mark Albrecht.
3. Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?* Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, revised edition, 2001, pg. 91.
4. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Hinduism in America*. Eugene, Ore.:

- Harvest House Publishers, 1991, pg. 7.
5. John Bowker, editor, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pg. 430, s.v., "Hinduism."
6. Ibid.
7. *So What's the Difference?*, op. cit., pg. 91.
8. Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part One: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context)," *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 02, pg. 14.
9. George W. Braswell, Jr., *Understanding World Religions*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, revised edition, 1994, pg. 35.
10. Ibid., pp. 34-35, italics in original.
11. Ibid., pg. 40.
12. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, op. cit., pg. 102, s.v., "Astrology."
13. *So What's the Difference?*, op. cit., pg. 94, italics in original.
14. Ravi Zacharias and Norman Geisler, general editors, *Who Made God? And Answers to Over 100 Other Tough Questions of Faith*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003, pg. 155, italic in original. This quotation is from the question, "Why Is There Such a High Degree of Interest in Eastern Religions among Westerners?" by L. T. Jeyachandran.
15. See further, J. Greg Sheryl, "Paramahansa Yogananda: Purveyor of a Different Jesus and a Different Gospel," in this issue of *The Quarterly Journal* (pp. 4-13).
16. Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Yoga of Jesus: Understanding the Hidden Teachings of the Gospels*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 2007, pg. vii. Also, Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Science of Religion*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 2001, from the back cover.
17. Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, revised and expanded edition, 1985, pg. 353.
18. *The Facts on Hinduism in America*, op. cit., pp. 9-10, italics in original. Citation in the above passage is from A.L. Basham, "Hinduism," in R.C. Zaehner, editor, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, pg. 237).
19. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, op. cit., pg. 22, s.v., "Advaita Vedanta."
20. Ronald Enroth, editor, *A Guide to New Religious Movements*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005, pg. 45, emphasis added. This quotation is from the chapter on "Yoga and Hinduism," by Vishal Mangalwadi with Ronald Enroth.
21. Ibid., pg. 46.
22. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part One: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context)," op. cit., pg. 17.
23. Ibid., pg. 12, italics in original.
24. Ibid., pp. 17-18.
25. Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D. and Larry Payne, Ph.D., *Yoga for Dummies*. Hoboken,

- N.J.: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 1999, pg. 14, bold in original.
26. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part One: Yoga in Its Original Eastern Context)," op. cit., pg. 17.
27. *Yoga for Dummies*, op. cit., pg. 18, italics in original.
28. Ronald L. Carlson, *Transcendental Meditation: Relaxation or Religion?* Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, pp. 41-42.
29. Ibid., pg. 42, italics in original.
30. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, op. cit., pp. 793-794, s.v., "Raja- or as[h]tanga-yoga."
31. Ibid., pg. 415, s.v., "Hatha-yoga," italics in original. The entry from the same source on "Gorakhnath, Goraksa, or Goraksanatha" notes that he was "A Hindu yogin of c. 10/11 cent CE" (ibid., pg. 383).
32. *A Guide to New Religious Movements*, op. cit., pg. 43, italic in original.
33. Elliot Miller, "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 04, pp. 35-36. Miller's quote is citing Dru Sefton, "Is Yoga Debased by Secular Practice?" *Newhouse News*, July 15, 2005, document available at: http://one-truthministries.com/yoga_article.html.
34. Ibid., pg. 33.
35. *A Guide to New Religious Movements*, op. cit., pg. 43.
36. Rabi R. Maharaj with Dave Hunt, *Death of a Guru*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1984, pg. 208. (Formerly published under the title, *Escape into the Light*.)
37. Stan Guthrie, "Hinduism Gains a Foothold in America," *Christianity Today*, Feb. 8, 1993, pg. 50.
38. Habel Verghese, *Search For Inner Peace*. Van Nuys, Calif.: Bible Voice Inc., 1977, pp. 81-85. This book, written by a Christian from India, contains much otherwise helpful material; however, I do differ with him on this matter.
39. Some of these Christian authors would be recognized by many readers of the *Journal*, were I to name them here. Not only so, but some of these same Christian authors have beneficial ministries to the Body of Christ. This just shows that, as Christians, we must still "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21), regardless of who it is that is doing the teaching.
40. Brooke Boon, *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul*. New York: Faith-Words, 2007.
41. Susan Bordenkircher, *Yoga for Christians*. Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006.
42. *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul*, op. cit., pg. 29.
43. Ibid., pg. 31; see also, pg. 5.

44. *Ibid.*, pg. 211.
45. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38; *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Vol. 12, pg. 846, s.v., "Yoga"; and *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, *op. cit.*, pg. 1058, s.v., "Yoga."
46. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pg. 37.
47. *Ibid.*, pg. 38, italic in original.
48. Irving Hexham, *Pocket Dictionary of New Religious Movements*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002, pg. 120, s.v., "yogic religions."
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, pg. 7, s.v., "Abramic religions."
51. *Holy Yoga: Exercise for the Christian Body and Soul*, *op. cit.*, pg. 33.
52. *Ibid.*, italics in original.
53. E-mail correspondence from Brooke Boon on file, dated Sept. 15, 2007.
54. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pg. 34.
55. *Ibid.*, pg. 32, italic in original.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 35.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Concerning its spelling as "Aum," Dr. Winfried Corduan explains, "Sanskrit does not have a separate vowel for o" (*Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998, pg. 345, endnote 12, italic in original).
59. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, *op. cit.*, pg. 713, s.v., "Om or Aum."
60. *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, *op. cit.*, pg. 209, italics in original.
61. *Yoga for Dummies*, *op. cit.*, pg. 301, italics in original.
62. *Death of a Guru*, *op. cit.*, pg. 208.
63. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment (Part Three: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response)," *op. cit.*, pg. 40.
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.*, pg. 41.
66. *A Guide to New Religious Movements*, *op. cit.*, pg. 43.
67. Pat Zukeran, general editor, *World Religions Through a Christian Worldview: A handbook to analyzing the world's religions from a Christian worldview perspective*. Richardson, Texas: Probe Ministries, 2008, pg. 228.
68. My thanks to my college friend Benjamin Williams for pointing out this verse to me as a biblical refutation of reincarnation.
69. It is true that this vision was symbolic of the inclusion of the Gentiles, whom Jews considered unclean, in the Church. However, in Mark 7:18-19, Jesus had already declared all foods clean. Thus, even the symbolism in Acts 10:9-16 coincides with this truth.
70. "Mohandas K. Gandhi" (1869-1948) was his actual name. "Mahatma" was a title of respect, and means "great soul." The passage that Bright gives here occurs near the end of the Gandhi's brief Preface to his autobiography.
71. Bill Bright, *Ten Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity: Introduction: The Uniqueness of Jesus*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., 1968, pp. 9-10, italic in original.
72. Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling With Questions People Ask*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005, pp. 46-47, italics and brackets in original. In quoting this story, I am not necessarily endorsing all that Pastor Hamilton says, either in this book or elsewhere.



EDITORIALS

(continued from page 2)

articles described Jackson in costume going door-to-door in Dallas and Birmingham visiting for the Jehovah's Witnesses.

All of this was concurrent with Jackson releasing songs and music videos such as "Thriller" and "Billie Jean." Picking up on this inconsistency, *The New York Times* observed, "At the same time, perhaps more than anyone else he emplies [sic] the music, videos, fashion and much else that is frowned upon by the hierarchy of his church." With such contradiction, PFO wrote to the Watchtower Society in 1984 and asked them how a Jehovah's Witness should respond when presented with the glaring hypocrisy of Jackson's lifestyle, public persona, and musical art merchandise — specifically his occult-based "Thriller" music video. We wrote, "Certainly, a good Jehovah's Witness would not want to present himself in this kind of light."

The Watchtower responded that, "The Society has been advised that Michael Jackson is a baptized member of the Christian congregation. However, his being one of Jehovah's Witnesses should not be construed by anyone to mean that either the Society or the congregation with which he is associated approves or endorses the music that he sings or plays, or all aspects of his life-style." (Interestingly, to our knowledge, PFO received the only

letter from the Watchtower which specifically identified Michael Jackson by name. When other counter-cult ministries wrote similar letters of inquiry to the Watchtower organization, the Society responded with "an entertainer associated with Jehovah's Witnesses.")

Yet Jehovah's Witnesses knew that evasion would not suffice. The editors of *People* magazine revealed, "A spokesman for Michael Jackson's congregation confirmed that he is a member in good standing and that he attends most of the meetings. However, the elders of his congregation are concerned about Jackson's public image and performances, including his recent forays into rock video" (Jan. 23, 1984, pg. 4).

The negative publicity for the Watchtower was beginning to mount. Some former Jehovah's Witnesses heightened the Watchtower's embarrassment with claims of a cult within the cult. *US* magazine stated, "The Jackson appeal, however, has gone too far in some ways, according to [former Jehovah's Witness Gary] Botting, who says an 'MJ cult' has developed within the Witnesses. The cult believes that Jackson is the Archangel Michael, who is described in the Book of Daniel: 'And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people'" (Oct. 8, 1984, pg. 69). Botting also contended that the Watchtower's "leadership was reluctant to alienate Jackson because the singer has helped bring contributions and credibility to the faith by what many consider his exemplary habits,