

yoga

JOURNAL

Is Yoga a Religion?

Without credos or congregations, the practice can't be regarded as religion—unless we say that each yogi or yogini comprises a religion of one.

By Phil Catalfo

At the closing ceremony of the "Yoga into the 21st Century" conference in New York City in September of 2000, T.K.V. Desikachar offered some thought-provoking comments on the subject of the relationship between hatha yoga and religion. "Yoga was rejected by Hinduism," he noted, "because yoga would not insist that God exists. It didn't say there was no God but just wouldn't insist there was." And, he added, there was an important lesson for yogis inherent in this schism: "Yoga is not a religion and should not [affiliate] with any religion."

One could easily argue in support of Mr. Desikachar's assertion: Yoga has no singular creed, nor does it have any ritual by which adherents profess their faith or allegiance, such as baptism or confirmation. There are no religious obligations, such as attending weekly worship services, receiving sacraments, fasting on certain days, or performing a devotional pilgrimage.

On the other hand, there are ancient yogic texts (most notably, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*) that many regard as scriptures, revelations of truth and wisdom meant to guide the lives of yogis down through the ages. And there is an elaborate moral code (the *yamas* and *niyamas*) that, while not uniformly espoused or understood, is widely studied and promulgated. Likewise, while there is significant variety in the ways hatha yoga is taught, raising questions about what is and is not a proper yoga posture, most yogis would probably tell you that they'd know a pose when they saw one, leading one to suggest that the various schools of yoga could be considered "sects" of a larger quasi-religion.

Still, most would disavow the term "religion" if it were applied to yoga. This begs the question: If hatha yoga is not a religion, what is it? Is it a hobby, a sport, a fitness regimen, a recreational activity? Or is it a discipline such as the study of law or the practice of medicine? The odd truth is that there are ways in which the practice of yoga resembles all of those pursuits.

Perhaps it would be helpful to consider the difference between the word "religion" and another word commonly associated with it, "spirituality." Spirituality, it could be said, has to do with one's interior life, the ever-evolving understanding of one's self and one's place in the cosmos—what Viktor Frankl called humankind's "search for meaning." Religion, on the other hand, can be seen as spirituality's external counterpart, the organizational structure we give to our individual and collective spiritual processes: the rituals, doctrines, prayers, chants, and ceremonies, and the congregations that come together to share them.

The fact that so many yogis report spiritual experiences in their practices indicates how

we might best view the ancient art. While many Westerners come to yoga primarily for its health benefits, it seems safe to say that most people who open to yoga will, in time, find its meditative qualities and more subtle effects on the mind and emotions equally (if not more) beneficial. They will, in other words, come to see yoga as a spiritual practice. But, without credos or congregations, it can't properly be regarded as a religion—unless we say that each yogi and yogini comprises a religion of one.

Return to <http://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/283>