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Yoga in a Christian church

● **Father Paul, some criticism has been directed at you for bringing yoga into the church. What would you like to say to your critics?**

It is a little bit uncommon it is true, and I am sorry if it has caused any unrest. Yoga is simply another word for prayer, though it is a different kind of prayer from what is commonly understood.

Prayer is as old as the human race and different religions had different ways of expressing the ultimate search of the human heart for the creator and for the meaning of life.

Yoga is one of these ways, and one with an old tradition, going back to the year 2500 BC. It has become very popular in recent times. I am trying to put it into the right context.

● **Do you find it difficult to combine your religious devotion with the practice of yoga?**

Not at all – it is the most natural thing for me to do! God, through Jesus Christ, has done everything for us. He actually lives within us. I want to give him an intelligent answer, and to show others a way of doing the same.

● **Do you think of yourself as a “guru”?**

Oh, no! A “guru” is a master of great quality and insight. In the Christian tradition we would call him (or her) a saint. By vocation I am a priest, by training I am a teacher. So was my father, and my mother. Teaching is in my blood. But I am only a little teacher.

● **Fr Paul, do you have the qualifications to teach yoga?**

I think so. If yoga is prayer then I am supposed to have them, since I have been a priest for the last 22 years. For my training as a missionary I did research and special studies in yoga from 1945 to 1948 and have continued to the present day.

● **Do you think experience of yoga is essential in order to lead a full Christian life?**

This depends on what you understand by yoga. If yoga means prayer then I would say yes. If it means a special way of prayer, the answer would be no – but it helps.

Let us face facts. The entire Christian building which has been built up over the last 2000 years seems to fall to pieces. We priests stand before empty churches. Many of my colleagues have quit their

vocation. They are insecure.

Everybody criticises, from Pope to bishops to ordinary people. Youth especially is disoriented, dissatisfied with the way they have been taught religion. People do not know any more what to believe and what to do. Many despair of the churches to give them proper guidance for their life.

Something has gone wrong in our times and it worries me. I am looking for a way out of these difficulties. Yoga, it seems

and contemplative prayer. My ecclesiastical superiors know and approve of what I am doing. And they know, too, that this is a necessity.

● **Where have you been teaching yoga and who attends your classes?**

Classes are held in my chapel on Saturday evenings. There are always people of different nationalities and sometimes a few Swiss, between the ages of 20 and 70, and even some handicapped people.

Marianne Hill-Moser talks with Father Paul Bossard

to me, does provide positive answers.

● **Would you like to specify this and give an example from practical experience?**

Look at the present youth-religions – Transcendental Meditation, the “Guru and Messiah cult”, the thousands of books about yoga and eastern mysticism. It is big “business”. Money has always been the ruin of true religion.

I know of many young people, Swiss and non-Swiss, who are caught in that, like a drug ring. To them I want to show that there is a better way, a deeply Christian way, a very practical and therapeutic way.

Many people keep asking me the same questions, asking how to cope with life. After seminars or instructions they keep saying: “Father, for the first time in a very long while I wanted to pray again.”

● **Has your teaching and practising yoga created difficulties for you within your church?**

In the beginning, before the Vatican Council 33 years ago, I was nearly kicked out of the seminary. My manuscripts, Yoga and Christian Mystics, the result of three years’ research and study, was confiscated. It could have become a bestseller – and would have possibly have spoilt me.

But now, things have changed and there is a strong movement within the Catholic Church to revive meditation

Then I am often invited for seminars, weekends and retreats. Numbers do not really matter. There are usually from five to 40 people. A good group to work with is between 10 and 20 students.

It is similar to being a mountaineer. He offers his service, takes people up the mountain as far as they want and can go. He shows the way, accompanies his guests for some time, gives help and guidance, and perhaps pulls somebody over an obstacle.

But I can say I am not overbooked yet, and members of the Swiss community always have precedence.

● **Do you aim to lead your students to mystical experience?**

No, I am not interested in that. I have read many books about mystics and I must confess they are still above my real understanding. I realise that they want to describe to us something that is very beautiful – but which is out of my reach.

What I am aiming at is to show that life is beautiful and that the teaching of Christ is the way to a full human life in body, mind and heart. It is actually the only possible way I know.

Of course we have been taught that in religious instruction a hundred times over. But we do not believe. We do not see it. At least most people do not, especially our youth. So I want to show them a way that they can find out for them-

selves.

● **Can they, and do they find out?**

Yes, they can and most of them do, at least to some degree. It depends on the daily practice in the body. It is clear to anybody that we cannot learn to swim by studying books about swimming. It is the same with human life.

We have to live in order to find the meaning of life. It needs great self discipline, concentration and awareness, which must be practiced.

We have mastered science and sports but you find not many teachers who teach you to master your life. You have to find out by experience how it works, how liberating a force like self-discipline is.

So I try to show people who want to know it a way to a full Christian life through the practice and experience of yoga. It is a religious practice, and my chapel is an ideal place with its atmosphere of silence and rest.

● **You seem to believe that we could learn a lot from the way of life in the East, from Hinduism and Buddhism?**

I have a great respect for these Eastern religions, for any genuine and sincere religion. Our modern times have pushed religion into the background.

This is why we are at present flooded with religious literature, mystical writings, magic and the whole range of occult phenomena. This is not healthy.

The study and practice of genuine religion is, however, most essential in our search for peace. And I think the world religions and the Christian religions must come together to work out practical guidelines from their spirituality to a peaceful settlement of the world problems.

Our politicians are stuck and caught up in a defense-mechanism. So are our business people. We need creative impulses and answers to the present difficulties, or we will have the war which we are so frightened of.

East and West must come together and they have a lot in common, especially in their religions.