

## Yoga as Religion; Encinitas as Sacred Ground

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As Postural Yoga and, to a lesser extent, meditation practices associated with yoga, become increasingly embedded in the *cultural* landscape of America, we might ask to what extent the yoga movement is part of a *religious* landscape as well. Elizabeth de Michelis and Stephanie Syman, among others, have pointed out the religious aspects of the yoga class with its bodily rituals and philosophical underpinnings. Others, however, have argued that the yoga craze provides a therapeutic styled individualism that contrasts with the sustained social commitments and service to others associated with religion. Wade Clark Roof in *Spiritual Marketplace* purports that contemporary transnational religion, consisting of “loosely bound networks of practitioners, the publishing industry, and the media” does not encourage loyalty to organizations and structures. Without this commitment, he states, “it is difficult to regularize religious life around a set of practices and unifying experiences, to mobilize people around causes, or even to sustain personal religious identity.” Jeremy Carrette and Richard King offer a searing critique of the unholy partnership of spirituality and capitalism in their book, *Selling Spirituality: the Silent Takeover of Religion*. Spirituality, according to the authors, has become a “cultural addiction” that is shallow, materialistic, and harmful to religious commitment.

Does a yoga practitioner have a “personal religious identity”? If so, how does it relate to group identity? Can we speak of the yoga phenomenon as a religious phenomenon that has a place at the multi-religious table of America? While I doubt that

yoga practitioners will ever call themselves *religious*, preferring the word *spiritual*, in this talk, I will employ the ideas of community and sacred space to argue that the yoga movement is becoming more than a “loosely bound network of practitioners.” Using Anusara Yoga, founded by John Friend, as a case study, I will show how spiritual identity is being shaped. John Friend, the founder of Anursara Yoga, plans to establish a home base in Encinitas, California, this spring. SLIDE Friend is drawn to Encinitas because of its natural beauty, but perhaps more so because of what he perceives to be its sacred quality. SLIDE Paramahansa Yogananda, the first Indian guru to take up permanent residence in America, made Encinitas his home in 1930. It was there that he wrote *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which was to become a spiritual classic for yogis worldwide, but particularly for American yogis. The hermitage he founded has only enhanced the natural beauty of the cliffs overlooking the ocean in Encinitas. After his death, his disciples created scenic and tranquil gardens, which are renowned in the area. Spiritual practices have been ongoing since the hermitage’s founding.

John Friend is by no means the first modern yogi to be attracted to Encinitas. SLIDE Another key figure in American yoga, K. Pattabhi Jois, founder of Ashtanga Yoga, first came to the United States in 1975 and was also to make Encinitas one home base. Today, in addition to Ashtanga Yoga and Anusara Yoga, Encinitas has yoga studios for Hot Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Bikram Yoga, Anahata Yoga, and Core Power Yoga. There are multiple individual teachers, a yoga studio especially for children, and, of course, yoga is available at various gyms and health clubs. This may sound like any typical California city, yet what is remarkable is that Encinitas has all of this with only 62,000 residents.

One attraction of yoga is the sense of shared ritual it provides. Anusara Yoga, as with many forms of yoga in the U.S., is almost always practiced in community. Most of the Anusara practitioners I interviewed said they rarely practiced alone. Several spoke about going out for tea together after class. Developing a sense of community was a goal for John Friend from Anusara's foundation, and he seems to be succeeding. One practitioner spoke about driving across the country. Wherever he stopped, he looked up the Anusara studio. He not only received invitations to visit classes, but also to have dinner and even spend the night from people he'd never met before. Another practitioner said, "I have the biggest group of friends that I've ever had in my life. I like to go to class because of the community I find there. It's hard to argue with going somewhere where I get kisses and hugs every time I go." Another said that two Anusara groups had recently formed in her city with the specific purpose of supporting one another socially through having dinner together and organizing meals for people who are in need.

Community is also maintained through virtual reality. Video streaming classes, Facebook, and Twitter help to keep people connected. SLIDE Outdoor festivals such as Wanderlust that combine yoga, hooping, music, and other forms of entertainment are becoming increasingly popular. 2 SLIDES People attending these festivals connect with their own yoga community through Twitter. An interviewee described it this way: "You go with your friends. Once you're there, you find people who have something in common with – like the same teacher. With Internet, there's constant communication through iPhones. Twitter is huge. When I went to Wanderlust, there were tags for Twitter, and you were instantly connected. We knew exactly where to meet up. Then afterward, thousands of pictures from Wanderlust were posted on Facebook. In fact, I

wonder if we'll look back on this time as some kind awakening, like tent revivals or the sixties. I go to maybe a dozen events like this in a year.”

If yoga festivals can be compared to tent revivals, John Friend might be compared to the itinerant preacher. SLIDE He's been on the go ever since he founded his system of yoga that he describes as a “heart-centered” approach. In his words, “I've been like a pied piper of hatha yoga. I've gone around the world – from South America to Eastern Europe to Australia to China – connecting people to spirit and shakti and the higher teachings.” It's no wonder that he is longing for a spiritual center, a community that has some continuity. Friend chose Encinitas as his new home base, where he is creating The Center, a high-tech yoga studio with a sound stage complete with cameras, lights, and video streaming capabilities. SLIDE From there, Friend will be able to teach classes to people in different parts of the world simultaneously. Not only does he plan to teach Hatha Yoga classes, but he also intends to host seminars – or perhaps “happenings” would be a better word – with lectures, panels, musical performances, poetry readings, and plays that will all be tied back to yoga philosophy. Friend's purpose in bringing together yoga and performing arts stems from his interest in Abhinavagupta, the Kashmir Shaivite philosopher who popularized rasa theory, or what might be called aesthetic savor theory. (2 SLIDES from an Anusara Grand Gathering)

While John Friend intends to reach around the globe from his studio, he also hopes that serious students will settle in Encinitas so that they can together delve deeply into yoga philosophy and particularly into the tantric philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism. Geographically-based, sustained community contrasts with virtual and event-based community structures. In spite of roving festivals and virtual communities, it seems that

people today, as in all times, yearn for a sense of rootedness to a particular place. The coalescence of community and sacred geography, along with the bodily rituals and philosophical underpinnings of yoga mentioned earlier, begins to look a lot like religion.

The American yoga experience comes full circle, in a sense, with John Friend's choice of Encinitas for his new yoga/performing arts studio, which is located just a few blocks away from the retreat site for Self-Realization Fellowship, Yogananda's organization. Friend's inspiration to pursue the practice of yoga and meditation came, in part, from Yogananda's autobiography, which he read in the late seventies. After reading this book, he began the practice of Kriya Yoga, taught by Self-Realization Fellowship.

Although the styles of Paramahansa Yogananda and John Friend are quite different, both approaches resonate with a form of American religion and culture that developed in the nineteenth century. Catherine Albanese has discussed how the imagined otherness of Asia was channeled into culturally available templates provided by liberal Protestantism and metaphysical traditions during this time. Sydney Ahlstrom dubbed the trend "harmonial religion," which "encompasses those forms of piety and belief in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person's rapport with the cosmos."

The harmonial religious strain is not limited to any particular group or religion. In an article for the *New York Times*, Mimi Schwartz compared John Friend to Christian evangelist Joel Osteen. Although followers of both sides of this equation might be offended by the comparison, it seems that Schwartz has tapped into the heart of American religion. It is flexible enough to find expression in a mega-church as well as in a mega-yoga retreat. Its emphasis on positive thinking and health are both important aspects of

New Thought, a movement which influenced both Yogananda and John Friend.

Americans seek a form of religion that encompasses all aspects of life, accords with laissez-faire ideals, and, at the same time, develops a sense of spiritual composure. Could this be the religious identity that the yoga movement is not necessarily creating, but reinforcing? If so, it appears to be rooted in an American tradition that is centuries old and whose history is linked to Encinitas. Yogananda intertwined liberal Protestantism, New Thought, the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta – especially as it was reformulated by Vivekananda – devotionism, Hindu forms of meditation, and hatha yoga-inspired physical exercises in his teaching. John Friend found this combination inspiring. Yogananda’s formulation brought together Friend’s own background in Christianity – he was, in fact, a Sunday school teacher – New Thought, Theosophy, and of course, yoga and meditation.

From the early part of the twentieth century, when Yogananda made his home in Encinitas, to the early years of the twenty-first century, when Friend intends to make his home in Encinitas, much has changed, and yet, much remains the same. SLIDE The monks and nuns of Self-Realization Fellowship express their yearning for God-realization through song and prayers in the same way a former generation did when Yogananda was alive. Males and females are strictly separated to decrease any temptation to desire. They pad across the beautiful grounds of the hermitage in their loose-fitting and modest clothing with an aura of the ethereal. The memory of their guru and his lineage is preserved through stories lovingly told again and again. It is almost as if time has stood still in this small enclave of devoted seekers. SLIDE To imagine Anusara’s “Center,” where men and women (mostly women) will gather in form-fitting

and often skimpy yoga attire to press into handstands and push into backbends certainly presents a study in contrast. In the evenings they may gather to view hoops aglow with fire twirled in elaborate patterns SLIDE or to listen to “MC Yogi” combine hip-hop and Hindu mantras SLIDE as he sings “Ganesh is Fresh” or “Rock on Hanuman” -- a far cry from Self-Realization Fellowship’s simple tunes and hymn-like lyrics.

Yogananda’s monks and nuns to this day attempt to live in isolation from worldly pursuits, which they believe would take them away from their focus on the divine. Their goal is to attain Self-realization, just as they believe their beloved guru had done. For those pursuing the path of Anusara, however, Self-realization is not a part of the lingo. “That kind of language is gone,” one Anusara practitioner told me.

Yogananda’s system is more aligned with meditation and devotion to the guru while the starting point for Friend’s system is Postural Yoga. However, both are rooted in heart-centered approaches that affirm the sacredness of life, and both teach practices of chanting, meditation, and physical exercises that help aspirants to discover that sacredness. On the other hand, even with Yogananda’s and Friend’s affinity on a certain level, a divide exists between the gentle other-worldly pull felt by followers of Yogananda and the world-embracing quality expressed by followers of Friend. Both of these strands of American Hinduism find a home in Encinitas.

While the styles of followers of Paramahansa Yogananda and followers of a yoga movement such as Anusara may be quite different, it is likely that a sense of religious identity or, as they would say, spiritual identity, would be stronger for practitioners who are walking the very ground that is a part of the history of yoga in America. It is also possible that the different groups will have an effect on each other, with the hoopers and

hand-standers of Postural Yoga being pulled to the more inner meditative practices of Yogananda's group, and with followers of Yogananda venturing into the world of creative performance, as John Friend's tantric-based approach encourages.

Time will tell, but I would venture to guess that Encinitas itself, with its sacred history, will eventually begin to foster shared rituals, and that followers of the different groups will be marking the same sacred holidays on their calendars. Followers of Anusara would naturally revere Yogananda since he has been such an inspiration to their own teacher. Of course, shared ritual is already part of the yoga movement; people who travel find comfort in being able to attend a class which, even with the differing styles of yoga, offers the security that comes with familiarity. SLIDE Down dog is still down dog, whether one is in a gym or a yoga studio with statues of Shiva Nataraj. Yet in a place where the poetry of Yogananda, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the Tantric texts of Kashmir Shaivism are familiar, surely the sense of the religious will be stronger.

Yoga and meditation practitioners associate religion with the confines of institutions they have left behind. However, the commitment engendered by caring for people in one's own community, as well as the participation in shared rituals, is likely to create something that looks more than a little like religion. Spirituality, with its connotation of individualism and the freedom it allows to drop one thing to move on to another at one's whim may be changing. For those living in Encinitas, anyway, the shared sacred history as well as the ever-increasing presence of yoga and meditation is bound to create a stronger sense of personal and communal religious identity than virtual communities or occasional gatherings at retreats or yoga festivals do, making Encinitas a hub of American Hinduism...if that is what we end up calling this amalgam religion.