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Kimberley J. Pingatore

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**BODIES BENDING BOUNDARIES: RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL, AND SECULAR
IDENTITIES OF MODERN POSTURAL YOGA IN THE OZARKS**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Religious Studies

By

Kimberley J. Pingatore

December 2015

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Religious Studies

Missouri State University, December 2015

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ABSTRACT

Modern postural yoga is an amalgamation of practices that continues to defy traditional explanatory models that understand *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular* to be mutually exclusive categories. In this project, I conduct in-depth interviews with yoga instructors in the Ozarks. In these interviews, I asked my informants to explain how they understand *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular*. I then asked if and how they would use those words to describe yoga. These interviews revealed that *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular* are not mutually exclusive, but are instead related, blended, and connected, especially when used to describe yoga. These findings inform my proposed explanatory model which reflects how my interviewees talk about yoga with respect to these categories.

KEYWORDS: yoga, modern postural yoga, religious, spiritual, secular, bodies, practice

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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INTRODUCTION

Finding Yoga

Inhale as you bring your palms together. Exhale as you place them at your heart. Bring your hands to your third eye as a reminder of right thought. Bring your hands to your lips as a reminder of right speech. Bring your hands to your heart as a reminder of right intention. Thank you all for sharing your practice with me today. Namaste.

— Yoga Class Closing Salutation

Surprised and intrigued, I thought briefly about the parting words that came from my yoga teacher's lips. I collected my props, rolled up my mat, and strolled to the prop room where the rest of the class was also returning their practice aids. I moved slowly, so as to let the crowd disperse before I inquired with my teacher about these words. A student of religious studies and a future graduate student, I respectfully probed.

After inquiring about the Buddhist nature of the words that concluded our practice that evening, I learned that this was not the first time a student had made the same connection. I was not offended or worried that I had just been initiated into some cult without my knowing. I loved those words. I loved how they asked me to take my practice off of my mat and into the world around me. I loved how they made me think and become more curious about this yoga stuff that happened four days a week in a small northern Michigan town, in what was once a church. As I proceeded back to the entryway where we had left our shoes, silenced cell phones, and hung our coats next to our egos, I ran my toes over creaky hardwood floors where it was obvious pews had once been anchored. What is this yoga? Where does it come from? How did it get here? How is it so infectious and transformative? In the years that followed, I brought my brain and my

yoga mat across one thousand miles to the heartland of the Midwest, a place known as a buckle of the Bible Belt. Becoming part of the yoga community to continue my practice as well as my research, I found fertile ground perfect for growth both as a yogi and as a scholar.

The presence of Protestant evangelical Christianity in Springfield, Missouri, hit this Michigander like the sun pierces sleepy eyes on a bright, snowy January morning. “God Created,” reads a billboard accompanied by a crossed-out caricature of the evolution of humanity. Churches seem to outnumber gas stations. Businesses everywhere, including bowling allies, law offices, and coffee shops, don Christian insignia.

Statistically speaking, the presence of Christianity in Springfield and in the Ozarks at large is impressive. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, in 2010, of the congregations in the study (which included Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish places of worship) over ninety-nine percent of adherents belong to a Christian congregation. This is a larger percentage of Christian adherents than the United States as a whole, where ninety-one percent of adherents belong to a Christian congregation.¹ The largest religious groups in the Springfield Metro Area are displayed in Table 1.

¹ “Metro-Area Membership Report for Springfield, MO Metropolitan Statistical Area,” The Association of Religion Data Archives, accessed November 10, 2015. http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/29/rcms2010_29077_county_name_2010.asp. This percentage is calculated based on the number of adherents included in the study. The United States as a whole comes in with ninety-one percent adherents belonging to a Christian congregation. However, in both reports, fifty-two percent of the Springfield Metro-Area population and forty-nine percent of the U. S. population are included in the study (which is based on the membership figures for area congregations). When accounting for the “unclaimed” population, the percentage of Christian adherents drops to fifty-two percent in the Springfield Metro-Area, and forty-four percent in the U.S. In both calculations, the Springfield Metro-Area has more Christian adherents when compared to the country as a whole.

Reflecting the evangelical Protestant Christian dominance in the area, Springfield is home to the world headquarters for the Assemblies of God. These statistics and the location of an evangelical denomination's world headquarters, along with the politically conservative climate of the Ozarks, afford the region the label "Buckle of the Bible Belt."²

Table 1. Largest Religious Groups in the Springfield Metro Area

Religious Bodies	Tradition/Family	Adherents
Southern Baptist Convention	Evangelical Protestant/Baptist	82,579
Assemblies of God	Evangelical Protestant/Pentecostal	39,310
The United Methodist Church	Mainline Protestant/Methodist	19,676
Catholic Church	Catholic/Catholicism	19,216
Non-Denominational	Evangelical Protestant	16,902
Churches of Christ	Evangelical Protestant/Baptist	6,497
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	Mainline Protestant/Baptist	5,376
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	Other/Latter-day Saints	5,104

The unique climate of the Ozarks is not lost on those who practice and teach yoga here. Kellie is a lifetime Springfieldian and a full-time yoga teacher in the Ozarks. She does not consider herself to have any "religion per se," but instead says that she "chose a

² Stanley Burgess, "Perspectives on the Sacred: Religion in the Ozarks," *OzarksWatch*, 1988, accessed May 1, 2014, <https://thelibrary.org/lohist/periodicals/ozarkswatch/ow202d.htm>.

different path” from her predominantly Pentecostal family.³ Her path values *karma* and a moral obligation to others, though she classifies herself not as an atheist, but as “just not really anything.”⁴ Here, Kellie attests to her experience with concerned Christian students who take her classes:

I never have thought of [yoga] as a religion. I know a lot of people here do. I’ve heard that a lot. I’ve had students ask me [about that], especially whenever we say Namaste or whenever we Om in a class. It kind of scares people sometimes, especially if they’re unfamiliar with it. It’s different. They’re not used to that, and a lot of times they think that it’s going to go against their religion. They don’t want to do that, and I completely respect that and understand that. I’m always more than happy to explain that to people. I do hear that a lot. . . . I think a lot of times what they’re asking is “Am I praying to another God?” and I totally understand. They need to understand that that’s not what it is at all, absolutely not. You don’t want to offend anybody. Just because I’m not religious doesn’t mean that I don’t want other people to be and I don’t ever want to offend someone either. I try really hard to be careful about that. And depending upon the studio I’m at too, sometimes I don’t Om in class—it’s just not something that I do. I wouldn’t sing a chant; I wouldn’t want to offend someone. You have to kind of be careful about that here. Whereas if we were on either coast, or New York City or Los Angeles, anything would go.⁵

Kellie is not the only yoga teacher in the Ozarks faced with questions from curious or apprehensive students and practitioners. Emery is thirty-six years old and a mother of two who began teaching yoga for some extra cash while she stayed home to parent her children until they were school-age. She now teaches yoga full-time between local studios and Missouri State University. She also offers yoga teacher training programs in Joplin and Branson. Emery does not identify as religious, spiritual, or atheist. Instead she describes her feelings as dynamic, and always evolving:

³ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015. With their permissions, I am using my informants’ real names.

⁴ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

⁵ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

I don't attend church. I would not call myself Christian, although I do have strong, spiritual beliefs, many of which parallel those from the Christian religion. But there are too many things I don't agree with for me to be able to call myself fully a Christian. I guess it's a blend of being agnostic, and there are many things in Hindu spirituality that I associate with and that ring true to me. So I'm sure that's one of the reasons that yoga was such a calling for me. But I feel a pull from a lot of different religions—things that feel right. But I've never been able to adhere to one set of beliefs. . . . You know what I mean? So it's very broad. And it's still evolving. So it kind of goes in waves, I've noticed, through life. There are times when I feel very atheist, and there are other times where I feel very connected to a God. Then there are times where I feel more connected to a source of energy but not a God-like human figure.⁶

Emery recalls talking with two students in her teacher training program who had questions about yoga and its religious connotations:

One [student] was actually from the training last year. She had read the info packet of all the things we were going to do, and she was concerned because we were going to talk about chanting and chanting in yoga. And there's chanting Om, which most people are familiar with, but there's also specific chants to specific Hindu gods and it's not something that's popular here in Springfield, but I've experienced it from some of my teachers. It is a fairly common practice that a lot of yogis use is chanting. There are specific chants. I liken it to the way Catholics pray to different saints for different things—isn't it St. Thomas if you want to sell your house? There's somebody else if you lose something? Like Gabriel like if you lose your keys you're supposed to pray to him. So, I liken it to that. . . . And the other one, I had a lady call, and she was just concerned. She wanted to do the teacher training, she just had general concerns. She said "I'm Christian, and I'm very involved in my church and I just don't know if that is, if this, if yoga is going to . . ."—I can't remember how she put it, but she was really concerned about it and she had been thinking about it. She didn't know if yoga was going to contradict her religion in any way. So there is still this thought in people's heads that they don't quite know what yoga is. They like it. She's been practicing yoga. She's been going to a yoga studio and doing the physical class, but there's still this idea in people's heads. They don't quite know what [yoga] is, and they definitely feel like there's something maybe religious, maybe spiritual to it. It might not jive with their Christianity. So, there's just this kind of vague unknowing.⁷

⁶ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

⁷ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

Emery and Kellie are constantly aware of how the yoga they teach may be perceived by their students. Both teachers credit the culture of the Ozarks for the “vague unknowing” and apprehension that some students voice in response to aspects of yoga, like chanting. If Emery and Kellie taught yoga in larger, arguably more diverse and liberal cities, they wonder if these concerns would be less prevalent which might allow them more freedom to include chanting and saying Namaste in their classes.

In the spring of 2014 I visited a local yoga studio, rolling out my yoga mat like I had done almost every Sunday afternoon since August of 2013. This particular weekend had been part of a teacher training program that this studio offers, so the class was especially well-attended. “It’s all the same God,” I overheard one aspiring yoga teacher respond to another. They had been discussing a mantra and whether its recitation meant they were honoring or worshiping that particular deity.⁸ Admittedly titillated, my mind was exploding with questions I wished I could ask. Is yoga religious? What about it is? Is it spiritual? Is it possible to practice yoga without it being religious or spiritual? These are the questions that this project addresses. The answers, provided by my gracious informants, serve to nuance how we think about and study yoga. Finally, I will use their answers to challenge the scholarly categories *religious*, *spiritual* and *secular* in ways that privilege individuality and necessitate boundary flexibility.

Ancient Roots, Modern Practice

It is vital to be clear about which of the many (historically and culturally) yogas this project deals with. To employ the useful terminology developed by Elizabeth De

⁸ Personal observation, Essential Yoga, Springfield, MO, February 22, 2014.

Michelis and used ubiquitously throughout scholarship on modern yoga, I am concerned with using the above questions to study Modern Postural Yoga (MPY).⁹ In addition to differentiating one yoga from another culturally and practically (this emphasizes postures while another emphasizes meditation), this typology brings with it a breadth of scholarship regarding MPY's historical development and evolution.

In *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*, De Michelis (as the title suggests) maps a development of modern yoga. Her map, not unlike the maps of Mark Singleton, David Gordon White, Christopher Key Chapple, and Joseph Alter, does not draw a clean, unwavering, easy-to-follow lineage from Patanjali and his *Yoga-Sutras* to the studios that dot strip malls across the American landscape.¹⁰ Instead, De Michelis locates MPY's "roots" in what she calls Neo-Hinduism and the Neo-Vedantic Enlightenment, which began in India in the late eighteenth century.¹¹ This cultural and

⁹ Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum, 2005) 7-8, 188. De Michelis is careful to acknowledge that in many instances the line between Modern Meditational Yoga and Modern Postural Yoga may be quite blurred. However, the term MPY suffices to capture what many Americans consider to be yoga.

¹⁰ The *Yoga-Sutras* are arguably the most referenced text in MPY culture. In a radio spot on BBC's *Beyond Belief*, Suzanne Newcombe, a prominent scholar on yoga, describes how a student of MPY is likely to hear reference to Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutras* at some point. "Yoga," Ernie Rea, *Beyond Belief*, aired February 10, 2014, on BBC Radio, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03trq8c>. Arguably, this reference to the *Yoga-Sutras* accomplishes some sort of action authenticating the practice since it is largely agreed that these aphorisms were compiled in the second century C.E. and are touted to be the authoritative voice for all things yoga in MPY culture. For example, see Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy, and Practice*, (Chino Valley, CA: Hohm Press, 2001), 213. Patanjali is widely credited as the author or compiler of the texts that comprise the *Yoga-Sutras* and in popular yoga culture he and his aphorisms are considered foundational. See the following works to understand how complicated and convoluted histories of yogas are: Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous: Patanjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); and Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹¹ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 38-46.

intellectual environment was extremely influential for one of the most, if not the most, famous ambassadors of yoga: Swami Vivekananda.¹² The relationships between Neo-Hinduism, Neo-Vedanta, and MPY are not of concern here. Rather, the point that is germane to this project is the pre-modern location that birthed what would become MPY: eighteenth-century colonial India as opposed to second-century mystics.

Much of the scholarship on yoga is aimed at deconstructing misconceptions. In particular, De Michelis, David Gordon White, Andrea Jain, and others, have written extensively to debunk the myth that the type of yoga over twenty-million Americans enjoy is a descendent of Patanjali's yoga.¹³ Moreover, many scholars are interested in challenging the notion that everything called yoga was at one point, or perhaps still is, "Eastern" or Hindu. David Gordon White and Christopher Key Chapple, for example, both write about how, etymologically and practically, yoga transcends the boundaries of Hinduism, as well as Buddhism, Jainism, and other religious or sectarian associations.¹⁴

In *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, Mark Singleton also problematizes the notion of yoga's monolithic, uninterrupted lineage. Less concerned with the esoteric and occult qualities of MPY (as De Michelis is), Singleton draws a strong connection between the postural sequences that characterize MPY and European

¹² De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 49.

¹³ "New Study Finds More Than 20 Million Yogis in U.S.," *Yoga Journal*, December 5, 2012, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.yogajournal.com/uncategorized/new-study-finds-20-million-yogis-u-s/>. See De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*; White, *Sinister Yogis*; and Jain, *Selling Yoga* about deconstruction the misconception that MPY is a direct descendent of Patanjali's yoga.

¹⁴ See White, *Sinister Yogis*, and Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*.

calisthenics and gymnastics that were used as physical fitness regimens and military training techniques.¹⁵

I draw on these histories not only to locate MPY historically, but also to justify the methodological approach this project takes. Like this scholarship, I anticipate the association my readers might make between MPY and ancient Hindu roots. To claim Hindu roots for MPY is to discount the incredibly rich and textured historical developments of things called yoga and people called yogis. It is to unnecessarily and inaccurately simplify practices that have moved and evolved, been transplanted and reconfigured, all before they encountered “Western” shores.

To that point, this project will not consider modern religious Hindus or their perspectives on “doing,” or the people who “do,” yoga. To do so would necessitate the same consideration be paid to modern religious Buddhists and modern religious Jains, among others, because, as Chapple tells us, “Yoga, in itself, is cross cultural.”¹⁶ Similarly, Andrea Jain convincingly demonstrates that “arguments for the Hindu essence of yoga cannot stand serious scrutiny since yoga’s history is characterized by consistent intercultural and interreligious exchange.”¹⁷ This is not to suggest that such perspectives are not worthy of scholarly investigation. It is to say, however, that such perspectives are not the concern of this project.

¹⁵ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, chapters 6 and 7.

¹⁶ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 16. Chapple thoroughly analyzes how yoga influenced and was influenced by India’s plural cultural landscape, which makes problematic the assignment of ownership to any one religious tradition.

¹⁷ Andrea Jain, “Who Is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have It All Wrong?: On Hindu Origins and Yogaphobia,” *Journal for the American Academy of Religion*, 82, no. 2 (June 2014): 429, footnote 5.

The perspectives that are of concern to this project are those of yoga teachers, specifically yoga teachers in Springfield, Missouri, and the Ozarks. I choose this approach because scholars of MPY, mostly, have not considered how everyday instructors think and talk about, practice, and teach yoga.¹⁸ Scholars have considered and worked with the perspectives of MPY's most famous and world-renowned teachers including Swami Vivekananda, B.K.S. Iyengar, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi and others. The "exotic" and worldly status of these teachers, however, fails to capture how yoga is taught and practiced by individuals who do not travel the globe as spiritual celebrities but instead offer restorative yoga classes for those with limited mobility, or offer community and donation-based classes on the downtown square, or teach children breath and postural techniques to use before a test, or instruct high-school and college athletes how to stretch to prevent injury, or help self-seeking, white, Midwestern women explore the possibilities of their breath and bodies.

This project is concerned with the perspectives of yoga teachers in the Ozarks. Since "yogaphobia" is part of mainstream American culture to a degree, and both Emery and Kellie describe dealing with questions of yoga and religion, I find the teachers in the Ozarks to occupy a particularly interesting and unique space for the questions that this project explores.¹⁹ Given the religious climate of the Ozarks, instructors must confront and contend with yoga, Christianity, and yoga's "religious roots." In a cultural climate

¹⁸ Exceptions include Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures* (New York: Berg, 2005), and Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Jain, "Who Is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have It All Wrong?" I employ Andrea Jain's terminology here to describe what she calls the "Christian yogaphobic position." In her article she describes how this position is occupied by those, particularly Christians, who identify yoga as having an undeniable "Hindu essence."

where nativity scenes decorate lawns of fast-food restaurants, I ask these yogis, some of whom are Christian themselves, how they think about, teach, and practice yoga in a place where religion seems to be rigidly conceptualized. I ask about potential tensions between yoga's "religious roots" and the religions of the students they teach. I ask about changes they may or may not make to accommodate or alleviate those tensions. I ask about yoga, as its own entity, or own agent perhaps, and whether it is in itself something secular, something religious, or something spiritual.

This kind of approach, with its in-depth interviews and "thick description," places the research and the researcher so closely together that the distinction becomes invisible at times. I am a part of this community by attending classes, workshops, and fundraisers, but I have learned that even when my attendance is completely personal my research faculties are never totally turned off.²⁰ Further, this intimate relationship between researcher and subject influences the subject, or subjects, themselves. I was invited into quiet studios after classes had ended, given lengthy and enthusiastic responses on phone calls with strangers, offered thoughtful and inspirational answers to complicated questions over coffee, and welcomed into homes. Many times my interviewees cocked their heads as they told me, "I've never thought about it that way." Often upon my departure I was told with a smile, "You've given me a lot to think about." Many of my questions, I doubt, were on my informants' minds before our conversations. Because these yogis do not usually consider the questions I posed to them, sometimes their

²⁰ For example, during a class at a local studio on January 19, 2015, the instructor told us, while we were in *camatkarasana* (Wild Thing), that we were now going to create a *mandala* with our bodies. She further explained that all that meant was we would be flowing from pose to pose to complete a full circle on our mats. Having been studying *mandalas* for a graduate seminar course on Tantra, I about fell out of my Wild Thing.

responses seem contradictory or inconsistent. But this is the nature of ethnographic work, and though complicated, the multi-vocality that this approach solicits is one of its most important aspects. My research has not left this community unchanged. It has not left me unchanged. Instead it has created a union between academic curiosity and everyday practice. But to this yogi and scholar, this yoking was and is a necessary part of the research process that creates a space where complicated questions can be investigated with veracity.

In this project we will hear from nine people, all of whom are certified yoga teachers who practice and teach yoga in the Ozarks. There are three men and six women. There are five who identify as Christian, one who identifies as an atheist, and three whose religious and/or spiritual feelings or beliefs cannot be captured by a single word or label. Some of us met at a Kundalini Yoga workshop at a local yoga studio, which for them was a mandatory training module as part of their course to obtain yoga teacher certification. I proceeded with a snowball sampling method, where my informants suggested others that I might be interested in interviewing. The questions I asked, which are included in Appendix 1, were informed by Robert Wuthnow's Spiritual Journeys Interview script. I obtained IRB approval for this project, as demonstrated in Appendix 2.

Yoga Scholarship: Religious? Spiritual? Secular?

Before I dive into the details about how my gracious informants talk about yoga, I should first establish what informs the framework for my questions. Modern yoga scholarship has yet to explicitly address the spiritual, religious, or secular nature of the practice of postural yoga with the exception of a single chapter in one book, a subject to

which I will return shortly. Largely, this scholarship is in implicit agreement that MPY, in all of its strip mall glory, is a spiritual practice.

By way of a beginning, it might be best to discuss the work of Elizabeth De Michelis, since she is responsible for the omnipresent term Modern Postural Yoga. In *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*, De Michelis introduces the term Modern Postural Yoga, or MPY, as a way to distinguish between different types of yoga that, according to her, fall beneath the umbrella of Modern Yoga.²¹ Since the publication of *A History of Modern Yoga*, “MPY” has been used in virtually all scholarship in modern yoga studies. For example, Christopher Key Chapple, Candy Gunther Brown, Mark Singleton, and Andrea Jain all, at least once, borrow De Michelis’s terminology.²²

In *A History of Modern Yoga* De Michelis concludes, albeit problematically, that MPY is a “healing ritual of secular religion.”²³ In her argument for this conclusion she states that “in such DIY forms of spiritual practice [as MPY], there is room for the practitioner to decide whether to experience her practice as ‘spiritual’ or as altogether secular.”²⁴ The threefold progression of a typical MPY class affords it the label “ritual”

²¹ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 187-188.

²² See Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*; Candy Gunther Brown, *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) Singleton, *Yoga Body*; and Jain, *Selling Yoga*.

²³ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 248-251. I will address the complexities of this claim more deeply in Chapter 2.

²⁴ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251.

and its relative openness to interpretation apparently affords it the label “secular religion.”

A previous student of De Michelis, Mark Singleton, adopts the same tone in his *Yoga Body*.²⁵ In this work Singleton traces the overlapping yoga, physical culture, and muscular spirituality movements, predominantly in India, which he argues collided to produce what a contemporary American would recognize as yoga. His argument seems interested in dispelling the notion that yoga ever existed as a monolithic whole that leapt out of Patanjali’s *Yoga-Sutras* and into the damaging hands of “Westerners.” In his conclusion, he contends with the argument that the physical nature of MPY is evidence of its secularization by questioning the notion that the physical cannot also be spiritual.²⁶

Singleton writes about yoga with words like “esoteric,” “spiritual” and “harmonial,” not “religious,” with “Hindu roots,” or “secular.” In fact, in his introduction Singleton expresses his dislike for a rigid categorical framework when working with yoga, especially in a modern, transnational context.²⁷ I draw attention to Singleton’s terminology to illustrate that, like De Michelis, scholars write about yoga as though it has a spiritual mystique that locates it beyond categorization as either a religion, religious, or not religious. Though making a distinction between spiritual and religious is not the focus

²⁵ “Dr. Mark Singleton,” Modern Yoga Research, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://modernyogaresearch.org/people/dr-mark-singleton/>. Mark Singleton’s biography indicates that he was a research assistant to De Michelis at some point in his academic training.

²⁶ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 208.

²⁷ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 13-16 18-19. In these sections of his Introduction, Singleton attempts to position himself as departing from the “typological application” that De Michelis uses. Singleton worries that using such a “provisional [and] heuristic” typology might suggest that it is something more than a “working construct.”

of Singleton's work, his terminology is representative of the vague language scholars use to describe yoga.

Joseph Alter is another dominant scholar in the field of modern yoga studies. In one of his more recent works, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy*, he is less delicate in his articulation of yoga's religious and/or spiritual status. He writes that "yoga can be understood as so profound as to make standard categories of thought such as religion, spirituality, metaphysics, and science—to name but the most standard—singularly imprecise and dubiously qualified to articulate Truth."²⁸ Later, however, he asserts that modern yoga is not a religious system, but the "functional equivalent of a distinct religion."²⁹ This shifting terminology is prevalent throughout his book as he seems to struggle to find the words to adequately locate the yogi's body between science and philosophy. Nevertheless, it is in keeping with the vague and inconsistent terminology that scholars use when writing about yoga. Alter's explicit assertion that it is not a "religious system" only further illustrates that the way to write about yoga, at least academically, is with an air of esoteric spirituality.

Georg Feuerstein's prodigious work, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, also locates yoga in this vague space. Feuerstein defines yoga as an "enormous body of spiritual values, attitudes, precepts, and techniques that have been developed in India over at least five millennia . . . the psychospiritual technology specific to the great civilization of India."³⁰ Later in the book Feuerstein also asserts that

²⁸ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 4.

²⁹ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 13.

³⁰ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, 6.

“yoga is not religion in the conventional sense but rather spirituality, esotericism, or mysticism.”³¹ Not unlike Alter, Feuerstein is quite specific here about what the word yoga is meant to indicate: something spiritual or esoteric, but definitely not a religion, at least conventionally. This also fits with De Michelis’s argument that yoga is secular religion, which is another way of saying that it is not religion in the conventional sense.³²

Andrea Jain instead opts for a new way of understanding yoga that departs from the ambiguous terminology discussed above. In *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*, Jain argues that yoga is best considered a “body of religious practice.” Jain defines “body of religious practice” as a set of behaviors,

treated as sacred, set apart from the ordinary or mundane; they are grounded in a shared ontology or worldview (although that ontology may or may not provide a metanarrative or all-encompassing worldview); they are grounded in a shared axiology or set of values or goals concerned with resolving weakness, suffering, or death; and the above qualities are reinforced through narrative and ritual.³³

Indeed, MPY fits this typology. One enters a studio or room that is closed off. Most studios discourage talking, and request that practitioners remove their shoes and leave their belongings outside of the practice room. Practitioners might find displayed on walls images of Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, Hindu deities, and yoga gurus. Additionally, practitioners might hear incorporated into an instructor’s teaching quotes from yoga gurus, references to the *Yoga-Sutras*, and spiritual or New-Age rhetoric that suggests a particular, if vague, worldview. People practice yoga for a variety of reasons including

³¹ Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, 83.

³² If De Michelis were to argue that yoga is a religion in a conventional sense, it would not require the descriptor “secular.” I will discuss more fully the confusion created by De Michelis’s terminology in Chapter two.

³³ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98.

physical fitness, stress relief, and spiritual fulfillment, which suggests agreement, to a degree, that yoga provides something positive toward those goals.

But Jain also notes how some yogis insist that there is nothing religious about yoga, opting instead to describe it as spiritual. Jain writes that “postural yogis frequently avoid categorizing yoga as *religion*. Many postural yogis prefer to categorize it as *spiritual* or invoke other non-explicitly religious terms to describe it.”³⁴ Regarding the impending taxation of yoga classes in Missouri, Jain quotes Bruce Roger, a yoga studio owner and instructor, as stating, “Yoga is a spiritual practice. It is not a purchase.”³⁵

Though Jain is perhaps correct in her assessment that yogis prefer to describe yoga as spiritual instead of religious because “they share a vision of religion that narrowly defines it primarily in terms of shared belief,” the disconnect between her terminology and that of her yogi sources is indicative of yoga’s complicated, multi-vocal social location.³⁶ It is also perhaps indicative of the inadequacy of rigid categories of understanding.

Rhetorical analysis illustrates the difficulty scholars have when attempting to categorize yoga, especially the practice of MPY. While these tensions between religion, spirituality, and secularity are not the predominant foci of any of these works, the previous quotes from scholars and practitioners indeed leave the reader wondering about the use of such terminology. Why describe yoga as a “body of religious practice” instead

³⁴ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 97.

³⁵ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98. P.J. Huffstutter, “Missouri’s yoga enthusiasts go to the mat over sales tax,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 2009, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/dec/18/nation/la-na-yoga-tax18-2009dec18>. Roger is a resident of St. Louis who has been teaching yoga for twenty-five years. Protesting yogis successfully reversed the decision to tax yoga classes made by Missouri’s Department of Revenue; yoga classes in Missouri are now exempt from sales tax.

³⁶ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98.

of a spiritual practice? How is yoga spiritual but not religious? What makes it spiritual? If it is spiritual, how can it be secular? Moreover, the evidence and sources that these scholars work with largely do not include average-Jane yogis. Instead they rely on texts, advertisements, propaganda, instruction manuals, world-renowned teachers, and cultural critiques to arrive at their conclusions. This project provides local voices who have passionately held perspectives on where MPY fits with regard to religion, spirituality, and secularity.

There exists one final voice that necessitates consideration in the conversation of MPY and the shambolic categories with which scholars have attempted to write about MPY. In a chapter from *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America* Candy Gunther Brown tells a cautionary tale to her readers about the dangers of “secularizing” what were, and perhaps still are, religious practices in the name of complementary and alternative medicine. Though not a scholar of yoga specifically, her conclusion about yoga serves as a way to complicate the problematic and only implicitly agreed upon inherent spirituality of MPY. Brown writes that the physical and spiritual dimensions of yoga cannot be neatly separated and that regardless of the context, Christian or otherwise, yoga has an inherent religious purpose: to yoke with the divine.³⁷ Yoga, according to Brown, is quite religious, a conclusion that directly contradicts those of the scholars I discussed above.

This contention that MPY is inherently religious has also been taken up in a legal arena. Judge John Meyer in San Diego County, California, ruled in 2012 that “Yoga ‘at

³⁷ Brown, *The Healing Gods*, 57.

it's roots is religious' . . . but is deeply engrained in secular U.S. society and 'is a distinctly American cultural phenomenon.'”³⁸ Judge Meyer also articulated that “yoga as it has developed in the last twenty years is rooted in American culture, not Indian culture. A reasonable student would not objectively perceive that the Encinitas School District yoga advances or promotes religion.”³⁹

The need for a court decision regarding MPY’s religious nature arose when concerned parents whose children at the time attended Olivenhain Pioneer Elementary School brought suit against the Encinitas Union School District in California for violating the First Amendment of the Constitution by promoting Hindu indoctrination during the yoga sessions of a physical education class.⁴⁰ Toward this argument, the classes and teachers are funded by the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Foundation. Sri K. Pattabhi Jois founded Ashtanga Yoga in the United States, and his foundation seeks to spread the practice and teachings of Ashtanga Yoga throughout the world.⁴¹ Despite efforts by the Jois Foundation to “secularize” the practice of Ashtanga yoga for instruction in a public school system by removing Sanskrit terminology and any cultural or religious references,

³⁸ Marty Graham, “Yoga Not Teaching Religion in Encinitas Schools, California Judge Rules, Appeal Expected,” *Huffington Post*, July 1, 2013, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/01/yoga-school-religion- n 3530347.html>. See also, *Sedlock v. Baird*, 37 Cal. 0035910 40 (2013) where Judge Meyer states: “the court concludes that the district is not teaching any religious component in its health and welfare program.”

³⁹ Nancy Redd, “Controversy Grows Over School Yoga,” *Huffpost Live*, August 21, 2013, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/school-yoga-controversy/520572f42b8c2a23cc0005d9>.

⁴⁰ Associated Press, “Encinitas Union School Yoga Sees Backlash, Parents Call it Religious Indoctrination,” *Huffington Post*, October 12, 2012, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/12/encinitas-union-school-di n 1961578.html>.

⁴¹ “About,” *Shri K. Pattabhi Jois charitable trust*, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.kpitrust.org/>.

some parents were not satisfied.⁴² After hearing testimony from religious studies experts including Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Singleton regarding the religiousness of yoga as it is being practiced in the Encinitas Union School District, Judge Meyer ruled in favor of the school district and yoga continues to be taught in Encinitas by teachers from the Jois Foundation.

These examples of MPY as spiritual, religious, or “a healing ritual of secular religion” inform the framework I create to investigate how teachers think about, talk about, practice, and teach yoga. It is from this scholarship that my three categories of *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular* emerge. In my investigation, I do not provide my informants with a specific way of defining these categories. Rather, I ask them to articulate how they understand them and then how they understand them in relationship to MPY. I ask my informants about changes they make regarding language, terminology, and practices like chanting, if any, when they teach in different places or to different people. I ask them to specifically consider teaching in a public school and whether their teaching style or terminology would change in order to accommodate the “secular” environment of a public school.

⁴² “Frequently Asked Questions,” *For Parents*, Encinitas Union School District, last modified October 30, 2012, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.eusd.net/Parents/health%20and%20wellness/FAQ.pdf>. For the question “Is there a religious component to the program and is this constitutional?” the district responds “Public schools are not allowed to teach religion. That would be a violation of the Constitution. The yoga program taught in the Encinitas Union School District provides no religious instruction whatsoever. There is no discussion of spiritualism, mysticism, or religion in any context. The students simply perform the physical components of movement and breathing related to mainstream yoga. Yoga is a physical exercise regime practiced by millions of people all over the world, representing many different religious beliefs.” They also explain that “the District has made many changes to the yoga program to make it more ‘kid friendly’ and to address some of the concerns voiced by a few of our parents. All cultural references in our yoga program have been removed. We do not teach students Sanskrit phrases and all of the yoga poses have been renamed into easy to remember words such as, ‘Gorilla,’ or ‘Mountain.’ Although the poses themselves are the same physically demanding poses used in adult yoga, students have an easier time remembering our terminology.”

Since this project concerns the categories *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular*, and it deals specifically with these categories as they pertain to practices in American society, it also invites conversation with a group of scholars whose work is focused on exploring similar issues. Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway have attempted to parse the differences between religion and spirituality, while arguing against the traditional assumptions that these categories are mutually exclusive. Traditionally, they argue, “‘spirituality’ appears to represent the functional, more intrinsic dimensions of religion, whereas ‘religion’ represents the more substantive, extrinsic ones.”⁴³

Wade Clark Roof addresses these categories as well. *Religious*, according to Roof, is the category beneath which doctrine, creed, institution, belief, or practice may be placed. *Spirituality*, on the other hand, includes aspects like “feelings, awareness of innermost realities, [and] . . . intimations of the presence of the sacred.”⁴⁴ Roof is careful to note that spirituality may or may not be divorced from anything religious. He later adds that when we think of these categories, we must conceive of “boundaries [that] are porous, allowing people, ideas, beliefs, practices, symbols, and spiritual currents to cross.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, “‘Being Religious’ or ‘Being Spiritual’ in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 2 (June 2002): 289. Similar to Ammerman, Marler and Hadaway identify traditional concepts of religion and spirituality as those they are interested in moving beyond. “Extrinsic,” in this context, refers to “those dastardly folks who use their religion,” while “intrinsic” refers to “those saintly folks who live their faith.” Marler and Hadaway are interested in moving away from the polarizing binary they describe here. Kenneth I. Pargament, “The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality? Yes and No” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9, no 1 (1999): 10.

⁴⁴ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 34.

⁴⁵ Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 44.

Nancy T. Ammerman has offered a potential solution while deconstructing the binary between religion and spirituality. She argues that *religion* is “usually assumed to be organized, traditional, and communal,” as opposed to *spiritual* which is “often described as improvised and individual.”⁴⁶ Ammerman agrees with Roof regarding the necessity for flexible, permeable boundaries when studying American religious life. She argues that “paying attention to everyday experience quickly explodes any assumption that religion is always (or ever) one thing, either for individuals or for groups.”⁴⁷ Ammerman’s corrective for rigid categories is to speak of “religiosities,” implying a plurality of practices that could be categorized as religious. One wonders, then, do Ammerman’s “religiosities” include “spiritualities”? Does this mean that the practice of yoga could be categorized as religious?

In *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, Ammerman deals more specifically and critically with *religious* and *spiritual* and how they may or may not be related. In her exploration of religion and spirituality in everyday life, Ammerman finds it more helpful to examine how the category *spiritual* is used to describe life than it is to articulate an explicit definition.⁴⁸ Moreover she argues, “However we are to define religion, it must include spiritualities of a variety of sorts. Scholars and popular culture often paint

⁴⁶ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no 2 (June 2013): 259. It is important to note that she does not argue that this should be the definition of religion, rather that this is how it has been conceived in scholarship. Her argument here is actually that we need to move away from these binary choices.

⁴⁷ Nancy Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

⁴⁸ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion In Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24.

religion and spirituality as opposites, but the participants in this study who were most active in organized religion were also most committed to spiritual practices and a spiritual view of the world.”⁴⁹

Ammerman also briefly discusses these convoluted categories and how her informants talk about yoga. She finds that “whatever else it may be, then, yoga *can* be a spiritual practice, and a handful of our participants (two Catholics, two Jews, a liberal Protestant, and two who are unaffiliated)—none of whom claimed any other prayer practice—talked about yoga as part of their spiritual repertoire. They all appreciated the meditative side of their yoga classes, but it is also fair to say that exercise and stress relief were as much a part of the picture as spiritual engagement.”⁵⁰ For the purposes of this project Ammerman’s understanding of distinct yet overlapping categories will serve as the scholarly sounding board for the ways my informants talk about the practice of yoga.

Perhaps the practice of yoga better fits within what Robert Wuthnow calls “practice-oriented spirituality.”⁵¹ This category, according to Wuthnow, is comprised of “a cluster of intentional activities concerned with relating to the sacred . . . [that] generally takes place in ordinary life.”⁵² Wuthnow is speaking specifically about Christian practice-oriented spirituality, but perhaps his words can be helpful for thinking

⁴⁹ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 289.

⁵⁰ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 71.

⁵¹ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 168. Wuthnow is unclear about how, specifically, he understands the term “sacred.” One can glean, however, that he is moving away from a strict understanding of the sacred as that which is opposed to the profane, and toward a more individual conception of the sacred which, in this case, is sometimes located in mundane, ordinary life.

⁵² Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 170.

about the practice of yoga in the Ozarks. Indeed, it is an intentional activity, but is it always concerned with relating to the sacred? Does it take place in ordinary life? One of the characteristics that leads De Michelis to argue that the practice of MPY is a healing ritual of secular religion is that it involves a period of reorientation, an “introductory quietening time: arrival and settling in,” creating a “cordoned off space.”⁵³ According to De Michelis it seems that creating a space that is separate from everyday life is an integral part of the MPY practice, which would make it difficult to place within Wuthnow’s “practice-oriented spirituality.”

How do these categories and boundaries function in the minds of yoga teachers in the Ozarks? According to my informants, are *spiritual* and *religious* separate categories? Where within those frameworks lies the practice of yoga? Finally, based on where these yogis locate the practice of MPY, how does that support or challenge the way scholarship conceives of these muddy categories?

The chapters that follow will deal with how the teachers I spoke with understand the practice of MPY, especially with regard to the categories *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular*. The first chapter will investigate how these instructors see yoga as religious, if they do at all, and what about yoga leads them to that conclusion. The second chapter will consider how these instructors see yoga as secular and what specifically about yoga is secular. The third chapter is concerned with how my informants see yoga as spiritual. The fourth chapter will locate this yoga-as-spiritual argument within its embodied practice. Since each of my interviewees addresses yoga with regard to each category, I contend that what emerges from these conversations is a serious need to reconsider categorical

⁵³ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251, 253.

frameworks at large, at least in attempting to understand embodied practices such as yoga in American culture. I will also argue that MPY's spirituality is located in its practice as an embodied experience. My arguments will require a reconfiguration of these categories, especially of *spiritual* as a classification that exists both within and beyond those of *religious* and *secular*. As I stated previously, this three-part framework is derived from scholarship specifically about MPY. But when applied to the everyday situations of yoga teachers in the Ozarks, the mutual exclusivity of the three categories begins to break down and necessitates a more fluid and dynamic conceptualization that prioritizes individual intention.

CHAPTER 1: YOGA AS RELIGIOUS

Other [students of mine] will say, “It isn’t, but it is mine. It is my religion because it is the closest thing that I have found to a belief system that adheres to what I see. What I see as the most nourishing of practices. It’s what I choose to devote myself. It’s a path to which I devote myself.”

—Beth Spindler, yoga therapist

Ozark yogis have complicated but clear ways of using *religious* to talk about yoga. Moreover, what makes yoga religious is much more dynamic than simply identifying, however problematically, Modern Postural Yoga’s (MPY) Hindu roots. To these yogis, yoga has some connections to Hinduism and Eastern religions more broadly, but understanding yoga as religious does not stop there. Instead, Ozark yogis use *religious* to describe yoga in two ways. First, describing a yoga practice as religious can indicate one’s dedication and commitment to a consistent practice. Second, religious can be used to describe a yoga practice that is infused with religious discourse and emphasis, like offering prayers during Sun Salutations or quoting Christian scripture.

This chapter will examine how yogis in the Ozarks use the term *religious* to talk about yoga. First, I will consider the perspectives of my nonreligious, spiritual but not religious, and otherwise uncategorized participants, who describe how different qualities of one’s yoga practice could afford it the descriptor *religious*. Next I will explore how Christian participants talk about their practices and the yoga they teach as *religious*. From commitment and discipline to engaging Christian scripture and prayer during Sun Salutations, how yogis use *religious* to describe yoga clearly demonstrates the practice’s flexibility and variability. Finally, I will use these conversations to reflect on how scholarship understands and engages the term *religious*, offering a critique that employs

the dynamic conceptions that these yogis have of the term *religious*. These conversations will demonstrate that yoga's meanings are varied, multi-vocal, and flexible, and as my interviewees will indicate, highly individualized.

Here I will be explicit: I do not wish, nor am I attempting, to construct a definition of *religious*. Instead, my aim is to explore and understand how yogis use *religious* to talk about yoga and to use their perspectives to enhance and nuance how scholarship may engage with *religious* and practices that can be described as such in American culture. To quote Nancy Ammerman, "Recognizing a wider range of variation [in our conception of religion] will allow us more powerful explanatory models."⁵⁴

One can hear echoes of Ammerman's argument for a more varied conception of religion and spirituality in Andrea Jain's *Selling Yoga*. As discussed in the introduction, Jain prefers to label yoga as a "body of religious practice" instead of a spiritual practice, which she justifies by arguing that it affords a more versatile understanding of *religious*.⁵⁵ As evidence of yoga's flexibility and the various ways *religious* can be used to examine and brand yoga, Jain argues:

Though many postural yogis prefer to describe their practice as "spiritual," others eagerly associate the religious dimensions of yoga with specific religious traditions or institutions. It is not unusual to find overt religious packaging of yoga brands. In the history of postural yoga, yoga advocates have packaged yoga in modern metaphysical, scientific, and fitness materials. In the history of premodern and early modern yoga, advocates packaged yoga in everything from Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain materials to Protestant materials. Today, postural yoga

⁵⁴ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 293.

⁵⁵ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98. Here Jain argues that postural yogis' preference to describe yoga as *spiritual*, and avoid using *religion* or *religious*, is caused by their narrow conception of *religious* that privileges Protestant and Catholic conceptions of the term. As a scholar of religion, she understands herself to "think more broadly about what counts as religious than most people do." Thus, her broader conception of *religious* leads her to "body of religious practice."

continues to be packaged in overtly religious ways to meet the desires of specific consumer audiences.⁵⁶

Jain's examination is limited to how yoga can be understood as religious in a traditional sense. That is, the religious packaging she is discussing pertains to rhetoric that refers to what are largely recognized as world religions. It also demonstrates how varied and multi-vocal yoga's packaging can be. The conversations in this chapter will broaden how yoga can be described as *religious*, both in support of and beyond what Jain argues here.

Yoga as Religious: "It isn't [a religion] but it is mine."

The epigraph that begins this chapter comes from Beth. Beth is fifty-six years old and a full-time yoga therapist in Springfield who grew up the daughter of a Methodist minister. Beth teaches yoga classes at studios and Cox Medical Center and offers yoga teacher training programs. Beth understands *religious* to mean "adhering to a specific dogma."⁵⁷ She no longer considers herself a Methodist, but instead offers this about her religious and spiritual beliefs:

My study [of yoga] predominantly started in the San Francisco/Bay Area, when I lived in Sri Eknath Easwaran's ashram. And he's probably the best known meditation teacher of our time. And you'll see his texts probably in your courses of study. His *Dhammapada*, *Bhagavad Gita*, his books on meditation, his even Christian mysticism. Yeah, Easwaran was quite the scholar. In the latter part of my teens, with my husband of [now] 36 years, we began exploration in our 20s and found areas of metaphysics and became more and more interested in Eastern teachings and when we moved to the Bay Area and started reading more deeply in Eastern components and attending Vedanta Society various groups. I even remember one day we were dancing with Hare Krishnas and thinking that was just wonderful fun. But, Easwaran grounded that because he had this amazing ecumenical approach, wherein he didn't see a difference: the mystics all speak the

⁵⁶ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 124.

⁵⁷ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

same language, but they use different words. A Christian mystic will talk about Holy Spirit, an Eastern mystic will talk about *Kundalini Shakti*: same thing. Same thing.⁵⁸

Beth's unique perspective on religion and spirituality is reflected in her understanding of yoga. I asked her if there was anything religious or spiritual about the practice itself. In her response, she talks about how her trainees respond to a prompt about religion and yoga on their final examination:

I've had over 140 graduates from the 200 hour training, and twenty from the 500 hour program, and they're all over the world now. All over the world. But on the final is [the] question: is yoga a religion? I get interesting answers. They'll say no, it is spiritual, it is not religious because there's no dogma to yoga. And a lot of people will say that. Others will say, "It isn't, but it is mine. It is my religion because it is the closest thing that I have found to a belief system that adheres to what I see. What I see as the most nourishing of practices. It's what I choose to devote myself. It's a path to which I devote myself." I've always taught Sunday classes and a lot of times the advanced classes are on Sunday. A lot of people will come to classes and say "this is my church" because [they] come out of my classes feeling like a better human being; better able to serve, better able to cope, more present, and more aware. To me that's the aim of spirituality. The aim of spirituality is to make us better people. That's what people get from [yoga]. Again, religion? No. In my opinion is yoga a religion? No. I have had people come through who were fundamentalist Christians, I've had people come through the training who were Sufi, who were Jewish, and every person that's come through has said: "This has deepened my religion . . . it has made me better able to practice my faith."⁵⁹

Like Andrea Jain, Beth believes yoga can meet the religious needs of practitioners, be they religious in a traditional sense or otherwise. It is available as a path of devotion and as a method of self-development. For Beth, yoga is not a religion itself in the sense that it would create conflict for those who have a religion since Christians, Jews, and Sufis have expressed to Beth their affinity for yoga.

⁵⁸ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

⁵⁹ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

Similarly, Emery, a full-time yoga teacher whom we met in the introduction, talks about the universal applicability of yoga. While her view is consistent with Beth's, that yoga is not itself religious, it can be religious for the practitioner who wants or needs it to be. In describing how she understands *religious*, Emery offered:

Religious means a specific doctrine. Whether it's Christianity and the Bible, or the different forms of Christianity—each have their own doctrine. Religion to me is spirituality, but with specific rules and specific terms. So to me spirituality is a broad thing. And to me all religions are spiritual, they're subcategorized into being Jewish, and Christian, and Islamic, and Hindu. So they all have this common theme of spirituality, but they all have their own specific way of doing it, or of presenting [it], or names of calling it.⁶⁰

With this conception in mind—of the inseparability of religion and spirituality—I asked Emery if she would use *religious* to describe yoga. She replied, “Yoga is a religion for some people. Like I said, all the religions I feel are spiritual, and then religion is a specific doctrine. For some people, yoga is their doctrine. There are the words, the Hindu gods, the chants. That is their way of relating to the universe, of practicing their spirituality.”⁶¹

Beth and Emery talk about yoga as being both religious and spiritual, which supports Ammerman's assertion that to talk of religion and spirituality as separate, distinct categories is insufficient. Instead, in her own ethnographic research Ammerman finds that “the boundaries between talk about spirituality and talk about deities beyond oneself are completely permeable. In discursive practice, a large portion of our American sample is spiritually religious and religiously spiritual.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

⁶¹ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

⁶² Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 31.

Seth is forty-eight years old and a yoga teacher who grew up in southeast Kansas and has a master's degree in psychology. He describes his religious or spiritual beliefs: "I am an atheist. But I'm somewhat of a peculiar atheist in that I don't like most atheists because I find that being an atheist is an absence of belief and doesn't necessarily mean that you're against other people's beliefs. It just means that I don't believe—I mean, what you see is what you get. That's what I believe."⁶³ Seth's understanding of yoga and its purpose is very similar to how Emery and Beth talk about yoga's universal applicability. Seth's thoughts also underscore the overlap that exists between religion and spirituality:

I believe that yoga should enhance each individual's spirituality, whatever that means to them. In my belief a Muslim and a Christian and an atheist and every other religion on the planet ought to be able to throw down on the same floor and in the most awesome practice have their most awesome experience all together. What I'm finding, though, is some people like yoga their way. And to them yoga does become a religious experience. And they don't really know it but they get so zealous over it that they tell me what yoga is to me and I don't like that. I don't like anybody telling me what to do especially when something is so personal. And yoga is most certainly very personal.⁶⁴

For Seth, because yoga is so personal, it takes on individual meaning and significance. While he, like Emery and Beth, feels that yoga can be shared with people regardless of religious or spiritual affiliation, or lack thereof, one person's yoga is not necessarily that of another.

From Seth's words we can also identify a parallel between zealous yogis and an evangelical style of religion. Seth expresses his dislike for yogis who make him feel as though they are imposing their understanding of yoga. Because "yoga is most certainly very personal" for Seth, evangelism is a negative attribute for a yogi. He takes this

⁶³ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 26, 2014.

⁶⁴ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 26, 2014.

connection even further during our conversation: “I can see why people think yoga is [a] religion because there [are] a lot of people that act like it is. I can see why people don’t want yoga taught in schools because some yogis are pushy. Just like some Christians are pushy. Just like some Muslims are pushy.”⁶⁵

Kellie, a full-time yoga teacher whom we met in the introduction, described people who are dedicated to a daily yoga practice as religious:

Well I mean, you do do yoga religiously, essentially. It’s a daily practice. So even if you’re not doing a daily *asana* practice, or even if your *asana* practice is only ten or fifteen minutes, you’ve got thirty minutes of meditation . . . You have breathwork that you might do throughout the day, even while you’re vacuuming the floor. You can do *kabalabiti* breathing [one long inhale followed by many short, forceful exhales] while you’re . . . I don’t know if you want to do fire breath while you’re vacuuming the floor, but you could! So it is something that you do religiously, like every day, in some form or another.⁶⁶

An intriguing pattern emerges from how Kellie, Seth, Beth, and Emery talk about yoga as *religious*. They are all very clear that yoga itself is not inherently religious in such a way as to render it incompatible for those who are religious in a traditional sense. In other words, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and other religious people need not worry about their yoga practice interfering with their religion. Indeed, though, yoga can be a religious practice for both traditionally religious and nonreligious people alike. These yogis seem to agree with Andrea Jain’s argument that “modern yoga is malleable.”⁶⁷

What does that say about how these yogis understand *religious*? When describing how they understand *religious*, Beth and Emery mentioned dogma and doctrine, rules and

⁶⁵ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 26, 2014.

⁶⁶ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015. *Asana* is the Sanskrit word used to refer to a posture. For example, *Padmasana*, is also referred to as “Lotus Pose.”

⁶⁷ Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 41.

regulations. Seth articulated that to him religious is “a group of people [who] have a set of rules that defines [their] belief. [The group is] generally more organized, maybe [with] lots of definitions: God, Bible, definitions, rules.”⁶⁸ Kellie described *religious* in terms of dedication and commitment to a regimented practice. Perhaps it is the flexibility with which these yogis conceive of *religious* that renders it appropriate as a descriptor for yoga. Indeed, traditionally religious practices like attending church and daily devotions or prayer contain the qualities that my informants say comprise their understanding of *religious*.

The practice of yoga can be described as religious in the same manner. Participants come to practice on their mats, either in a class or at home, in daily or otherwise regimented patterns. There are rules, to a degree, since not every posture that the human body is capable of performing is a yoga pose. There are also countless “denominations” of MPY, some of which include prescribed sets of sequences, like Bikram or Ashtanga, that make them unique to other forms of MPY.⁶⁹ And perhaps a doctrine emerges when we consider how these yogis describe the dimensions of what they consider to be *real* yoga. When I asked Beth to tell me in her own words what yoga is, she was very specific about what constitutes real yoga: “It is when it becomes about the breath. It is when it becomes about *bandha* and interior practice that people begin to grasp hold of the thread of what yoga is about. If there’s no emphasis on the breath,

⁶⁸ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

⁶⁹ In a Bikram Yoga class, students will move through a set series of twenty-six postures in a heated room. In Ashtanga Yoga, there are four series, each having its own sequence of postures, also usually performed in a heated room.

they're not gettin' it. If they're working outside of an understanding of the breath, they're missing it."⁷⁰

Kellie also described how, in her own practice, yoga came to be about breathing:

Once I got to that point where I was able to start reading and start really figuring out the spiritual aspect of it and that it wasn't all about the physical practice. That it was about breathing, and it was about finding that connection to myself. . . . There's just so much more to yoga than the physical portion of it. All you're basically doing, the physical portion of the yoga practice, is to keep your body nice and strong so that you can lead a really long, fulfilling life. Essentially [that] is what [the *asanas*] are there for. They're just to keep you nice and strong. It's all of the breath, the *pranayama*, and all of the meditation that comes along with that. That's the spiritual side. That's the part that gets into you. That's the connection to yourself.⁷¹

Similarly, Emery talked at length about how yoga helps her pay attention to her breath, which functions as a stepping-stone for increasing her self-awareness: "I've just trained my mind to work in this way from my mat, off my mat into my head. And it's really helped me to see that when first it was just noticing my breathing pattern, now I start to notice my thinking pattern, which is mind-blowing."⁷²

⁷⁰ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015. *Bandhas* are interior energy locks that a practitioner uses to manipulate the flow of energy in the subtle body. It is important here to note that for Beth, emphasis on the breath involves more than just the inhalation and exhalation of oxygen. Breath is the mechanism by which one manipulates *prana*. Earlier in our conversation Beth talked about this connection. "The entire purpose of yoga practice is the correction and redirection of *prana*. And it is about healing. It is about reconstructing broken nervous systems. It is about, in effect, when I say *prana*, *prana* isn't breath, *prana* is the life force. It's that which moves the breath. And when there is deficiency, the body and the nervous system become ill. It's like an electrical system, an electrical circuit. When breakers shut down, there's a deficiency in *prana* and disease develops in some capacity; mental, physical, wherever. So in that sense I work with the correction and redirection of *prana*. Whether it is through physical *asana* practices, whether it is through breath correction and redirection, or whether it is with some of the other of the eight limbs of yoga, developing focus and concentration, gathering in the senses, or meditation." What Beth is describing here is a relationship between the physical and subtle bodies, what is arguably a more tantric understanding of yoga.

⁷¹ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, February 23, 2015.

⁷² Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, May 8, 2015. Breath is a key component of yoga for Emery. Her breathing pattern is one of the first things that practicing yoga made her aware of. As she describes here, that awareness, which begins with the breath, continues to expand as she continues to practice yoga.

For these Ozark yogis, *religious* can be used to describe a practice with a set of rules, a dogma, evangelical zealotry, or an individual's commitment and dedication to that practice. The practice of yoga, however, is not religious in and of itself. Instead, it can be religious and fulfill the functions of a religion for that particular yogi. If we take the way that my informants conceptualize *religious* and apply it to MPY, that analysis betrays just how religious a yoga practice can be. But for some, yoga can also be an integral part of their religious, that is, Christian, identity and practice.

Yoga as Religious: "It's the way I reconnect with our Lord."

Yoga is a tool in a toolbox to help folks be able to sit down, be still, and worship or meditate. All of those things are commanded/requested of us in the Bible. It so happens, that has ALWAYS been the reason for yoga. Whatever a person was, be it Hindu, Buddhist, or whatever, it was a way of balancing the body so that one was able to be connected to themselves and the Divine (hello, Holy Spirit without and within), and SIT DOWN FOR CRYING OUT LOUD. Be Still, the Lord says.

—Robyn Hurst, Vessels of Clay Fitness

Perhaps one of the most recognizable forms of Christian yoga is Brooke Boon's Holy Yoga. Now an international empire, Holy Yoga describes itself as "100 percent Jesus and 100 percent yoga."⁷³ Holy Yoga is not alone in its fusion of health, wellness, yoga, and Christianity. In studios across the country, online, and on DVD, businesses offer variations on this brand of yoga including classes like Christoga, Christ Centered

⁷³ "About," Holy Yoga, accessed August 25, 2015, <https://holyyoga.net/about>. "Holy Yoga is experiential worship created to deepen people's connection to Christ. Our sole purpose is to facilitate a Christ-honoring experience that offers an opportunity to believers and non-believers alike to authentically connect to God through His Word, worship and wellness."

Yoga, and in Branson, Missouri, Faith Focused Yoga.⁷⁴ As Andrea Jain has observed and my interviewees will demonstrate, “Such Christian yoga brands often assign Christian terms and prayers to certain yoga postures or sequences and replace South Asian imagery, such as the popular ‘Om’ symbol, with Christian imagery, such as the cross.”⁷⁵ I asked these Christian yogis to talk about how they practice yoga as Christians, what they add to or take away from the practice to give it a Christian theme, and how yoga interacts with their religious lives.

Robyn, whom we heard from in the epigraph of this section, is thirty-nine years old and a yoga teacher in the Ozarks who spent many years as a professional singer and dancer. Robyn is a Christian and has been teaching faith-focused, or Christ-centered, yoga classes in the Ozarks and holds a Yahweh Yoga Teacher certificate from Yahweh Yoga of Chandler, Arizona. Robyn came to practice yoga when her physically demanding professional life started taking a significant toll on her body and she was no longer reaching her goals with her regular fitness routine. She found wellness and a reprieve from stressful emotional struggles, describing yoga as her “perfect soulmate workout.”⁷⁶ I asked her to describe what differentiates her Faith Focused classes from other types of yoga classes that she teaches:

⁷⁴ “Classes,” My Hot Yoga, accessed August 25, 2015. <http://www.myhotyoga.net/classes/>. Here My Hot Yoga, which has studios in Springfield and Branson, advertises and explains the different types of classes they offer, including Faith Focused Yoga. See also Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 126.

⁷⁵ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 126. It is also important to note the Christian opponents to Christian brands of yoga. For example, PraiseMoves, “the Christian alternative to yoga,” claims that “Christian yoga is an oxymoron.” Laurette Williams, “Why a Christian ALTERNATIVE to Yoga?” *PraiseMoves*, accessed May 1, 2014, www.praisemoves.com/about-us-why-a-christian-alternative-to-yoga/yoga-is-religion/. For a deeper discussion, see Chapter 6 in Andrea Jain’s *Selling Yoga*, as well as Andrea Jain, “Who Is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have It All Wrong?: On Hindu Origins and Yogaphobia,”

⁷⁶ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

So what sets it apart is the focus really. You would have Biblical scriptures from the Christian Bible and you would have Christian-themed music, whether it's all instrumental or it's a playlist of praise and worship and Christian contemporary, as well as secular stuff. I often use secular things that to me can have a double meaning in my classes; they're happy and positive. And even in my classes that aren't [Christian], what I have called my secular classes, I still make my playlist as positive and inspirational as possible. So it's got a theme or it's got a mood or a good message that is going to leave someone feeling better than when they came in. The big difference then would be the fact that it is going to have a Christian theme or Christian scripture and affirmation, and prayer, meditation time.⁷⁷

Robyn makes a clear distinction between her Christian and secular yoga classes. In a Faith Focused Yoga class from Robyn, the practitioner can expect the class to take on a Christian theme in the music, rhetoric, scripture references, and opportunities for prayer and affirmation. When I asked Robyn about teaching classes in churches, she emphasized the compatibility between yoga and Christianity: "I think what better place to worship your Lord than right there where you generally worship your Lord? He calls us to take care of ourselves and to take care of our bodies and why wouldn't we do that in His own house? Of course granted His own house is also our own body so it can happen anywhere—in a church."⁷⁸ For Robyn, yoga is an ideal companion to one's Christian life. Not only does it present the practitioner with opportunities to pray and worship, it is ideally suited to maintain health and wellness, which Robyn identifies as a tenet of her Christianity.

From Robyn's words, we can also get a sense of her versatility as a yoga teacher. If one were to participate in every class Robyn taught for a given week, one would experience both her Christian and her "secular" yoga styles, in addition to variations in

⁷⁷ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

⁷⁸ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

the physical demands of each class. Robyn is not unique in her flexibility as a teacher. In the introduction, Kellie also talked about how she varies her teaching style based on the studio she's in or the demographic of her students.⁷⁹ This individual and studio-level variability demonstrates yoga's flexibility and the ability of students and teachers to create a yoga that serves their needs, religious and otherwise. It supports Courtney Bender's conclusion about yoga, where her interviewees demonstrated similar characteristics of the practice: "Rather than seeing yoga as a 'health' or 'expressive' or 'spiritual' pursuit singularly, yoga thus takes on all characteristics, confounding any claims to say that it is one or the other."⁸⁰ That is to say, there is indeed room for one's yoga practice to be a "worship tool" or an opportunity for prayer, without delegitimizing a yoga practice that is "just a workout" and thus totally secular.⁸¹

Kathy was participating in a yoga teacher training program when I met her at a Kundalini yoga workshop. She is forty-nine years old, teaches high school English in Republic, Missouri, and is now a member of a Methodist congregation, though she spent part of her childhood in a Baptist church in Georgia. Kathy has been practicing yoga for two and a half years and has recently begun incorporating her religious life into her yoga practice: "Recently what I've started doing at the end of my practice—I've seen other practitioners do this, they'll put their hands at heart center then they'll go to their mouth,

⁷⁹ Recall Kellie's words from the Introduction where she described that if she taught yoga in a bigger city she might not encounter so many students who are uneasy about some aspects of yoga.

⁸⁰ Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 43.

⁸¹ See Chapter Two where I develop more thoroughly a discussion about how my informants understand a physically focused yoga practice to be secular.

then they'll go to their third eye, with their hands. So what I've done is I've started to incorporate my own prayers when I do those gestures."⁸² Even in a class that is not designed to be Christian, Kathy finds opportunities to incorporate her faith into yoga practice.

Kathy also described some dangers that yoga could present to Christian faith. I asked if there were ways that yoga could be made to be religious and how she felt about someone claiming that yoga was a religion:

Well, I have a hard time with that concept because my Christianity asks me to keep God as the only God in my life. So if I then shift my focus to the practice of yoga and that becomes a God, which I've worked really hard to not let that happen because I really like yoga. I really like going and doing yoga. So if I let that consume me like anything, food, other types of exercise, any type of substance can become, even a relationship can become a focus that is not with your attention on the Divine Creator. Then I think that that's going to be a problem. So to answer your question I don't think yoga should be a religion. I don't think it should be defined that way.⁸³

Once again, we can see evidence of yoga's malleability. It is not itself a religion, she tells us, but could become problematic if her focus turns from God to her yoga practice.

Interestingly, Kathy underscores the argument that Jain makes regarding the narrow understanding of the word *religion* for many postural yogis. Critiquing their preference for describing yoga as *spiritual* and not *religious*, Jain concludes that "the implication is that a person cannot rationally adopt two or more religions at the same time because that would entail commitment to different, and incompatible, belief systems."⁸⁴ For Kathy,

⁸² Kathleen Scales, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 29, 2014.

⁸³ Kathleen Scales, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 29, 2014.

⁸⁴ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98.

that is definitely the case. If yoga were ever to consume her in such a way so as to shift her focus away from God she worries she would forsake a foundational characteristic of her Christianity.⁸⁵

Like Kathy, Katie practices yoga and Christianity in complementary ways, at times simultaneously. Katie is twenty-four years old and a student at Missouri State University studying to be an X-ray technician. We met at the Kundalini yoga workshop while she was pursuing her yoga teacher training certificate. Katie grew up going to First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in southeast Kansas and, after a period of disconnection, began attending church again while at MSU, reading the Bible, praying, and became closer to God.⁸⁶ She began practicing yoga while suffering from Bell's Palsy and Guillain-Barre Syndrome, which had put her education on hold. Like Kathy, Katie also finds ways to blend together her yoga practice and her Christianity:

So this is my *mala* bracelet that has 108 beads. It's supposed to be—I can't tell you right off the top of my head the whole yogic philosophy behind it, but at that retreat I went to we did a meditation where we rubbed a finger across each bead and each one represents something that you're grateful for or something that you're thinking about that maybe needs a little extra healing touch from God. . . . But I think that the Bible tells you to be pure and whatnot so I think doing yoga helps my body and my mind, like mind, body, spirit all together. It connects it all I guess. So it's not just physical exercise by any means. . . . There's a Sunday morning class that [I] have to choose whether to go to yoga or go to church, but I think both are really fulfilling in the same kind of way. . . . Some of the chants say something about God, but I don't think of it as whatever god may be that it might have been written for, I think about it as my God.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Jain also states that this narrow conception of religion “has been privileged among Protestants and Catholics since the seventeenth century.” Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98. If that was, and is now, the case, then it is perhaps not surprising that Kathy articulates this kind of relationship between her Christianity and her yoga practice.

⁸⁶ Katie Hay, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 5, 2014.

⁸⁷ Katie Hay, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 5, 2014.

In *Selling Yoga*, Andrea Jain discusses the “Christian Yogaphobic Position,” which argues that the practice of yoga and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. By contrast, Katie finds striking similarities between the ways that her religious life and her yoga practice serve her.⁸⁸ Like Beth, Katie finds that Christianity and a yoga practice speak the same language. She even describes how her yoga practice helps strengthen her religious beliefs:

Before I got sick I started going to church again and I started following Christ more strongly and getting back on my walk with God and everything. It was kind of like yoga helped me stop and realize how having that part of my life was changing me too, I guess. It kind of opened up my spiritual side again to where I was able to—I started doing a daily devotion every day, and I’ve never like read the Bible all the way through but I was able to pick out pieces of it and then go back and read the scriptures that went along with it and kind of understand how I could implement those things in my life. . . . I guess when I went to church in the past I would just go and I would just zone out and I wouldn’t really get the whole message. I would hear things and whatnot, but yoga taught me to be more present-minded and really listen and everything started to click a little bit more I guess.⁸⁹

Emery described how yoga expands her awareness of breathing, followed by other aspects of her life. In a similar way, Katie credits her yoga practice for a deeper relationship with God.⁹⁰ Not only do yoga and Christianity fulfill similar needs, but her yoga practice has made her more religious. Through her yoga practice, Kathy finds a deeper connection to God and the Christian faith:

So, what I did was to start a mediation journal. Instead of the *Yoga-Sutras*, I record a verse of the Bible each time I meditate. After my five minutes or so of stillness and reflection, I sit and listen for the thoughts in my head and record

⁸⁸ See Jain, *Selling Yoga*, Chapter Six. See also Jain, “Who Is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have It All Wrong?: On Hindu Origins and Yogaphobia,” 429.

⁸⁹ Katie Hay, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 5, 2014.

⁹⁰ Recall Emery’s words from earlier in this chapter: “I’ve just trained my mind to work in this way from my mat, off my mat into my head. It’s really helped me to see that when first it was just noticing my breathing pattern, now I start to notice my thinking pattern, which is mind-blowing.”

those in my journal. I ask myself what it is God wants me to hear from that Word. This is one way that I focus on my Christianity and it has added another dimension to my overall practice of yoga and quiet time with God. In reflection of our interview yesterday, I suppose that I view yoga as one framework for expressing and practicing spiritual growth. Likewise, a prayer life, journaling, small groups at church, service projects, worship, and other aspects of the Christian life are also frameworks for spiritual growth. Yoga has become a very special and meaningful way for me to express and practice some of those aspects.⁹¹

Kathy perfectly emulates what Andrea Jain describes about Christian yoga brands; she is replacing texts, focus, and emphasis in ways that serve her Christian identity.

Katie and Kathy are not alone in their understandings of the deep, immanent connections between yoga and Christianity. Rod is a cradle Episcopalian who grew up in Springfield. He has taken classes in the Religious Studies department at Missouri State University (then Southwest Missouri State University) and studied Roling in Colorado. He also received his yoga teacher training from Beth Spindler in Springfield, whom we heard from earlier in the chapter. At the very beginning of our conversation, Rod discussed the relationship between his Christian faith and yoga practice:

In fact, I just got done teaching a Christian, faith-based yoga class at my church. I don't see any differentiation. I don't personally differentiate at all between Christian faith and yoga because they both—yoga means union. What we're trying to do in the Christian faith is yoke ourselves to the spirit. Yoke, union, same thing. So we're creating a oneness, a uniting in body, mind, and spirit.⁹²

Like Beth, Katie, and Robyn, Rod sees an intimate relationship between Christianity and yoga. In fact, he sees his yoga and Roling as a way of serving God:

Now I do anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five [Roling] sessions a week, and teach anywhere from 8 to 10 yoga classes a week. That doesn't include when I do teacher training. So I'm very busy. I'm very busy and it's . . . oh what's the term,

⁹¹ Kathleen Scales, email to author, April 30, 2014.

⁹² Rod Buckner, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 28, 2015.

Shrada. *Shrada* is a term in yoga that means I derive joy or happiness from selfless service. It's become, for lack of a better term, a way of life. It's not . . . I don't feel separate from God. I feel like God is working through me. I feel like I'm an instrument and I'm willing to go to the Nth degree to make that happen.⁹³

For these Christian yogis, God, Christianity, and yoga work in conjunction to meet their individual needs as physical and religious beings. These beliefs, practices, and lifestyles are not antithetical philosophies or competing religious ideas that disrupt or question the sacred nature inherent in each of them. Rather they are complementary, connected, and mutually enriching.

Bill is also a full-time yoga teacher in the Ozarks. He grew up as a Protestant in Kansas City, had a born-again experience in his early twenties, then converted to Catholicism when he and his wife began having children. Bill came to yoga after recovering from alcohol addiction and started 11th Step Yoga which he continues to teach here in Springfield. Bill described his understanding of yoga, emphasizing its malleability:

And the problems I have related to yoga, religion, and spirituality, is when people try to dictate absolutes. When they say you must perform this ritual or you must do something this way, or you must do something that way, then what they're doing then is they are dictating religious dogma, which I personally don't believe there is any. Yoga is—yoga's a living, moving, breathing thing and it's highly individualized.⁹⁴

Bill sees yoga as a way to meet a need, even if that need is religious fulfillment. This dynamic, multi-vocal understanding of the practice of yoga creates space for yoga to be *religious*. Yoga can be religious for Christians who take advantage of prayer opportunities during *Suryanamaskar vinyasas* [Sun salutations], teach donation-based

⁹³ Rod Buckner, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 28, 2015.

⁹⁴ Bill Lynch, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 30, 2015.

classes at the churches they attend, offer Faith Focused classes accompanied by Christian music and scripture reading, or find a more present state-of-mind in church that allows them to deepen their connection to God.⁹⁵

Christian scripture, music, and prayer are not the only ways that a yoga practice can be described as religious. Even my Christian informants talk about a religious yoga practice that involves no Christian flavor at all. Robyn describes a similar understanding of *religious* with respect to yoga that the yogis in the first section of this chapter articulated: that it is more indicative of one's discipline and dedication than one's belief system: "If I were attaching those words [religious, spiritual, secular] to yoga that's where I would be like—this is what I think of as religious: I think of discipline and dedication then I would think that if your . . . religion and yoga I'd be like oh, you're talking about your dedication to it."⁹⁶

Like Robyn, when I asked Kathy to talk about how she would use the word *religious* to describe yoga, she articulated how *religious* would reflect one's discipline and dedication: "Religious, feels a little more legal, legal bound, legality, so sort of the mandates, the laws, the disciplines that you practice . . . Right, discipline. Yes. They're dedicated. That is how I would define—I guess how I'd use the word religious [to describe yoga]. So dedicated, devoted, purposeful."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ A *Suryanamaskar Vinyasa*, also known as a Sun Salutation, is a common sequence of postures, ubiquitous throughout Modern Postural Yoga.

⁹⁶ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 20, 2014.

⁹⁷ Kathleen Scales, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 29, 2014.

Concluding Reflections

When I asked these Ozark yogis to talk about yoga and how, if at all, yoga could be described as *religious*, their responses illuminated three important points. First, every yogi articulated very specifically that yoga is not a religion. Second, yoga can be *religious*. Third, what *religious* means when talking about yoga is variable and dynamic.

To the first point, never did I ask these yogis if yoga is a religion. Their adamant statements that yoga is not itself a religion evolved from our conversations. Sometimes it was at the very beginning of our talks, as though they wanted to make sure to communicate their feelings as clearly and as quickly as possible. However, at least once, everyone articulated that yoga is not a religion, nor should it be thought of as one, nor should it be associated with any one in particular.⁹⁸

The fervor with which these and other yogis state that yoga is not a religion arguably serves as what Nancy Ammerman calls a “boundary-maintaining device.”⁹⁹ Though Ammerman uses this term to talk about spiritual-but-not-religious discourse, I find it applicable here. As Andrea Jain aptly states, “Many postural yogis avoid the category *religion* because it connotes an authoritative institution or doctrine in the popular imagination.”¹⁰⁰ Yoga could certainly look like a religion with rules that govern specific sequences thus distinguishing different “denominations,” so to speak, like

⁹⁸ For example: “It’s not a faith or a religion, it’s a practice of uniting your mind and your body and connecting those things, your breath and your movement and centering your mind.” Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, May 20, 2014. “I don’t consider yoga a religion at all.” Kathleen Scales, interview by author, April 29, 2014. “Again, religion . . . no. In my opinion is yoga a religion? No.” Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, April 17, 2015.

⁹⁹ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 51.

¹⁰⁰ Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98.

Ashtanga and Bikram. Indeed, some postural yogic discourse invokes God and includes what could be construed as religious rhetoric.¹⁰¹ However, yogis are very cautious and careful to avoid such categorization fearing that it will pigeonhole yoga into an inadequate category. In other words, for these yogis as well as popular yoga culture at large, labeling yoga as a religion is too limiting and a disservice to the continuously evolving variety of ways that yoga serves the individuals who engage in the practice.

But yoga can indeed be religious. That is, according to these Ozark yogis, Christian and non-Christian alike, yoga can be a religious practice that either fulfills the religious needs of a practitioner or enhances the religious life of a practitioner. Like Robyn's Faith-Focused classes or Kathy's prayers on her mat, yoga can be integrated into the lifestyle that makes one religious. For Beth's students, yoga can be religious by providing a path or a belief system that resonates with them. It can also be religious in the sense that people are dedicated to their practice and exemplify discipline and purpose through their yoga. But describing yoga as religious can also have negative consequences. Seth articulated his distaste for "pushy" yogis who try to tell him what his yoga should be. When a yogi adopts an evangelistic style of promulgating yoga, she can appear much like a zealous Christian or Muslim, which for Seth, is problematic. The fact that yoga can be religious does not prevent it from being something else entirely for another yogi. Rather, yoga's nature is varied, multi-vocal, and flexible and, as my interviewees indicated multiple times, highly individualized.

¹⁰¹ See discussion of yogic "denominations" earlier in this chapter. See also B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012). Iyengar, a postural yoga giant known to each yogi I interviewed and hugely influential to postural yoga culture, makes references to God and religion throughout the text. In addition, Andrea Jain describes in detail the ways that yoga is wrapped in religious packaging and infused with religious discourse, in chapter five of *Selling Yoga*.

The preceding discussion of Ozark yogis serves to expand and nuance how scholars study that which can be described as *religious* in American culture. Andrea Jain argues that postural yoga can be understood as a “body of religious practice.” Indeed, postural yoga fits neatly within her categorization. But my pool of Ozark yogis adds to the conversation that a yoga practice can be understood as *religious* if a yogi demonstrates discipline, dedication, and devotion. This is not to argue that every practice with these qualities is *religious*. Instead, it is to identify that the term *religious* is employed by both religious and nonreligious yogis to describe yoga. Christian and non-Christian yogis in the Ozarks understand *religious* to describe a yogi who is dedicated, devoted to a disciplined practice of yoga. This means that if we are to understand the myriad ways that people practice yoga, we must comprehend that yoga can be religious in ways that are not associated with a particular religion. This comprehension should expand the arenas in which scholars look for and find religious practices.

In the interest of expanding scholarly categories used to explore and analyze American culture, Nancy Ammerman argues that, in order to understand how religion and spirituality function, “our measures of religiosity need to be broader.”¹⁰² Here Ammerman is specifically writing about the categorical overlap between *religious* and *spiritual*, but if we are to understand how and where they overlap, we must understand how individuals use the categories in discourse. That is, we must pay attention to and investigate how people use and understand these categories and let that inform our scholarly metric.

¹⁰² Ammerman, “Spiritual But Not Religious?,” 276.

The categorical overlap regarding religion and spirituality is evident in how these Ozark yogis talk about yoga. Frequently they invoke both terms when discussing the role that their yoga practices play in their lives. This is not to say that these words are interchangeable. Instead it demonstrates how they are related and how the practice of yoga can be both religious and spiritual. In other words, yoga is malleable.¹⁰³ That malleability brings to the fore how the categories we use to explain and understand yoga must also be dynamic and flexible.

Chapter Three will pay specific attention to the discourse that surrounds the use of *spiritual* when talking about yoga. In the next chapter, however, I will explore how these yogis use *secular* to describe and talk about their yoga practice. Indeed, readers will see how *secular* is related to and overlaps with both *religious* and *spiritual*, at least regarding the practice of postural yoga in the Ozarks.

¹⁰³ See Jain's repeated conclusions about yoga's malleability in *Selling Yoga*.

CHAPTER 2: YOGA AS SECULAR

As discussed in the introduction and Chapter One, the practice of modern postural yoga (MPY) is notoriously difficult to categorize. Elizabeth De Michelis made one such attempt, arguing that MPY is best described as a “healing ritual of secular religion.”¹⁰⁴ This categorization deserves a comprehensive breakdown. Establishing her conception of secularization on R. C. Fuller’s arguments about the association between the decline of institutionalized religion and “urban living,” De Michelis locates MPY’s popularity and success in more urban and thus more secular areas.¹⁰⁵ For De Michelis, then, MPY is prevalent in urban areas where secularization is also arguably prevalent. Since, at least for De Michelis and Fuller, urban areas are characterized by the increased privatization of religion, the fact that MPY is obvious and public speaks to its compatibility with secularization, making it look more like something secular than something religious.

Though it is difficult to discern what De Michelis means exactly by “secular religion,” it is helpful to work through her terminology further. The threefold progression of a typical MPY class affords it the label “ritual,” and its relative openness to interpretation apparently affords it the label “secular religion.”¹⁰⁶ For De Michelis, yoga

¹⁰⁴ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 248.

¹⁰⁵ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 250. “As Fuller reminds us, the term ‘secularization’ refers, in a general sense, ‘to the gradual decline of [institutionalized] religion as a consequence of the growth of scientific knowledge and [to] the continued diversification of social and ethnic groups in the Occident.’ All of these elements would be especially prominent in conditions of ‘urban living’, and it is in such environments that MPY grows and thrives. Adopted and cultivated in conditions of marked privatization and relativization of religion, MPY is successful, like other harmonial belief systems, because it provides ‘experiential access to the sacred.’” R. C. Fuller, *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 118.

¹⁰⁶ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251. Here De Michelis breaks down and explains how a typical MPY class unfolds: “(i) introductory quietening time; arrival and settling in (about ten minutes);

has always been about uniting dualistic aspects of existence. By evaluating the discourse used to explain and disseminate MPY, De Michelis argues that “it tries to bridge the gap not only between body, mind and spirit, but also between orthodox and alternative styles of medicine, and between mechanistic and holistic models of the human being.”¹⁰⁷

Additionally, De Michelis states, “the religion-philosophical discourses that shape and validate the ritual dimension of the MPY session, finally, bring to bear both traditional religious concepts (God, transcendence, devotion, etc.) and modern understandings of ‘spirituality’ as awareness of and participation in/attunement to a holistic and evolutionary universe.”¹⁰⁸ Since MPY is a practice that bridges gaps and its instructors and practitioners incorporate a variety of discourses, the categorical framework we use to understand it must accommodate these multi-vocal aspects.

In her argument for understanding yoga as a “healing ritual of secular religion,” De Michelis argues that “in such DIY [do it yourself] forms of spiritual practice [as MPY] there is room for the practitioner to decide whether to experience her practice as ‘spiritual’ or as altogether ‘secular.’”¹⁰⁹ Some Ozark yogis agree with De Michelis in the sense that they see yoga as variable and therefore available to be *spiritual* and *secular* but also *religious*. But what emerges from my interviews is an obvious need to conceive of

(ii) MPY practice proper: instruction in postural and breathing practice given by the instructor through example, correction and explanation; (iii) final relaxation: pupils lie down in *savasana* (‘corpse pose’) for guided relaxation, possibly with elements of visualization or meditation (ten to twenty minutes).’’

¹⁰⁷ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 250.

¹⁰⁸ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 250-251.

¹⁰⁹ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251.

these categories not as mutually exclusive, but connecting and overlapping. That is, something that is *secular* can also be, simultaneously, *religious* or *spiritual*.

In addition to scholarly conversations about secularity and yoga, Judge John Meyer has sparked conversation by ruling that the Jois Foundation's yoga program in the Encinitas Union School District (EUSD) does not promote religion and is appropriate for a secular, public school environment.¹¹⁰ That is because, according to Judge Meyer, MPY is "deeply engrained in U.S. secular culture," and a reasonable student would not find any promotion of religion within the EUSD yoga program. Judge Meyer's ruling assumes that which is *secular* is diametrically opposed to that which is *religious*.

Martin Marty's work challenges the assumption that *religious* and *secular* are mutually exclusive. Regarding that binary, Marty argues that such polarizing concepts "[do] not adequately express the ways that individuals, groups, and societies actually behave; most people blur, mesh, meld, and muddle together elements of both the secular and the religious."¹¹¹ Instead, he proposes the term *religio-secular*, because, he argues, "our world is neither primarily religious, nor predominantly secular. It is religious. And secular. *At the same time*."¹¹²

Like Marty, Nancy Ammerman identifies the overlap between the categories *religious* and *secular* when studying spirituality and religion in American culture. She concludes that the imposition of binary categories fails to accurately capture the existence

¹¹⁰ Graham, "Yoga Not Teaching Religion in Encinitas Schools, California Judge Rules, Appeal Expected." *Sedlock v. Baird*, 40.

¹¹¹ Martin E. Marty, "Our Religio-Secular World," *Daedalus*, 132, no. 3(Summer 2003): 42-48.

¹¹² Marty, "Our Religio-Secular World," 47.

of religion in everyday life: “With a model of sacred consciousness that does not force respondents into either/or answers, we are able to see the presence of religion in places and situations that are *also* secular.”¹¹³

How might MPY provide a space to explore the relationships between *religious* and *secular*? If “there is room for the practitioner to decide whether to experience her practice as ‘spiritual’ or as altogether secular,” what does a secular yoga practice look like?¹¹⁴ What does it feel like? And does that mean that if one’s practice is secular it is not also spiritual? I asked these questions to Ozark yogis. Their responses betray a more flexible and dynamic conception of a secular yoga practice than what De Michelis and Judge Meyer articulate. Not only can a practitioner experience her practice as either altogether spiritual or altogether secular, but even that altogether secular practice can be a spiritual experience. Finally, I asked these Ozark yogis to describe what their class might look like if they were to teach in a public school setting, e.g., for a physical education class.

These conversations reveal the most sensitive components of a yoga class that might bristle the hairs of parents whose children might chant Om or perform Sun Salutations.¹¹⁵ In these conversations, Ozark yogis describe how they might make the yoga they teach more secular and thus more appropriate for a public school environment. They also make a very interesting, almost ubiquitous association between a secular yoga

¹¹³ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 298.

¹¹⁴ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251.

¹¹⁵ Chanting Om in this context usually means standing or sitting with palms together at the heart. After a deep inhale practitioners chant Om for the duration of their exhale. Sun Salutation, also called *Suryanamaskar*, is a set sequence of poses common across all types of MPY.

practice and the physical components of MPY. In other words, focusing on physical *asanas*, alone or primarily, is a prime indicator of a secular yoga practice.

Religion scholar Mark Singleton challenges this understanding that the physical is secular and that the spiritual is opposed to or other than the physical. In *Yoga Body* Singleton takes to task Georg Feuerstein and his argument that MPY is a corrupt version of an authentic yoga tradition. Feuerstein argues that because of contact with the “Western” world yoga has lost its spiritual nature and has been refashioned as fitness training.¹¹⁶ But Singleton disagrees with Feuerstein arguing that “the notion that ‘fitness’ is somehow opposed to the ‘spiritual’ ignores the possibility of physical training as a spiritual practice, in India as elsewhere. It also misses the deeply ‘spiritual’ orientation of some modern bodybuilding and of women’s fitness training in the harmonial gymnastics tradition.”¹¹⁷

To accommodate the need for more flexible and porous categories, this chapter will analyze how Ozark yogis use *secular* to talk about yoga. After teasing out the secular aspects of a yoga practice I will use these conversations to reflect critically on how my informants conceive of *secular* and its relationships with *religious* and *spiritual*. Finally, I will suggest a reconceptualization of *secular* that more accurately captures its flexibility and compatibility with *religious* and *spiritual*.

¹¹⁶ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 209. Here Singleton quotes Feuerstein: “‘When traditional yoga reached our Western shores in the late nineteenth century,’ writes Feuerstein, ‘it was gradually stripped of its spiritual orientation and remodeled into fitness training.’”

¹¹⁷ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 209.

Secular Yoga in the Ozarks

Robyn teaches both Christian and non-Christian yoga classes in the Ozarks. In a single day she might teach a yoga class with Christian music and scripture followed by a secular yoga class. I asked her how, if at all, she would use *secular* to talk about yoga.

I have been known to, just because it's easier, to use the word secular when I'm referring to my classes that aren't a Christian yoga, Christ-centered classes. I guess maybe because of my background in music—so there's secular music and then there's music associated with church, Christianity or whatever. So that's kind of [how] I was able to delineate it for myself and what kind of classes I was teaching on a given day. . . . That's how I used it in terms of “oh, that's one of my secular yoga classes” meaning it's not a Christian yoga class. It's got no particular belief system or anything at all though again I would flavor it with positivity and I often even have a yoga thought for the day that I present like an intention or a something you might want to let go of or something we want to focus on in class. I usually call my playlists for those classes my secular inspirational playlist because it's still positive inspirational music.¹¹⁸

When Robyn uses *secular* to talk about yoga, she is usually referring to a class that has no Christian elements. In that setting, she changes the genre of music and the sources of her inspirational quotes. For Robyn, *secular* is the absence of religious elements, a perspective that agrees with De Michelis and Judge Meyer.

When I asked Kellie to talk about how she understands *secular*, she described her husband's beliefs which are “just nothing.” To her, *secular* is not necessarily spiritual, not necessarily religious, but “pretty much just nothing.”¹¹⁹ But when Kellie described how she would use *secular* to talk about yoga, she revealed some interesting things to consider. Earlier in our conversation she talked about a spiritual side of yoga that is a counterpart to the physical side, which is not spiritual. I asked her to talk more

¹¹⁸ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 21, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

specifically about these two sides of the yoga coin: “You can definitely do the physical yoga practice without connecting to a spiritual practice. You can use it more for just exercise, which happens a lot in the Western culture. It is used a lot for just exercise. So yeah, you can definitely do that without being connected to the spiritual side of it.”¹²⁰ For Kellie, the practice of yoga can be spiritual, or just physical. That is, the physical, purely *asana*-focused practice would be secular, as opposed to a spiritual practice which is beyond, or perhaps inside of the physical.¹²¹

Kathy, the high school English teacher in Republic, Missouri, talked at length about what her yoga class might look like if she were to teach one at her school:

I personally think it’s a great idea. If I’m going to learn square dancing and volleyball and track, why not have aerobics and yoga, you know, because then children when they are older can decide for themselves, “Hey I did this in middle school, maybe I’ll give it a try as an adult.” [The] problem is that, again, I think parents see sports one way and they see yoga as spiritual and “No you can’t do Namaste or speak Sanskrit to my children because that’s something I don’t want . . . I don’t want them to embrace Hindu ideas.” And so I think that’s where the conflict comes in. Personally I think it’d be great. If more of the children that I work with and the teachers that I work with were able to balance out their life with a yoga practice we’d all be feeling better and interacting with each other better.¹²²

Kathy understands that Namaste and using Sanskrit are elements of yoga that might cause concern for parents whose children would participate in a yoga program in school. In an effort to secularize their EUSD yoga program, the Jois Foundation made changes to the

¹²⁰ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

¹²¹ During our conversation Kellie talked about what makes yoga spiritual. One of the things she emphasized is that yoga connects you to a deeper sense of yourself, an inner self. This is how a lot of my informants talked about the connections that yoga helps them make with their deeper-selves or inner-selves. This is why I say that a *spiritual* conception of a yoga practice could be beneath the physical. I will cover this in more detail in Chapter Three.

¹²² Kathy Scales, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 29, 2014.

same aspects.¹²³ The Jois Foundation removed the Sanskrit terms and replaced the names of the postures with terminology that was child-friendly, like “Pancake Pose.”¹²⁴ Not necessarily Hindu in nature, these are qualities of a yoga practice that, at least for Kathy and the EUSD, render it inappropriate for teaching in a public school. But because yoga is malleable, as Andrea Jain argues, it can be changed and manipulated, even secularized, to accommodate a public school environment.¹²⁵

Kellie also described how she would change the way she teaches if she were to teach yoga in a public school. She relished the thoughts of how yoga could assist young children and teenagers with anxiety and attention problems. I asked if she would chant Om or say Namaste. Though Kellie would, she talks about how those qualities might raise the eyebrows of the school administration and parents.

I would assume it would have to go through an approval process. It would probably be something that they wouldn’t [want] . . . just because of the fact that it is in a school. We do have separation of church and state and because of a lot of beliefs as far as Namaste and Om are concerned, and a lot of the questions, it would just be easier to leave it out probably, than to have to deal with a lot of the parental questions at that point. Even if the child’s open to it then they go home to talk to mom and dad, hey guess what we did today. So, I would love to, but I

¹²³ Namaste is a common parting gesture spoken between practitioners and teachers. It usually occurs at the close of a class or practice and usually accompanied by that teacher’s own twist on the salutation. In general, it is spoken to convey honor and gratitude meaning “The light within me honors the light within you.” Removing Sanskrit terminology here refers to using the English words for poses and movements instead of Sanskrit ones.

¹²⁴ See Kyla Calvert, “Promoting Hinduism? Parents Demand Removal of School Yoga Class,” NPR, January 9, 2013, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2013/01/09/168613461/promoting-hinduism-parents-demand-removal-of-school-yoga-class> This article quotes a mother describing how her daughter talked about doing Pancake Pose. See also “Calif. Judge Rules Yoga in Public Schools Not Religious,” Krishnadev Calamur, *The Two-Way*, NPR, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/07/01/197712791/calif-judge-rules-yoga-in-public-schools-not-religious>. This article quotes Judge Meyer describing how the classes have been stripped of “all cultural references including the Sanskrit language,” and teachers renamed the lotus pose “criss-cross applesauce.”

¹²⁵ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 4, 25, 41, 131, 159, 160. Describing yoga as malleable is language borrowed from Jain’s work.

don't think it would be something that would ever be accepted. Not here anyway.¹²⁶

The phrase “not here anyway” echoes the way Kellie and Emery described Springfield's receptiveness to yoga, suggesting that larger, more liberal cities might be open to a yoga practice that was a bit more esoteric by including Sanskrit terminology, chanting Om, and saying Namaste in yoga classes in public schools.¹²⁷ Though this is not the case for the EUSD, Kellie believes these qualities could render a yoga practice inappropriate for a secular, public school environment.

Emery also reflected on her secular teaching style. She is apprehensive about yoga in schools because of the short attention span and rambunctious nature of children.

When I asked her to describe what *secular* means she stated,

Secular is . . . more on a superficial level, of the day-to-day life. To me secular is all the things that organize our physical world; school, like kids have to go to school. You have first grade, you have second grade, you have third grade . . . It's all the physical. It doesn't concern itself with the deeper level, the things that are invisible, this idea of a god or of spirit or a force of nature that's inside of all of us. Secular is all the things that we do on the most superficial, physical level.¹²⁸

Clearly for Emery, *secular* pertains to existence at face-value; the mundane, everyday.

But she understands there to be more than just what we experience on a superficial level.

There is, for Emery, a “deeper level,” but *secular* does not capture those aspects of

¹²⁶ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2014.

¹²⁷ Recall from the introduction how Kellie and Emery talked about addressing their students' concerns about practicing yoga. They described how their students bring to them questions about being Christian and practicing yoga. Both Emery and Kellie said that if they taught yoga in larger, more diverse areas that they would not expect to heed so many concerns.

¹²⁸ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

existence. When I asked Emery to tell me how she might use *secular*, if at all, to describe the yoga she teaches, she replied,

I feel like I teach in a pretty secular way. Like I said yoga is for me—has become my spiritual practice, but I recognize that the majority of people I’m teaching to, that yoga is not their spiritual practice. [It] might turn into something that they supplement their religion with, you know what I mean? But it’s not why they’re coming to me, and I recognize that. What I teach is more of a physical-first [practice], and it’s more of a moving meditation, which is very secular. I feel like what I teach is more the physical exercise partnered with moving meditation, mind-body awareness, deep breathing, and relaxation.¹²⁹

A practice that focuses on the physical aspects, postures, and movements of yoga, is for Emery, a secular practice. For this teacher, it is the blank canvas she presents to her students, allowing them to decide how to experience their yoga practice.

Beth, the full-time yoga therapist whom we met in the introduction, also distinguishes between the physical, secular practice of yoga and the spiritual practice. Unlike Emery, Beth takes issue with the physical-first or physical-only approach to yoga. For her, a secular, physical practice misrepresents what yoga is meant to be: “Isolating *asana* only is a disservice to the practice. Because it is meant to be a spiritual practice. It is not meant to be something akin to Pilates or Zumba.”¹³⁰ I asked Beth, “So if it is just the physical, we are totally missing—”

Missing the boat. Missing the boat. Right. It’s . . . it is when it becomes about the breath. It is when it becomes about *bandha* and interior practice that people begin to grasp hold of the thread of what yoga is about. If there’s no emphasis on the breath, they’re not gettin’ it. If they’re working outside of an understanding of the breath, they’re missing it. B.K.S. Iyengar said that *asana* practiced without *bandha* was calisthenics. And it is absolutely, absolutely true.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

¹³⁰ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

¹³¹ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

For Beth, there is nothing spiritual or religious about an *asana*-only practice. Actually, there is not much even yogic about an *asana*-only practice.

Beth, Emery, Kellie, Kathy, and Robyn are very clear about what a secular yoga looks like. First, it focuses on the physical postures and movement. Second, the instructor uses the vernacular language and secular music and inspiration. Third, the instructor removes the spiritual, religious, or cultural elements which include chanting and using Namaste. For some of my informants, thinking of or practicing yoga in this way is an injustice to what they consider a spiritual practice.

Ironically, this conception of yoga is very much like the approach that is taught in Encinitas. Those instructors and school administrators took similar steps in an effort to secularize the practice for a public school setting. In a Frequently Asked Questions document on the district website, the EUSD states that it made the yoga program more “kid-friendly” by removing cultural references, using the vernacular, and renaming postures.¹³² For the EUSD, the type of yoga appropriate for their secular school environment is one much like the secular yoga that Ozark yogis describe. This is a curious parallel since most of my interviewees were unfamiliar with the situation in

¹³² “Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.eusd.net/Parents/health%20and%20wellness/FAQ.pdf>. At the American Academy of Religion’s annual meeting in 2014, Seth Powell presented a paper on a panel titled “Yoga’s Religious or Secular Identities: Contemporary Debates.” Focusing specifically on what he calls “the Yoga Case” (the EUSD legal case), Powell demonstrated how the EUSD secularized the yoga program: “After parents began complaining in the fall of 2012, the district took measures to begin stripping away the problematic religious or cultural elements. They took out the use of ‘Namaste,’ removed chanting and bells, stripped the ‘eight-limbed’ posters from the walls, dropped the Sanskrit, and renamed many of the yoga practices in ‘kid-friendly language’...In effect, they created a new form of modern yoga for children, known as ‘EUSD Yoga.’” Seth Powell, “The Yoga Case: The Imbrication of Yoga and Religion in Sedlock v. Baird,” unpublished paper, in Yoga’s Religious or Secular Identities: Contemporary Debates session, *AAR Annual Meeting*, San Diego, CA, 2014.

Encinitas, California. Given their unawareness of the EUSD yoga program, it is fascinating and telling that Ozark yogis describe such a comparable secular yoga.

These examples demonstrate two necessary points of emphasis. First, and in support of Andrea Jain's argument, yoga is malleable.¹³³ That is, yoga is available to meet the needs of individual practitioners. Whether their needs are physical and secular, spiritual, or religious, yoga obliges. Second, yoga is multi-vocal. Yoga is not a monolithic, singular practice that is ubiquitously agreed upon as being one thing and therefore not another. Rather, yoga can be secular or religious or spiritual or all three at the same time.

What is also curious about both Ozark and Encinitas secular yogas is the association between the secular and physical. Anything intra- or metaphysical is inappropriate for a practice taught in a secular environment.¹³⁴ Rather the focus should remain on the physical alone, the most superficial or mundane of concerns.¹³⁵

Rod, whom we met in Chapter One, is a cradle Episcopalian who is a full-time yoga teacher and Rolfer in the Ozarks. He told me a story about how he had to change his teaching style while teaching yoga at the YMCA in downtown Springfield:

So I went and taught yoga on the square one day, was feeling . . . exceptional that day. Well my class was loaded with spiritual talk. Well I got a report back from my supervisor saying, "Hey Rod, you need to tone down the spiritual talk." And I

¹³³ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 4, 25, 41, 131, 159, 160.

¹³⁴ I use the term intra-physical to indicate that which is inside of or beneath the physical. As demonstrated in Chapter One and Chapter Three, many of my interviewees describe the spiritual and religious aspects of yoga as pertaining to something inside themselves. They talk of a deeper self, an inner self, something more than just physical but not necessarily transcending it.

¹³⁵ Emery stated that *secular* referred to physical, superficial concerns. Though she is only one to use the word superficial, my informants talk about physical concerns in yoga as being superficial and the real concerns of yoga are meta or intra-physical.

did. And generally, essentially when I teach yoga at the YMCA, which I find completely ironic, the Young Men's Christian Association, Young Men's Christian Association, Christian! Association. I can't talk about spirit! So I dumb it down. I narrow the focus and make it purely a workout. . . . We don't Om. And I may say breathe from your heart. Contact your own truth. And I just won't use—I won't say Ganesh, or I won't say anything that's remotely Hindu or even Christian. Because honestly I tend to teach more from a Christian standpoint than I do a Hindu standpoint, even though I don't see any separation between them personally. It's more physical. It's definitely more secular.¹³⁶

For Rod, removing religious references, “spiritual talk,” and other spiritual or esoteric practices like chanting Om made his teaching style more secular. Because of those changes, the focus of his classes became the physical movements, making it “purely a workout.”

These Ozark yogis have clear, if complicated, conceptions of *secular* and how it can be used to discuss yoga. First, *secular* describes the most superficial, physical aspects of existence. Second, *secular* indicates the absence of anything religious or spiritual. Using *secular* to talk about yoga involves describing a practice that is focused only on the physical workout. But for most of these yogis, that kind of practice is deficient and misses the depth of transformation or experience that yoga can provide. In other words, there is more to yoga than just the physical.

Yoga: Come for the Physical, Stay for the Spiritual

Equally fascinating as how Ozark yogis use *secular*, is how they talk about the secular, physical practice of yoga as a gateway to its deeper, more spiritual levels. That is, some practitioners come to yoga for relief from physical ills, but stay when they discover, through continued practice, that yoga has fulfilled psychological, emotional,

¹³⁶ Rod Buckner, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 28, 2015.

and even spiritual needs. Emery described this kind of evolving practice during our conversation:

I feel like . . . you have to meet people where they are. As a yoga teacher that's what I feel like. I have to meet people where they are. I had to meet myself where I was. I had no concept of control over my own thoughts and emotions. I had no concept of even control over my breath. I had no concept of a relationship with energy or spirit or God. I just didn't have those things in my head yet. What I did have [was] a concept [that] I can do a push-up. I can put my hands here. I can put my foot there. So it started with that. It started with the physical. . . . Why not learn how to control our body and our urges, and then as we start to develop the skill[s] of control and awareness, then start to use that skill on something else, like our mental state. And then that opens a whole new doorway. . . . I start to notice when thoughts pop into my head. And I now, for me, recognize that as inspiration, influence, from the universe, or from God, or from my higher self. . . . So it was that gradual process starting from the physical, to the mental, to the emotional, to spiritual.¹³⁷

For Emery, her personal experience with yoga influences her teaching style. She begins with the physical because she understands her role as a teacher to be to “meet people where they are.” Her yoga journey began with the physical aspects, so she understands that the best way to teach yoga is to meet her students on a physical, rather than spiritual, level. But the longer she practiced the more she began to experience emotional, mental and spiritual consequences.

Kellie also talked about how, for her, yoga began with the physical. But after she learned more about the practice it became much more than what she had thought it could be:

The practice made sense. The actual *asanas* made sense. But it did feel kind of disconnected, like it did feel that there was something else missing. And at that point it was strictly the *asanas* that were making me feel good about myself. And . . . if I had stuck with that that probably would have been a bad path I think. I

¹³⁷ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015. During our conversation Emery mentioned Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body*. After we had been talking I asked her about Singleton's critique of Feuerstein's argument which I analyzed earlier in this chapter. She said that she "100 percent agrees" with Singleton that physical training can be a spiritual practice.

would have really ended up I think hurting myself because I wasn't meditating. I wasn't breathing. I wasn't doing all of this other stuff that comes along with yoga. It was just the physical portion of it. So I kind of hit that wall and thought, "Well maybe I'll go to a studio." I bought a Groupon and I started at Essential [Yoga Studio] and everything changed. I started buying books and I started reading about things trying to figure out what they were talking about, trying to figure out; what's *prana*? What's *apana*? What's a *shishumna nadi*? What is all of this stuff? And then once I started kind of figuring that stuff out it opened up that whole other spiritual world to yoga. Because there definitely is a spiritual aspect to it. Spiritual in the way that it makes you . . . it forces you to look inside yourself. It forces you to to really figure out who you are in a way that I never thought that I ever would.¹³⁸

Kellie, like Emery, began yoga with the physical *asanas*. But after continued practice and learning more about yoga culture, it became something spiritual.

Though my interviewees identify a secular yoga practice as one that is focused on the physical, their stories about the evolution of their own practices betrays that the *secular* is not so opposed to the *spiritual* or *religious*. That is, without the secular *asanas*, neither Kellie nor Emery would have had the spiritual experiences that they describe. I asked Beth if she thought that the physical practice of yoga could function as a gateway to the spiritual. She replied, "It is for a lot of people . . . This I find: That people become hungry. They do. They say, 'Something happens. I feel rewired. Something is a little different when I come through a yoga class.'"¹³⁹ For many of these Ozark yogis, the practice begins with an emphasis on the physical. But with continued practice one can inevitably find herself doing yoga as a spiritual practice.

This is not unlike how De Michelis describes MPY as a "healing ritual of secular religion." Recall De Michelis's words quoted earlier in the chapter: "The MPY session

¹³⁸ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

¹³⁹ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

becomes a ritual which affords various levels of access to the sacred, starting from a ‘safe’, mundane, tangible foundation of body-based practice.”¹⁴⁰ Like Kellie, Beth, and Emery, De Michelis describes the most basic, foundational kind of MPY practice as one that is concerned with the physical first. This kind of blank or basic yoga canvas leaves room for the practitioner to continue a physical-first secular practice, or dive deeper into the practice, which becomes a more spiritual experience.

For Sale: Special Yoga

Again, a secular yoga practice is one focused exclusively on physical movement. Why though, do my informants express distaste for a yoga practice that is just physical? My hypothesis is that yogis are interested in demonstrating how yoga is special. Recall Beth’s words from earlier in this chapter: “[Yoga] is not meant to be something akin to Pilates or Zumba.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, Emery distinguished between yoga and other types of exercise regimens:

As opposed to something like . . . throwing on your headphones, jumping on the stationary bike, you know you really don’t have to think about what your feet are doing. You just get going and then just go. And you’re just zoning out to your music. And not that that’s bad, by all means cardio’s important too. But, it doesn’t give you that mental aspect that yoga does where you’re really forced to think about what you’re doing while you’re doing it.¹⁴²

Finally, Seth also talked about people who practice yoga because it provides for them benefits that other kinds of wellness practices do not: “Among the people that you talk to

¹⁴⁰ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251.

¹⁴¹ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

¹⁴² Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

that had bounced around the word of athletics, had been runners and bikers and CrossFitters, they kind of get into yoga and they have a feeling that . . . that there's some sense of peace that they weren't getting somewhere else."¹⁴³ Further, Seth offered,

[Practicing yoga is about creating] really close connections with people that are incredibly dissimilar. And I don't see any of that outside of [the yoga studio]. It's really to me being overlooked that there's really something going on there. But I mean it is deep and it is meaningful. I don't care whether it is your practice or not . . . it's not just a bunch of people lifting weights, I mean there is something going on that's not going on at the gym. I don't know what it is but it is, I can see it. I live it.¹⁴⁴

Presenting yoga as a practice that offers more than just physical results is what distinguishes it from other types of wellness regimens. Yoga is not like weight-lifting, CrossFit, or Zumba. Yoga is different. Yoga is unique, according to my informants, because it emphasizes breath, self-awareness, and creates a comradery that other wellness practices do not.

Though my informants talked at length about how yoga is different from other fitness regimens, it shares at least one aspect with CrossFit, Zumba, gyms, and the like: it is for sale. That is, practitioners pay money to attend classes and workshops, participate in training programs, and obtain teacher certification. Indeed, there are sometimes free or discounted class options, but the vast majority of yoga classes, products, and services require financial means. Additionally, yoga teachers and studio owners earn their livings or supplement their incomes by offering classes and workshops and selling products. While yoga may be unique to other types of fitness practices because of the benefits it can offer, if a practitioner is interested in those benefits, she will have to pay for them.

¹⁴³ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 26, 2014.

¹⁴⁴ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 26, 2014.

In *Selling Yoga*, Andrea Jain details the intricacies of commodified postural yoga in the United States. She argues that “yoga entrepreneurs and organizations seek to disseminate yoga to the general populace. To do that, yoga needs to stand out in the marketplace among available products and services by being branded or ‘packaged’ in ways that make it seem valuable, accessible and unique.”¹⁴⁵ To make yoga accessible in the Ozarks, studios and teachers employ myriad techniques. For example, Kellie talked about using a Groupon to attend her first yoga classes. Similarly, many studios offer discounted prices for those new to yoga and to college students. Some teachers and studios also participate in fundraising events where they teach donation-based classes outside of the studio.¹⁴⁶ To make the practice seem unique, Jain argues that,

As yoga generates somatic, semantic, and symbolic fields of meaning meant to appeal to consumer desires, brands seek to signify those meanings to millions of individuals interested in doing yoga. In this way, branding mythologizes yoga products and services, ranging from mats and pants to styles and teachers. And one of the most common themes is that yoga signifies self-development. In other words, it is a tool that will enable consumers to become better people through physical and psychological transformations.¹⁴⁷

Marketed as self-development products and services, yoga brands offer access to this through “physical and psychological transformations.” A yoga as a blank canvas upon which consumers can create their own religious, spiritual, or secular experience is exactly the kind of marketing strategy that, for Jain, has allowed yoga’s transition into

¹⁴⁵ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 75-76.

¹⁴⁶ For example, during the summer in Springfield, MO, local teachers alternate teaching at Yoga in the Park. On Sunday evenings practitioners from the area gather in Phelps Grove Park to participate in this donation-based class. See “Yoga in the Park,” Facebook, accessed November 10, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/yogaintheparkSGF/?fref=ts>.

¹⁴⁷ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 77-78.

popular culture. But my research adds that yoga's self-development packaging distinguishes it from other types of wellness practices and exercise regimens. That a consumer can get something extra from practicing yoga in addition to the physical benefits makes it stand out from gym memberships and cardio classes. For example, Robyn described yoga as "a tool in my toolbox to be my best me."¹⁴⁸ Emery also distinguished yoga from cardio workouts and gym routines and described how yoga helped her achieve greater self-awareness. Though Seth is a bit more vague about how yoga is different, he articulates that practitioners are able to achieve something during a yoga class that they were not able to by running or lifting weights.

Yoga is not alone in the marketplace of self-development products and services. Yoga instructors and organizations must present themselves in ways that distinguish their products and services from others. One way that proponents market yoga is by highlighting how it is different: it brings the practitioner peace and awareness that, according to Ozark yogis, cannot be achieved at the gym.¹⁴⁹ It provides positive benefits not just to physical bodies, but also to emotional, psychological, and spiritual selves. A secular yoga, according to my informants, makes yoga appear too much like a Zumba or CrossFit class, which they understand to focus exclusively on physical benefits. In a yoga class, however, the benefits are much more than just physical, much more than just secular.

¹⁴⁸ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Mara Einstein argues that "the only way to differentiate one religion from another, or any product for that matter, is through the services provided (the added value) and the symbols that designate it. What we are talking about here is branding." See Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.

Concluding Reflections

For these Ozark yogis, *secular* is used to describe the most physical and superficial aspects of existence. When they use *secular* to talk about yoga, they identify a yoga practice that is concerned only with physical movement. But many of these yogis find that that kind of yoga practice misses some aspects of self-development that yoga can provide. In the previous section I argued that my informants' displeasure with a physical-only yoga is a marketing strategy. The argument that yoga offers more than something physical is what distinguishes it from other types of self-development and wellness. To understand yoga as secular is too narrow a conception to capture all of the psychological and emotional benefits that a yoga practice provides.

But, as Jain is careful to point out and my interviewees also articulate, sometimes yoga's packaging is anything but secular.¹⁵⁰ If, as Jain argues, yoga is a commodity of capitalism, a product that responds to consumer demands, then how yoga is marketed should reflect what yogis want. But the desires of consumers are not homogeneous. They are instead multi-vocal and personal. Because of that, "yoga entrepreneurs must manage their brand images in ways that make consumers feel personally connected to them."¹⁵¹ Not every consumer is interested in a secular yoga. Actually, some yogis quite enjoy the religious or spiritual trappings that can accompany some yoga practices. Rod talked about reinvigorating his teaching style with the same "spiritual talk" that his supervisor at the

¹⁵⁰ Jain argues that conversations, especially conversations opposing the legal regulation of yoga, are "infused with religious discourse." Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 97. Moreover, she argues that yoga is a "body of practice that is profoundly religious." Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98.

¹⁵¹ Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 80.

YMCA once asked him to tone down: “It’s been now two years since she corrected me and said, ‘Tone down the spiritual talk.’ I’ve turned the heat back up. And the reason for that is because I’m having more and more people coming to my classes [just] because of that. Because they are wanting, they are hungry for it.”¹⁵²

This chapter has identified and analyzed how yogis understand *secular* and use *secular* to talk about yoga. While in some ways their words agree with Judge Meyer that *secular* is opposed to *religious* and *spiritual*, in other ways their responses confirm Martin Marty's and Nancy Ammerman's arguments that lines between these categories are quite blurred. If practitioners begin yoga as a physical practice but inevitably experience something spiritual, then *secular* and *spiritual* are not as mutually exclusive as De Michelis and Judge Meyer conceive. Though they are different, they are connected. That is, *secular* describes yoga in ways that *spiritual* and *religious* cannot. But yoga can be all of those: *religious*, *spiritual*, and even *secular* simultaneously.

In the next chapter I will focus on how Ozark yogis use *spiritual* to talk about yoga. I will analyze how they understand *spiritual* and its relationships to *religious* and *secular*. Finally, I will use these conversations to critique how scholars use these categories to study practices in American culture.

¹⁵² Rod Buckner, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 28, 2015.

CHAPTER 3: YOGA AS SPIRITUAL

As I demonstrated in the introduction and throughout the preceding chapters, categorizing the practice of yoga is notoriously difficult. In an attempt to get around this difficulty and capture a more nuanced and flexible understanding of yoga I have argued that we adopt more malleable concepts of the words we use to describe the practice, concepts that reflect how my interviewees have talked about it. That is, I have argued that because yoga can be described as *religious* does not mean that it cannot also be described as *secular*. Additionally, the flexibility that these terms require when talking about yoga provides an opportunity to reflect on how they are used in discourse on practices in American culture.

This chapter will discuss how my interviewees use the word *spiritual* to talk about yoga. When I asked these Ozark yogis to explain what *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular* mean and if they would use any of those words to describe yoga, almost unanimously the response was *spiritual*. For those who did not immediately reply that *spiritual* was the word they would choose, they instead said yes to all, or yes and no to all. These conversations also identify the need to critically consider how *spiritual* is used to talk about yoga, as well as how *spiritual* is related to *religious* and *secular*.

In the pages that follow I will present how these Ozark yogis understand *spiritual*. I will analyze how they use *spiritual* to talk about yoga. I will show what they understand to be the spiritual components of yoga, and how their use of *spiritual* informs a way in which scholars can study and explore other instances of *spiritual* in discourse surrounding practices in American culture. Finally, I will argue that *spiritual* is not

mutually exclusive with *religious* or *secular*. Instead *spiritual* is the third sphere of the terminological Venn diagram that can be used to talk about yoga in the same conversation that describes the *religious* and *secular* aspects of yoga. By way of beginning, however, I shall first examine how *spiritual* is understood by scholars both when studying American culture and when studying yoga.

Scholars on Spirituality, Yoga, and Yoga as a Spiritual Practice

Recall from Chapter Two Elizabeth De Michelis's argument about what Andrea Jain calls yoga's malleability: "In such DIY forms of spiritual practice [as MPY], there is room for the practitioner to decide whether to experience her practice as 'spiritual' or as altogether secular."¹⁵³ De Michelis adopts an understanding of *spiritual* and *secular* as categories that are mutually exclusive. It is this either-or binary that this chapter, and this project as a whole, seek to deconstruct. My interviewees will describe how yoga is both *spiritual* and *secular*, as well as *religious*, simultaneously. This shows that mutually exclusive categories and descriptors fail to capture the varied and multi-vocal existences of yoga in American culture.

Jain also weighs in on yoga as a spiritual practice. In *Selling Yoga* she provides a variety of statements and quotes from yogis across the United States who all describe yoga as a spiritual practice. She hesitates to take them at their word and instead argues that yoga is best understood as a "body of religious practice." Though we do not have the opportunity to see how her informants react to her argument, she raises a curious question: are spiritual practices really bodies of religious practices? For the scholar who

¹⁵³ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 251.

subscribes to Ammerman's argument that "spiritual but not religious" is a boundary-maintaining device, classifying yoga as a spiritual practice serves only to distinguish it from the negative connotations that accompany *religious*. That scholar would argue that *spiritual* does not function as a serious category or descriptor beyond the boundaries it creates.

Ozark yogis challenge this argument. For them, *religious* and *spiritual* are indeed different, but their difference does not equal mutual exclusivity. Instead *religious* and *spiritual*, as well as *secular*, are words that can be used at the same time to describe the same practice. When my interviewees talk about *spiritual* they use words like "self" and "connection" and imply individuality and more "wiggle room."¹⁵⁴ When I ask these yogis to talk about how yoga is spiritual, they describe learning things about themselves. They discuss experiencing a heightened awareness of their thoughts, reactions, and relationships, and feeling emotional, intimate connections to themselves or others. I will use these conversations to argue that *spiritual* is a distinct category and descriptor that indicates qualities of the practice of yoga that *religious* and *secular* fail to capture, while simultaneously leaving space for *religious* and *secular* to indicate qualities of yoga that *spiritual* fails to capture.

¹⁵⁴ When I asked Katie if she would use any of these words, religious, spiritual, or secular to describe yoga, she replied: "I would say spiritual first because it seems to me like it has a little more wiggle room. Where religious, some people would think . . . I don't know, strict rules or something like that. And secular even more so, probably. So I guess in that order, if possible. So spiritual: yes. Religious: maybe. Secular: I don't know." Katie Hay, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 5, 2014.

What is Spiritual: Individual, Flexible, Connective

As I stated in Chapter One, I first asked these Ozark yogis to describe their religious or spiritual beliefs, if any. While some talked about what it means to be Christian, and others talked about leaving their childhood religion for a different path, none of my informants mentioned their yoga practice as a part of their religious, spiritual, or otherwise uncategorized position. It was only when the conversation became specifically about yoga that they began using words like “spiritual,” “faith,” and “religion.” It is curious that yoga did not come up when I asked about religion and spirituality. But when asked about yoga, religion and spirituality indeed entered the conversation.

When I asked Kathy to describe how she understands *spiritual*, she described practices one does alone. For Kathy, though, spirituality also had much to do with her Christianity: “Spiritual is really personal, your soul and your connection to God and the personal relationship with the Lord and then, the personal practice that you have. So your quiet time in the morning or your study of the Bible, your prayer life, community of Christians that you are connected with.”¹⁵⁵

While Robyn does not mention Christianity specifically in her understanding of *spiritual*, she does agree that spirituality is about connection to and awareness of oneself and others:

Spiritual, I would say anything with yoga, anything that connects your mind and your body and your spirit, that’s spiritual. I supposed you could connect just your mind and body, and not get all spiritual, you know you could just be nice and relaxed and breathing and feeling better and more peaceful, but I just don’t know how that peacefulness doesn’t somehow settle into your spirit. A lot of people believe we don’t even have a spirit so, how could it be spiritual if they just feel better? But spiritual to me doesn’t mean you have to have this huge, worshipful

¹⁵⁵ Kathleen Scales, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 29, 2014.

experience. To me it can just be again kind of connecting to yourself and to who you are and what matters to you. Like right now I'm on the phone, I'm sitting in my own driveway on the phone and I'm watching a bird fly overhead and it's just one single little bird and that's a spiritual experience for me, that I took the time to notice something. Spiritual in yoga can just be as simple as really connecting and feeling what it's like to release the calf muscle as you breathe out . . . feel your jaw muscles release.¹⁵⁶

For Robyn, spirituality is about connection: connection to oneself and the physical experiences of oneself, connection to other animals. Earlier in the interview, however, when I asked her to describe what yoga is to her, she talked about spirituality, connection, and Christianity: "[Yoga is] a way of connecting the mind, the body and the spirit. Spiritually it's the way I reconnect to my Lord. . . . When you're really doing yoga . . . it's going to affect your spirit."¹⁵⁷

When I asked Beth to talk about spirituality she also emphasized connection. Beth added that spirituality is personal and can be connected to religion, but that it does not have to be:

Spiritual means working on the essence of your own path. Your own personal path. And that might intersect with religion. But it might not. . . . You meet somebody and you start talking and you say wow that's a deep connection beyond just . . . "Hi it's nice to meet you." And you realize that you're on a deeper level, suddenly. Yeah. That's spiritual, you know? It's saying I'm not just . . . skin and bones here. I am . . . there's more to me than that. So, that's spiritual.¹⁵⁸

When I asked Beth if she would use religious, spiritual, or secular to describe yoga, she replied: "Yoga's spiritual. Yeah."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

¹⁵⁸ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

Seth, the “peculiar atheist,” talked about spirituality in more vague terms. For Seth, spirituality is still personal, and yoga is a tool available for the enhancement of an individual’s spirituality: “Spiritualism is sort of that feeling that you have in that you don’t really want to define it, [like] when you go out in nature and it makes you feel good. You don’t want to define it.”¹⁶⁰ I asked Seth if he would use any of the words that I asked him to define (religious, spiritual, or secular) to describe yoga. He replied, “Spiritual. My exact phrase that I use is that if yoga is to be anything it is to enhance your own morality or spiritualism. Whatever that may be, but it’s yours. It’s simply an enhancement. It doesn’t change it.”¹⁶¹

For Kathy, Robyn, and Beth, spirituality is about connection. It is about a personal connection to oneself, God, or other beings. This connection can certainly exist within or be linked to one’s religion, but it can also exist outside of or beyond anything religious. Seth also emphasizes, like Kathy, Robyn, and Beth, that spirituality is highly individualized, adding that practicing yoga is a way to enhance one’s individual spirituality.

When I asked Kellie to talk about what *spiritual* means, she had some different things to say. For Kellie, spirituality had to do with practices and beliefs that could be religious, but were not necessarily so.

Spiritual I think would be all of my hippie friends. They’re all pretty spiritual in one form or another whether it’s yoga that is their spiritual place or whether it’s essential oils or whether it’s energy healing or chakras . . . I think of all of that more as spiritual. . . . A lot of people associate spirituality with being religious . . .

¹⁶⁰ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 26, 2014. Though Seth uses the term *spiritualism* here, he is not referring to séances or communicating with the dead.

¹⁶¹ Seth Williams, interview by author, Springfield, March 26, 2014.

I don't necessarily believe that they're one in the same. I think that they're different and I really do think that people can be spiritual and not necessarily be religious, not necessarily belong to a church or associate with any sort of organized religion. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they don't believe in God or they don't believe in something outside of themselves. I do think that yoga could be described as spiritual.¹⁶²

Throughout our conversation, however, Kellie talked about spirituality and yoga in very similar ways to Beth, Seth, Kathy and Robyn. She talked about connecting to something inside oneself through different practices.

In the yoga world they use God as a reference for anything that is higher than you. Everything is all about yourself. Everything spiritual is about getting to that place inside of yourself where you feel that connection to God, essentially. But it's not a connection to something outside of you, nothing existential. It's all about inside. So, not only are you . . . God is inside of you I guess, basically. That would be a good way to say that. So you're trying to find that connection to that inside of you through your meditation, through your *asana* practice. Through your breath. The combination of all of that together builds a strong vehicle for self-change, self-realization.¹⁶³

Like other Ozark yogis, Kellie talks about connection, self, and individuality when she talks about *spiritual*. The takeaway regarding spirituality is this: *spiritual* can be used to describe a connection someone has. That connection can be to a deeper sense of themselves through a particular practice, a connection to God, or a connection to another being, human or otherwise. That connection can be related to something religious, but it may not be. Finally, spirituality is highly personal and individualized.

As readers can gather, how these yogis use and understand *spiritual* is different from how they use and understand *religious* and how they use and understand *secular*. That difference, however, does not mean these three concepts are unrelated or mutually

¹⁶² Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

¹⁶³ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

exclusive. What we can gather from these conversations both agrees and disagrees with Ammerman's argument regarding religion and spirituality. Ammerman writes, "Any attempt to map the empirical domain of religion and spirituality must reject the misleading effort to draw lines between individual and communal, spirituality and religion."¹⁶⁴ Though I doubt Ammerman would argue that religion and spirituality are totally unrelated, her language here stands in stark contrast to how my interviewees talk about religion and spirituality with regard to yoga. For these yogis, lines indeed exist between religion and spirituality: spirituality is personal, a connection, and *religious* suggests discipline, rules, and devotion. But the lines separating these concepts are not solid. Instead they are dotted, with gaps allowing religion to seep into spirituality, and spirituality to seep into religion.

What is especially curious about *spiritual* in this case is that it also seeps into *secular*. Moreover, spirituality is employed earnestly and specifically by those who are religious in a traditional sense and those who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, or not really anything. Additionally, *spiritual* is also used by atheist Ozark yogis. Finally, *spiritual* can be used to talk about secular spaces. Bill described the intersections between *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular* during our conversation:

So, can you still be spiritual and religious? Most certainly. You can be. I said there's a difference but here I am going to talk like a real, true yogi; they can be quite the same thing. You know? If you want to define them, you would have to define them separately. But can a religious person be spiritual? Oh of course. And can a spiritual person be religious? Yes they can. Can they develop it into yoga? Well absolutely. Do you have to? No, you don't have to.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 289.

¹⁶⁵ Bill Lynch, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 30, 2015.

“Can a spiritual person be secular?” I asked. Bill replied, “Yes! Oh absolutely. I believe, and I think it’s becoming a common philosophy now, which you can probably tell I like philosophy, that atheists are in fact spiritual. There’s a lot of atheists that’ll claim they just don’t believe in God but they believe in a higher power. So I mean really, that’s spirituality.”¹⁶⁶ Though Bill’s understanding of spirituality deviates a bit from the others, his words demonstrate the connections among *religious*, *spiritual* and *secular*. He also speaks to the flexibility and individuality that characterize yoga.

Beth also talks about the ways in which *spiritual*, *secular*, and *religious* can meld together. She, like Bill, speaks to the multi-vocality of yoga’s existence but also betrays how the physical is synonymous with the secular:

I think [yoga] can be secular and still spiritual. The people are aware that they’re doing something different entirely. When the schools of Christian yoga came out, somebody said, “How do you feel about that because this is from the East, isn’t this offensive?” I said I would rather, honestly, that people practiced yoga with an understanding that they’re doing something more than just getting a workout. If people want to come through from a Christian tradition, I would far rather see people approach it from a Christian base than just that “I’m going to get a great lookin’ butt.”¹⁶⁷

Rod similarly described how spirituality is individualized and can be a part of an atheist’s worldview. For Rod, yoga is where the spiritual connection between believers and non-believers can take place:

Even if you’re an atheist, if you don’t believe in a god, if you don’t believe in a higher power, you can believe in truth. You can believe in love. I can’t define what it is that the creator is for you. I can only define it for what it is for me. See what I’m saying? Only you can know what it is that this yoga class is doing for you. In your mind and your spirit. And it’s unique to you. It’s unique unto yourself. You’re, as Seane Corn would say, come into your own unique

¹⁶⁶ Bill Lynch, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 30, 2015.

¹⁶⁷ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

understanding of God. If you're not a believer of God come into your own understanding of spirit or truth or whatever it is that you, the Divine Mother, or whatever. Whatever that is for you. So yes, when I teach a yoga class, I lead, I begin at that point. Right there. At the heart where we're all connected.¹⁶⁸

Again, *spiritual* is about connection. This connection can be between oneself and a deeper, intra-physical self, God, an otherwise unnamed higher power, or other physical, earthly beings. The *spiritual* is highly individualized and can vary. *Spiritual* can, but is not required to involve a connection to something *religious*. Finally, *spiritual* and *secular* are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but instead intersect.

Using the Spiritual to Talk About Yoga

If this is how Ozark yogis understand *spiritual*, how do they use *spiritual* to talk about yoga? Indeed, some of the above quotations have described ways in which yoga can be understood as *spiritual*. This next section will focus more specifically on the ways in which Ozark yogis use *spiritual* when talking about yoga. I ask them to identify specific aspects of a yoga practice that they consider *spiritual*, and ways they can manipulate those aspects to either increase or decrease the spirituality of a yoga practice. In some cases, they identify aspects like language and chanting. In other cases, they talk about the profound, life-changing effects that practicing yoga has created in their lives and how it has impacted their spirituality. But overall, when these yogis talk about yoga's spirituality, it is with an understanding of *spiritual* that is individualized, flexible, and relatable to both *religious* and *secular*.

¹⁶⁸ Rod Buckner, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 28, 2015. Seane Corn is a world renowned yoga teacher and activist. See "About," Seane Corn, accessed November 10, 2015, <http://www.seanecorn.com/about.php>.

Emery, whom we met in the introduction, describes how for her, yoga is a spiritual practice. But she understands and recognizes that not everyone practices yoga for spiritual fulfillment.

Like I said yoga is for me—has become my spiritual practice, but I recognize that the majority of people I’m teaching to, that yoga is not their spiritual practice. [It] might turn into something that they supplement their religion with, you know what I mean? But it’s not—it’s not why they’re coming to me. And I recognize that. . . . When I came to yoga, I was not satisfying my spiritual needs anywhere. You know, I wasn’t feeling connected, I didn’t have any community, I didn’t have anyone or anything to pray to or to believe in or have faith in. I didn’t have any doctrine to help me create a story of why. . . . I didn’t have any of that where a lot of my students do have that. You know, they get that from their church or their religion. So yoga became that for me.¹⁶⁹

When I asked Emery to elaborate on how yoga is a spiritual practice for her, she talked about how practicing yoga provides a way for an individual to move either beyond or beneath the physical.

For me, yoga starts with the physical, and no doubt it’s an exercise. And for a lot of people it ends with that, and I think that’s fine because there’s a lot of tremendous benefits to a physical practice; a lot of healing of physical issues. But hopefully for most people it starts to become a way of learning how to pay attention, how to clear their head, how to approach their body first and then carrying over into teaching them how to rethink what they’re doing while they’re doing it so they can live in a more harmonious way. . . . I think that yoga has always been spiritual. Because it just opens you up to the idea that there’s something other than just the physical. And then you start thinking about things. You can’t see your thoughts, you can’t see your emotions so it just opens you up to the idea that there are these things, there’s more than just the physical that we can touch. So that starts to open you up into the idea that maybe’s there’s other more than physical things that we can’t see that are at work.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

¹⁷⁰ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

For Emery, yoga is the practice that opens up the space for deeper connections to take place. Though her students may be finding spiritual connections elsewhere, e.g., through their religion, yoga is available to fulfill the spiritual needs of anyone who practices it.¹⁷¹

In my conversation with Robyn, she talked about an inherent, sneaky spiritual quality to the practice of yoga. Like Emery, Robyn describes how the practice of yoga begins with the physical but then becomes a deeper practice. That is, through the physical experience the yogi's spirit is also affected.

I would also say though that there may be a lot of people out there who come to [yoga] for the exercise and they don't realize they get something spiritual out of it. They just know that they feel better. . . . I would say, to me it's spiritual if you feel more peaceful after doing something. You've had kind of a spiritual experience. . . . I certainly have times when I come to the mat and I'm just going through the motions. But at some point I'm so filled with gratitude or awareness that I can't help but praise God for the moment or be connected to myself. And that's the thing, I think it would be really hard doing yoga . . . you'd have to have the most obnoxious music playing and the most . . . something to totally keep you out of your mind and keep you from becoming centered in order for it not to be at all spiritual in some way. I think just getting re-centered is a spiritual thing.¹⁷²

Surprisingly, Seth also talked about how yoga can affect a person's spirit, even when they are not aware. He, like Beth and Robyn, sees yoga as different from other fitness regimens because it impacts the practitioner in ways that other exercises do not.

I would go to the gym and I hated it. It seems to be that even the people that don't want it to, [when they do yoga] there is something happening in between their ears. Maybe not as dramatic for everybody. But for most of them, yeah. Among the people that you talk to that had bounced around the word of athletics, had been runners and bikers and CrossFitters, they kind of get into yoga and they have

¹⁷¹ Recall from the Introduction how Emery talked about her own religious or spiritual beliefs and credited yoga for creating space for her to reconnect with her spirituality. She described that she is not a Christian, finds aspects of Hinduism that "ring true" to her, and that yoga has opened her up to being more spiritual. Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

¹⁷² Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 21, 2014.

a feeling that there's some sense of peace that they weren't getting somewhere else.¹⁷³

For Seth, this sense of peace can only come from yoga. Similarly, in Chapter Two Emery talked about how yoga is different and provides the practitioner with something that other types of wellness practices cannot. She compared yoga to cardio training and that stationary biking while listening to music does not afford one the self-awareness that practicing yoga does. Here, Emery elaborates on what makes yoga different:

Over time then for me it has become very spiritual as well . . . because the physical practice requires you to really pay attention to what you're doing. There's so much—[in] every pose there's so much balance involved and every pose has a specific place where you need to put your hand, and you need to put your foot and even a specific place where you're supposed to look. So the whole time, you're having to think about “ok, I have to do this, I have to do this, I have to do this, with my body and I have to do this with my hand and that with my feet” and just starting to develop in your head this awareness.¹⁷⁴

For these Ozark yogis, a yoga practice begins with the physical. But stay dedicated to yoga and practitioners will soon find themselves affected in unexpected and surprising ways. These effects, according to my informants, are unique to the practice of yoga. That is, the way that practicing yoga changes one spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically is different from other types of exercise regimens and wellness programs. In other words, yoga is unique.

Emery, Seth, and Robyn talked about how the practice impacts the practitioner. Even when individuals are seeking a hot, intense, workout to burn copious calories, the longer they practice the more attuned they become to the other effects their practice is

¹⁷³ Seth Williams, interview with author, Springfield, MO, March 26, 2014. I asked Seth if that something extra was something spiritual. He replied: “I mean the word spiritual as this something going on out there and I just can't quite put a label on it.”

¹⁷⁴ Emery Bryant, interview with author, Springfield, May 8, MO, 2015.

having on themselves and their bodies. Bill talked about some of his students going through these changes as they continue to practice yoga.

I have students come and say, you know who really get into yoga, and I'm like, "Hey man, that's just really cool! Before you know it you won't even want a cheeseburger anymore!" They're like, "No Way! I'll always love cheeseburgers!" And they'll come back four months later and go, "Oh my God, how'd you know? How'd you know I wouldn't want a cheeseburger?" I don't know why, it's just [that] you're making healthier choices! You'd rather have a salad than a cheeseburger, it's not that you want to be some political vegan. It's that, it just naturally occurs because you've created your own psychological and physiological change through sitting still, breathing, meditation, gentle movement even.¹⁷⁵

Toward a Yoga Habitus

Bill, Emery, Seth, and Robyn ascribe agency to yoga. Their narratives, about how they came to practice yoga and how they became dedicated teachers, all involve talking about yoga as if it acts upon them. That is, it affects the practitioner's body, mind, and spirit, sometimes in unexpected or unintended ways. The changes that the practice creates are all discussed as positive and healthy and never portrayed as negative or detrimental.

Perhaps yoga's effects have less to do with the agency of the practice and more to do with a yoga *habitus*.¹⁷⁶ As Bourdieu famously demonstrated, the *habitus* is a structured but also structuring structure, a "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" that informs and is informed by how we live and exist in the social world.¹⁷⁷ Agents have "no conscious mastery" of their *habitus*; rather, the agent

¹⁷⁵ Bill Lynch, interview by author, Springfield, May 30, MO, 2015.

¹⁷⁶ See Shreena Niketa Divyakant Gandhi, "Translating, Practicing, and Commodifying Yoga in the U.S." (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2009) for a more thorough discussion of a yoga *habitus*.

¹⁷⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78.

absorbs and internalizes these arbitrary social rules and by the internalization of these rules, perpetuates them. Perhaps more succinctly, the *habitus* is “the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences, that predisposes the agent to perceive and behave in a certain fashion.”¹⁷⁸ The way that individual bodies behave in the world because of their habitus is, according to Bourdieu, *hexis*. In other words, *hexis* is the embodiment of the *habitus*, or rather the values and dispositions of the *habitus* are lived out on the body.¹⁷⁹

When we apply Bourdieu’s concepts to the discourse of Ozark yogis, we reveal interesting characteristics about the practice of yoga. Readers will recall Kellie’s words earlier in this chapter regarding her understanding of *spiritual* as involving essential oils and energy healing.¹⁸⁰ Kellie perfectly illustrates that practicing yoga consistently and for a prolonged period of time steeps one in a yoga culture that does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, practicing yoga in a community exposes one to other pockets of culture including but not limited to using essential oils, vegetarianism, sustainable agriculture, types of energy healing, and environmentalism.¹⁸¹ Bill’s story about a student’s waning love for cheeseburgers is evidence that she or he is embodying this particular yoga *habitus*

¹⁷⁸ Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (Bristol, CT: Acumen, 2007), 92.

¹⁷⁹ Bourdieu defines *hexis* as a “political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*.” Bourdieu, *Outline*, 93-94.

¹⁸⁰ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

¹⁸¹ These values and dispositions as part of a larger yoga culture are reflected in Shreena Gandhi's doctoral dissertation. She argues that through advertisements in the increasingly popular *Yoga Journal*, one can analyze the characteristics of a yoga culture since advertisements reflect products and services that readers of the magazine would be interested in purchasing. Moreover, “*Yoga Journal* does not just present yoga as a form of exercise or spiritual practice, but as a lifestyle that is embedded into a larger communal experience.” Gandhi, “Yoga in the U.S.,” 173-174.

because the agents in this particular *habitus* are concerned with making what they understand to be healthier food choices. It does not demonstrate that the physical practice altered her or his thinking. Instead, the continued practice of yoga exposes one to these other facets of yoga culture, and some practitioners eventually internalize the values and dispositions of their *habitus*.

The results of that exposure are then lived through the practitioner's body as *hexis*. That is, the yogi begins to embody the values and dispositions of the *habitus* in which she finds herself. Bill's student stops eating cheeseburgers. Kellie's student begins using essential oils. Emery's student becomes more aware of her body when she is off her mat. These changes occur because practicing yoga is linked to other facets of culture that include making what some yogis come to view as healthier food choices and utilizing forms of alternative medicine.

Concluding Reflections

This chapter has demonstrated how Ozark yogis understand the *spiritual* and how they use *spiritual* to talk about yoga. *Spiritual* is used to identify a connection. That connection can be between an individual and God, an individual and a deeper sense of herself, or a connection between her and another human or non-human being. Additionally, that connection can, but need not necessarily be, related to her religion.

The way that these Ozark yogis understand *spiritual* also demonstrates how the *spiritual* is related to and distinct from both *religious* and *secular*. *Spiritual* can be used in conjunction with both *religious* and *secular* to talk about yoga because *spiritual* applies to characteristics of the practice that neither *religious* nor *secular* can accurately

capture. These characteristics include not only the connections one experiences through practicing yoga, but also the peace and awareness it brings to the practitioner. According to these Ozark yogis, the practice of yoga is unique in the sense that it provides for the practitioner things like peace and awareness that she cannot receive through other practices like stationary biking or lifting weights at a gym.

How Ozark yogis use *spiritual* to talk about yoga both agrees and disagrees with Ammerman's argument that "any attempt to map the empirical domain of religion and spirituality must reject the misleading effort to draw lines between individual and communal, spirituality and religion."¹⁸² Indeed for my informants there exists undeniable overlap between *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular*. However, yoga also exists where there is no overlap between categories. In other words, yoga can be practiced as *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular*, simultaneously. It can also be practiced as either *religious*, *spiritual*, or *secular*. These conversations with Ozark yogis betray that when we conceive of *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular*, we must understand them to exist with "boundaries [that] are porous, allowing people, ideas, beliefs, practices, symbols, and spiritual currents to cross."¹⁸³ That is, these categories are independent, but not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In the following chapter, I will describe in more detail how the categories religious, spiritual, and secular should be conceived. I will also explore more thoroughly the intersections of bodily practice and spirituality in the practice of yoga. Readers will recall from Chapter Two the association between physical practices and the secular that is

¹⁸² Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 289.

¹⁸³ Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 44.

ubiquitous among these Ozark yogis. In the pages that follow, I will highlight the inconsistencies inherent in describing the physical aspects of a yoga practice as the most secular. Instead, I will argue that the practice of yoga is an embodied spiritual practice. I will show how the characteristics of a yoga practice that my informants label as *spiritual* are indeed embodied and therefore physical which problematizes the understanding that physical is *secular* and opposed to *spiritual*.

CHAPTER 4: BENDING BODIES: CATEGORIES CONFLATE ON THE MAT

Yoga is religious. Yoga is secular. Yoga is spiritual. To practice modern postural yoga (MPY) is to physically engage one's body as a mechanism with which one experiences something religious, spiritual, or secular, or some combination of the three. While Ozark yogis identify a clear difference between a totally physical, that is, secular, practice and a spiritual practice, I question if the distinction can be so clearly demarcated. Moreover, I posit that the religious, spiritual, and secular experiences of yogis are a consequence of the embodied practice of yoga.

To begin, I will remind readers how yoga is religious, spiritual, and secular. First, yoga is multi-vocal. That is, what MPY is and how it exists in the world is varied and complicated, shifting and moving from individual to individual. Second, that multi-vocality is what most clearly demonstrates the necessity for flexible, melding categories and descriptors that one uses when talking about MPY's complicated ways of existing in the world. Third, these flexible and intersecting categories do not negate the legitimacy or structural integrity of these classifications on their own. Describing one's yoga practice as spiritual does not prevent it from also being classified as a secular or sacred religious practice.

Because Ozark yogis describe MPY as religious, spiritual, secular, and any combination of the three, we must understand what they mean by these words. As demonstrated in Chapter One, my respondents use *religious* to talk about yoga in two ways. First, they use *religious* to refer to rules, doctrine, discipline and dedication. In other words, describing yoga as religious indicates that a yogi is dedicated to her practice

and makes a consistent commitment to get on her mat. In Chapter One, Kellie described how practicing yoga religiously referred to a daily practice. She talked about the physical postures and breathwork and noted that, since yoga is a daily practice, one does yoga religiously when she is committed to that daily practice in some way.¹⁸⁴

Ozark yogis also use *religious* to talk about yoga as a practice infused with discourse and inspiration from a particular religion.¹⁸⁵ Robyn teaches both Christian and secular yoga classes. She described that Christian scripture, Christian-themed music, and prayer opportunities distinguish her Christian classes from her “secular classes.”¹⁸⁶ Describing yoga as religious refers to one’s commitment to a practice that draws from a specific religion. But, as readers will recall, describing yoga as religious does not mean that it can only be described as that. For my respondents, yoga is simultaneously religious, spiritual, and secular.

My informants make a curious association when describing yoga as secular. In most cases, they believe that a secular yoga practice is focused on the physical experience, an *asana*-centered practice. This secular, physical yoga is superficial and does not afford the practitioner the opportunity for a spiritual experience. To some yogis, this is not even yoga. Beth stated that focusing exclusively on physical benefits makes yoga appear to be too much like Zumba or Pilates. Yoga without a focus on breath and

¹⁸⁴ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

¹⁸⁵ My informants and I were careful to talk about yoga as *religious*, but not a religion. That an adjective is more appropriate and accurate when discussing yoga is a curious finding. The tendency to use *religious* instead of *religion* affords more flexibility and variety in meaning. One can use religious to talk about practices that are not considered part of a particular religion, but religion is too limited to capture the complicated ways that individuals practice MPY.

¹⁸⁶ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

“interior practice,” according to Beth, is a “disservice to the practice.”¹⁸⁷ Similarly, Kellie described a secular yoga practice as “just exercise,” and explained that it does not connect to anything spiritual.¹⁸⁸

According to Ozark yogis, a secular yoga practice is “just exercise,” something that is not connected to anything spiritual. But when I asked if something physical or secular could be spiritual, my informants betrayed their earlier assertions. They talked about moving meditation and described that even if one was practicing yoga for just physical benefits, those benefits would inevitably affect their spirit. For example, in Chapter Three Robyn described how the peacefulness from a yoga practice most certainly “settles into [one’s] spirit.”¹⁸⁹

Finally, Ozark yogis almost unanimously describe yoga as a spiritual practice. When describing yoga as spiritual, they refer to a practice that provides a connection. That connection can be to a deeper sense of themselves, a metaphysical entity, God, or other human and non-human beings. In Chapter Three, Emery talked about how her yoga practice makes her more aware of “something other than just the physical.”¹⁹⁰ Similarly, when I asked Beth if she would use *religious*, *spiritual*, or *secular* to describe yoga, she replied without hesitation, “Yoga’s spiritual. Yeah.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

¹⁸⁸ Kellie Schrader, interview by author, Springfield, MO, February 23, 2015.

¹⁸⁹ Robyn Hurst, interview by author, Springfield, MO, March 20, 2014.

¹⁹⁰ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

¹⁹¹ Beth Spindler, interview by author, Springfield, MO, April 17, 2015.

Yoga is religious, spiritual, and secular. My informants use these words to describe yoga in clear, specific ways. They also understand that one practitioner's totally secular yoga workout does not discount another practitioner's relationship with God during Sun Salutations. Further analysis of the interviews reveals that *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular* are not totally separate, mutually exclusive categories. Instead, they are better understood as independent conceptual spheres that sometimes overlap. MPY exists both within and beyond this conceptual framework. For example, consider how Bill responded to my question about using *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular* to describe yoga: "I would use absolutely none and, absolutely all. I mean seriously. I hate to again sound like some whacked-out yoga teacher, but it can be all and it can be none. It can be each and every one individually, it can be them all together, or it can be none."¹⁹² Emery also articulated yoga's multi-vocality and that these categories are not mutually exclusive when describing yoga. When I asked her if she would use *religious*, *spiritual* or *secular* to talk about yoga she replied, "Yeah. Absolutely. All of them."¹⁹³

To say the least, categorizing yoga is notoriously difficult. Capturing how yoga exists as an individual and collective practice requires a model that can account for multiple and conflicting voices, and that allows for messy, overlapping boundaries. In Nancy Ammerman's words: "When [scholars] study religion . . . recognizing a wider range of variation will allow us more powerful explanatory models."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Bill Lynch, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 30, 2015.

¹⁹³ Emery Bryant, interview by author, Springfield, MO, May 8, 2015.

¹⁹⁴ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 293. Though Ammerman writes about religion here, I find the rest of her statement to indicate that the "wider range of variation" she is referring to is a range that includes spirituality as a concept people employ.

When Ammerman encounters yoga in her research, she argues that the practice does not fit traditional explanatory models that pit *religious* against *spiritual*.

Ammerman's words aptly depict how *spiritual* can be related to *religious* when talking about yoga, and finds that some Christians, Jews, and otherwise unaffiliated people talked about yoga as part of their "spiritual repertoire." Interestingly, Ammerman, like my informants, understands the physical components of a yoga practice (exercise, stress relief) to be opposed or unrelated to the spiritual or meditative aspects of yoga.¹⁹⁵

Spiritual, *religious*, and *secular* can all be used to describe the practice of yoga. Because this is the case, it requires a conceptual model where boundaries are porous and spheres overlap. Such a model allows for the existence of myriad voices and individuals engaged in yoga without compromising the legitimacy of one practitioner's claim in favor of another's.

Figure 1 demonstrates how my informants use *religious*, *secular*, and *spiritual* to talk about yoga. This model illustrates the multi-vocality that allows yoga to exist within each category singularly and in places where the categories overlap. The spheres labeled "Religious," "Spiritual," and "Secular" all overlap. But those spheres also remain partially independent of each other. Where there is overlap, where they are independent, and even beyond the confines of the model, one can find yoga. Each sphere is accompanied by a summary of how my informants understand that specific category. In Chapter One I discussed how my informants understand *religious* and use it to talk about yoga. They emphasize that describing one's yoga practice as religious indicates a yogi's dedication and commitment to the practice. *Religious*, for Ozark yogis, also implies a set

¹⁹⁵ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 71.

of rules or a doctrine that governs practice. Accordingly, the sphere labeled “Religious” contains a list of words summarizing how my informants understand the category. Similarly, the spheres labeled “Secular” and “Spiritual” each contain a list of words summarizing how Ozark yogis talk about yoga. To accurately portray how my informants use these words to talk about yoga, this model also reflects how some practitioners understand even the most flexible of categories to be inadequate for understanding yoga’s nature, hence yoga is located outside of the model.

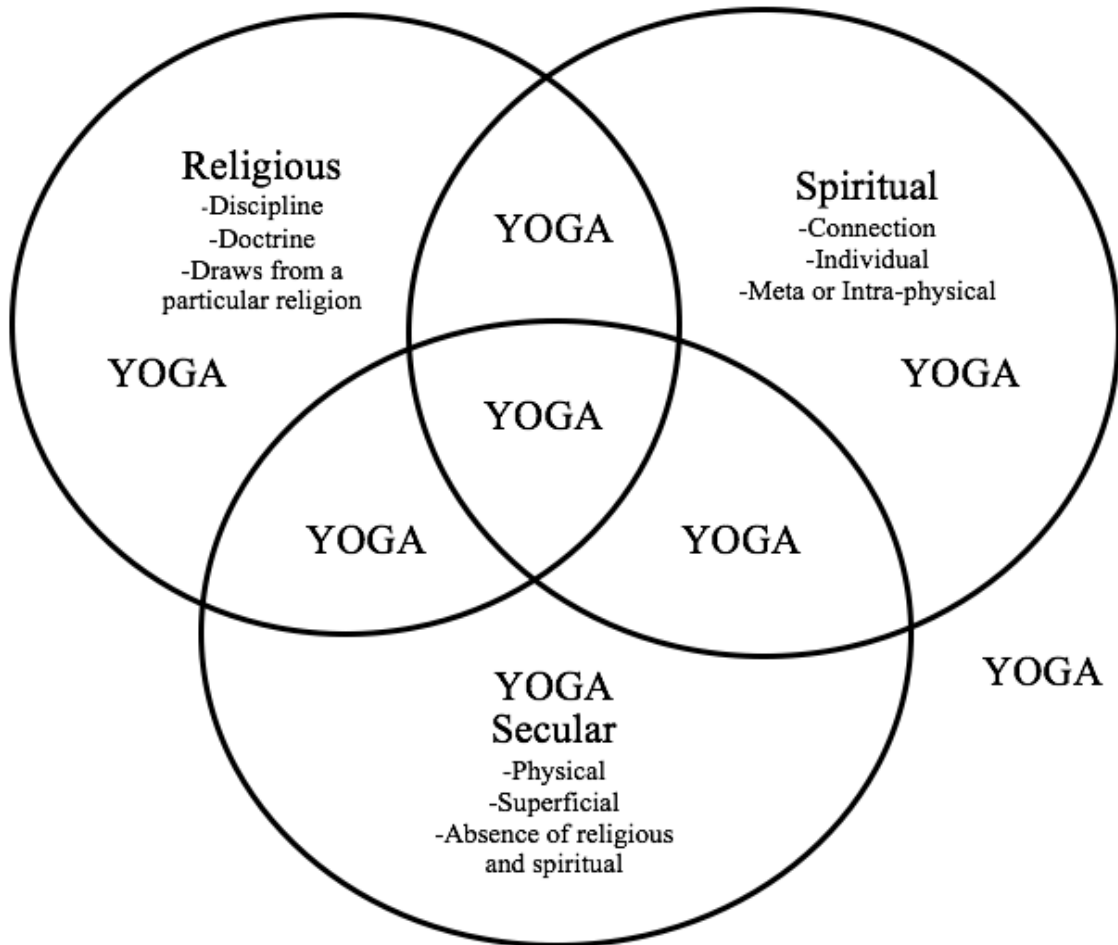


Figure 1. Model for understanding yoga.

This model offers a way to understand how my informants use *spiritual*, *religious*, and *secular* to talk about yoga. In each sphere is a list of words that reflect how Ozark yogis use that category to talk about yoga. For example, my respondents use *spiritual* to refer to a yoga practice where one experiences a connection to her or his inner self, another being, or God. Hence, in the sphere labeled “Spiritual” is a list of the attributes that pertain to how my interviewees understand *spiritual*. Similarly, my informants understand a secular yoga practice to be concerned primarily with the physical and not connected to anything spiritual. Accordingly, in the sphere labeled “Secular” is a list of words indicating those findings. To accommodate the multi-vocality and malleability that exists in how Ozark yogis talk about yoga, readers will see that yoga is found both in the spaces where the spheres overlap and where they exist independently. This reflects how one practitioner may engage in a totally religious yoga practice, while another may enjoy, in Marty’s words, a “religio-secular” yoga practice. Finally, Bill expressed how even a model with categories as flexible as these could be insufficient to understand yoga. With that in mind, readers will also notice that one can find yoga beyond the confines of this categorical framework. Not only does this model reflect how Ozark yogis understand yoga, but it also can act as a point of comparison to how yogis across the country think and talk about and practice yoga.

Scholars of MPY have neither specifically nor satisfactorily addressed practitioners’ claims about yoga as religious, spiritual or secular. Additionally, scholars have also left unattended two themes to which I now turn: bodies and gender. The following section will reflect more critically on the distinction that some scholars and informants make between physical (secular) yoga and spiritual yoga. By critically

analyzing how practicing yoga engages the physical body, I show the ways that secular and spiritual yoga practices are connected. For many of my respondents, physical engagement can itself be a spiritual experience. Finally, I will argue that the MPY pop culture image—a young, ethnically white, lithe, flexible, feminine body—communicates what is available and desirable, both physically and spiritually, to the American yogi. According to Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight*, the condition of one's physical body indicates not only social position, but most importantly for the purposes of this project, "the spiritual, moral, and emotional state of the individual."¹⁹⁶

Kinetic Spirituality: Yoga, Bodies, and Gender

To facilitate a discussion regarding yoga and pop culture in the United States, it is necessary to draw attention to two teachers from whom almost every MPY genre has evolved: B. K. S. Iyengar and Sri K. Pattabhi Jois. Their yoga empires—Iyengar Yoga and Ashtanga Yoga respectively—are some of the most popular and well-known forms of yoga, spawning innumerable offshoots.¹⁹⁷

Ozark yogis are definitely aware of Iyengar and Jois and their influences. Kellie and Emery, for example, both practice and teach Ashtanga Yoga. Beth, Kellie, Rod, and Emery all mentioned Iyengar at least once during our conversations. Quotes from Iyengar

¹⁹⁶ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 187.

¹⁹⁷ De Michelis identifies Iyengar Yoga as "arguably the most influential and widespread school of Modern Postural Yoga worldwide." De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 194. Jean Byrne describes Ashtanga Yoga's popularity and its relationship to Power Yoga and Dynamic Yoga, in "'Authorized by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois': The Role of *Parampara* and Lineage in Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga," in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

and Jois are ubiquitous in local and global yoga cultures, accompanying teachers' Instagram posts and inspiring class instruction.¹⁹⁸

I highlight Iyengar and Jois and their influences because their works inform my exploration of kinetic spirituality in MPY. I will first examine how images of and discourse about the physical body are used in Iyengar's and Jois's most prominent works, *Light On Yoga* and *Yoga Mala*. I will use this analysis as a launching point for my reflection on how Ozark yogis distinguish a physical, secular yoga practice from a spiritual one. These images and videos, along with the descriptions that accompany them, demonstrate that yoga's spirituality is a result of its physicality.

Joseph Alter's *Yoga in Modern India* provides a great scholarly introduction to a discussion about yoga and physical bodies. Describing the relationship between yoga and physical culture, Alter offers this rather bombastic but not unfounded statement: "At the risk of sounding heretical, I think Eugene Sandow, the father of modern body building, has had a greater influence on the form and practice of modern Yoga—and most certainly modern Haṭha Yoga—than either Aurobindo or Vivekananda."¹⁹⁹ Here Alter is arguing against the common, if not attractive, argument that modern yoga is a product of a solely spiritual practice from India.

In addition to yoga's body building interactions, Alter also describes the attempts to legitimize yogic practices by scientifically studying them, which could only be done by measuring the actions of the physical and physiological body. For example,

¹⁹⁸ For example, many of Kellie's Instagram and Facebook posts related to her yoga business are accompanied by the Hashtag: Practice And All Is Coming, a quote attributed to the late Sri K. Pattabhi Jois. One can also get an app for one's smartphone, something Katie mentioned, for a Yoga Quote of the Day where one is almost guaranteed to see quotes from Jois, Iyengar, and their predecessors.

¹⁹⁹ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 28.

Kuvalyananda's experiments were aimed at "[revealing] the basic Universal Truth manifest in Yoga by demystifying it through science" using X-ray machines and a malometer pressure gauge to measure the effects of the practice of *navli* on the large intestine. "[This] specific methodology of science made it possible for two different kinds of 'data' to manifest themselves in the same space at the same time as a consequence of the same kind of action—a kind of empirical harmonic chord created by the simultaneous intonation of science and spirituality."²⁰⁰ This discovery of "one of the precise points of convergence between gross anatomy and the subtle power manifest in yogic physiology" was mediated by none other than the engagement and observance of the physical body.²⁰¹

Further, Alter articulates his experience while doing field research at a yoga clinic in India in the late 1990s. Recalling a class led by Dr. Karandikar, Alter argues that "yoga is, in some sense, done to the body—if not also to various parts of the body—rather than by a person, although I am sure this is not how either Dr. Karandikar or Iyengar would see it."²⁰² This quote so eloquently illustrates the mind-body dualism that infiltrated yoga. Yoga as "done to the body" as opposed to "by a person" suggests a separation between the body and the person, a division that pop culture yoga discourse argues the practice can bridge.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 84. See also Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 133,134. Here Singleton shows how *navli* as an abdominal cleansing exercise in *hatha* yoga is also comparable to a bodybuilding performance posture. To practice *navli*, one isolates the abdominal muscles such that they protrude profoundly.

²⁰¹ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 84.

²⁰² Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*., 152. The connection is made between Karandikar and Iyengar here as Karandikar was a protege or disciple of Iyengar.

²⁰³ Indeed, yoga is done by a person using her or his body. But understanding yoga as done to one's *body* rather than by a person indicates that the person and the body are not connected.

Mark Singleton addresses yoga's conflation with physical culture in *Yoga Body*. According to Singleton, scholars in colonial India encountered performing yogis on every corner. He argues that "transnational anglophone yoga was born at the peak of an unprecedented enthusiasm for physical culture and the meaning of yoga itself would not remain unaltered by the encounter."²⁰⁴ The encounter that Singleton is referring to here is between Indian yoga and European physical culture, a combination that fused together and produced MPY as we know it. As an example, Singleton spends a chapter discussing European gymnastics and postural yoga. With the implementation of Ling gymnastics from Scandinavia in Indian schools and "the assumption [by Europeans] of *āsana* as an Asian version of the Swedish movement cure," postural yoga was beginning to take shape with an unprecedented and specific focus on the condition of the physical body.²⁰⁵

More to the point, Singleton argues that there was an implicit but irrevocable spirituality to this movement culture where the condition of the physical body became indicative of one's spiritual adeptness. In the early twentieth century, the YMCA introduced and perpetuated this notion of physical fitness where "the development of bodily strength [was] of the utmost importance for the spiritual evolution of the modern Hindu."²⁰⁶ It is this amalgamation of physical condition and spirituality that created the modern yoga systems of twenty-first-century America. Or, in Singleton's words, "the first decades of the twentieth century, then, were a period of intense and eclectic

²⁰⁴ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 81.

²⁰⁵ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 86.

²⁰⁶ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 100.

experimentation within nationalist physical culture, with manifold techniques and systems being borrowed, adapted, and naturalized to suit Indian needs. Modern *asana* practice emerged from this crucible as the imagined essence of Hindu physical training.”²⁰⁷

Fast forward to the mid-twentieth century and enter B. K. S. Iyengar and Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, students of the father of MPY, T. Krishnamacharya, a major figure in Indian physical culture. As Singleton argues, “the highly fashionable Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga of Pattabhi Jois is a direct development of this phase of Krishnamacharya’s teaching, and the various spin-off forms that have burgeoned, particularly in America, since the early 1990s derive often explicit inspiration from these forms.”²⁰⁸ Singleton also credits T. Krishnamacharya as having significant influence on the development of MPY when he says, “Ultimately, Krishnamacharya’s sublimation of twentieth-century gymnastic forms into Patanjala tradition is less an indication of a historically traceable ‘classical’ *asana* lineage than of the modern project of grafting gymnastic or aerobic *asana* practice onto the *Yoga-sutras*, and the creation of a new tradition.”²⁰⁹

These “missionaries” presented this body-centric form of yoga to an eager American audience. Under the tutelage of T. Krishnamacharya, these individuals taught and published yoga as a remedy for many ills including back aches, injuries from specific athletic ventures (e.g., running), as well as a cluttered, constantly whirring mind, all of

²⁰⁷ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 109.

²⁰⁸ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 176.

²⁰⁹ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 186.

which can be ameliorated by performing *asanas* and *pranayama*, or more generally, engaging the physical body.²¹⁰

Throughout its development during the twentieth century, yoga had always enjoyed female attention, and it has since erupted into a multibillion dollar industry practiced and taught primarily by women.²¹¹ Yoga also seemed to evolve as American culture became increasingly concerned about beauty and physicality. In the 1920s American gurus of Tantra, Blanche De Vries and Pierre Bernard, taught difficult and austere postures to America's elite. The message that physical ability and spiritual adeptness went hand-in-hand was explicit in their teachings when De Vries especially criticized "weak" yogis for their inability to perform advanced *asanas* as "only the results of human stupidity" and a sign of spiritual weakness.²¹²

In the latter decades of the twentieth century women's bodies and ways of moving in the world continued to transform. As more and more women joined the labor force and sought to present themselves as powerful and strong, especially when engulfed by the male-dominated workforce, by the 1970s yoga came to be understood as a counter to this masculinized female. Moreover, according to Stephanie Syman, "to practice yoga was to move slowly and deliberately, being careful not to strain or overexert yourself. Yoga was gentle, relaxing, and safe. . . . It was comparatively soft and stereotypically feminine."²¹³

²¹⁰ See descriptions of what certain poses cure or treat in *Light on Yoga* and Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, *Yoga Mala* (New York: North Point Press, 1999).

²¹¹ Gandhi, "Yoga in the U.S," 199, 216.

²¹² Stephanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: D&M Publishers, 2010), 100-101.

²¹³ Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 266.

Yoga was a practice available to an individual who wanted to cultivate a feminine body, both physically and spiritually. In describing the feminine gender bend that yoga took during the twentieth century, Catherine Albanese succinctly summarizes the cultural climate that made the ideal female body the icon of American yoga. With regard to this development she writes,

Along the way, yoga got feminized, and women became the major producers and consumers of yogic asanas. In meditation yoga, likewise, divine mothers and female spiritual teachers proliferated—and kundalini prevailed as their general message. Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, second-wave feminism, and rising ethnic consciousness, more and more non-Asian Americans were turning east and refashioning what they found there. New forms of spirituality were abounding.²¹⁴

Bodies in Yoga Manuals

Considering first Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*, the importance of the physical body is quite obvious. In his introduction Iyengar states that “to the Yogi, his body is the prime instrument of attainment.”²¹⁵ For example, Iyengar demonstrates and describes the benefits of *Sirsasana*, or headstand. While outlining the many physical and physiological benefits, including lowered blood pressure, relief from insomnia, and proper blood flow to the pituitary and pineal glands, Iyengar also attests to the spiritual effects of the pose.²¹⁶ He notes, “Regular and precise practice of *Sirsasana* develops the body, disciplines the mind and widens the horizons of the spirit. One becomes balanced and self-reliant in pain and pleasure, loss and gain, shame and fame and defeat and

²¹⁴ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 371.

²¹⁵ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, 24.

²¹⁶ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, 190.

victory.”²¹⁷ Here, it is clear that the specific position and, more importantly, precise engagement of the physical body is the gateway to mindful and spiritual adeptness (Figure 2).

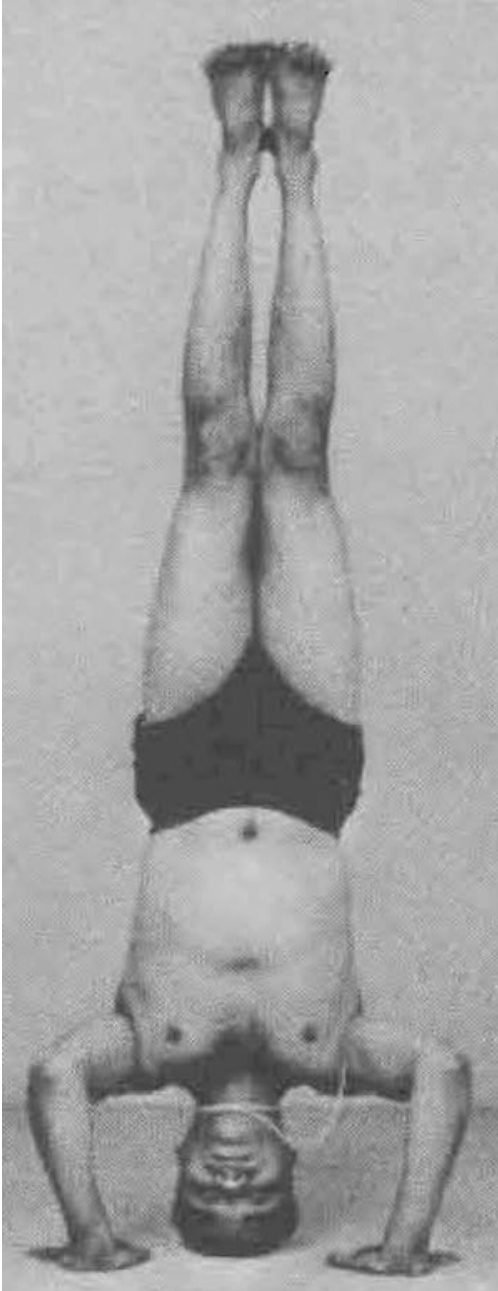


Figure 2. Iyengar in *Sirsana*. *Light on Yoga*, 191.

²¹⁷ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, 190.

In his explanation of the Ashtanga Yoga method, Jois explains the role and importance of the physical body. Specifically, when explaining *pranayama*, the third limb of the Ashtanga method, Jois writes, “Physical strength, mental strength and the strength of the sense organs—all these are very important. Without them, one cannot attain spiritual strength.”²¹⁸ Like Iyengar, Jois is also locating the physical body as the “prime instrument of attainment.”

At the close of his manual Jois reminds the yogi that by “carefully practic[ing] the *asanas* described above, [the yogi] will have the means to prosperity, both material and spiritual.”²¹⁹ Echoing Iyengar’s words, Jois articulates what the physical practice of yoga is able to achieve: spiritual growth. Not only does practicing *āsana* provide the gateway to spirituality by ceasing the fluctuations of the mind, but the physical body also enjoys change. Both Jois and Iyengar describe the specific muscles and areas of the body that are affected by each of the postures: the abdomen, waist, joints, spine, and arms. The effects of these postures on these muscles or areas of the body are not robust musculature, but rather a lean, long, light stature with muscles that are as flexible as they are strong. It is this body type, this muscle structure, that moves in the world as a yogi. And if we accept the spirituality of the practice of yoga, this body type and this muscle structure indicate the level of spirituality that a yogi has achieved.

In the Ozarks, teachers frequently rely on social media to operate their yoga businesses. Teachers will post pictures of themselves performing *asanas*, accompanied by their teaching schedule for the week, a testimony to how that particular pose has

²¹⁸ Jois, *Yoga Mala*, 22.

²¹⁹ Jois, *Yoga Mala*, 127.

impacted them, or an inspirational quote (Figure 3). For example, consider a recent post from Kellie:

“Body is not stiff. Mind is stiff.” Sri K. Pattabhi Jois. Day 12 of the #OctoberYogaSpice #igyogachallenge is #padangusthasana or #footbigtoeposture with hosts and sponsors @kinoyoga @beachyogagirl @aloyoga & @yogisheart. I don’t know about anyone else but it has most certainly [been] my mind keeping me from this pose for so long. It wasn’t until an adjustment from @ash_lisamarie that I realized the breath really was my guide. Just keep breathing. #ashtanga #primaryseries #practiceandalliscoming.²²⁰



Figure 3. Kellie Schrader in *Padangusthasana*. Posted to Facebook and Instagram on October 12, 2015.

Kellie’s use of social media bears striking resemblance to Iyengar’s and Jois’s works. She displays her body in a yoga pose, in this case one that is part of a challenge across social media. She quotes Jois and offers a testimony about her experience with this particular posture.

Kellie is not unique in how she uses Facebook and Instagram to disseminate yoga and run her business. Kino MacGregor is one of the most prominent yogis known across

²²⁰ Kellie Schrader, Facebook post, October 12, 2015, accessed October 12, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/kellie.tinnon.9>.

the globe for her yoga prowess and social media presence. She is the embodiment of a stereotypical yogi. Perhaps one of the most famous Ashtangis around the world, she remains the youngest person certified by Jois to teach the Ashtanga Yoga method. A white American from Florida, MacGregor's body is not only the marvel of her sisters and brothers in yoga, but also the subject of criticism and fetishism. MacGregor will serve as a representative example of America's yoga body (Figure 4).

Yoga is a spiritual practice, not just a[n] exercise routine to stretch and strengthen. . . . But the essence of yoga is stilling the mind to turn your attention inward so that you can experience the quiet voice of wisdom that sits at your heart center. Padmasana, lotus pose, is the seated posture that forms the basis of meditation and breathing, dhyana and pranayama. Once your hips are open enough to sit comfortably here it actually makes it easier to sit in meditation for longer periods of time with less stress on the back. I have had some of my deepest spiritual realizations sitting in Padmasana.²²¹



Figure 4. Kino MacGregor in *Padmasana*. Posted to Facebook and Instagram on April 3, 2015.

²²¹ Kino MacGregor, Facebook post, April 3, 2015, accessed April 3, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/kinoyoga/timeline>.

Not unlike her own guru, MacGregor is often found clad in minimal clothing when demonstrating and instructing *asanas* for her Youtube channel, Facebook page, or Instagram account. Not only does she emulate the rhetoric of Jois's and Iyengar's teaching manuals, but she has taken the yoga manual onto the digital scene. With regard to her clothing, she "covers everything that needs to be covered," but remains largely uncovered, much to the chagrin of some of her contemporaries.²²² In an interview with the popular online magazine *Elephant Journal*, MacGregor describes the functional reasoning behind her clothing choices, defending her decision when she says, "I figured out long ago that if I wore pants I would use friction instead of core strength and that no men were wearing tights to hold themselves up in the challenging arm balances. So I made a conscious choice to wear shorts even though I slipped and fell off my arms for years."²²³ MacGregor's clothing choice is largely pragmatic: less clothing is more conducive to the practice. It does also mean that her body is exposed to the world, much like the bodies of Iyengar and Jois.

With this exposure in mind, her body is also worth a closer look. She, like Iyengar and Jois, is not bulky or robust but, again, lean and supple. In the video from her blog post, her body can be seen moving with tremendous grace and lightness through postures that require tremendous strength, balance, and flexibility.²²⁴ Perhaps it is evident, but

²²² Kino MacGregor, "Confessions of a Loved & Hated Ashtangi," *Elephant Journal*, February 5, 2013, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/02/confessions-of-a-loved-hated-ashtangi-kino-MacGregor/>.

²²³ MacGregor, "Confessions," <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/02/confessions-of-a-loved-hated-ashtangi-kino-MacGregor/>.

²²⁴ MacGregor, "Confessions," see video, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/02/confessions-of-a-loved-hated-ashtangi-kino-MacGregor/>.

MacGregor's practice is the product of years of dedicated consistency. This commitment to practice surely does not go unnoticed to those watching the video, as her body moves and flexes in ways that could seem impossible.

This advanced body control and grace not only indicates that MacGregor has been practicing for years, but also that she embodies twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminine American spirituality. Regarding Georg Feuerstein's criticism that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans physicalized and stripped yoga of its spiritual roots, Mark Singleton notes that "the notion that 'fitness' is somehow opposed to the 'spiritual' ignores the possibility for training as spiritual practice, in India as elsewhere."²²⁵ This notion not only nods at Alter's work, *Yoga in Modern India*, but also describes how MPY can be viewed as kinetic spirituality, a practice which affects both the physical body and the spirit. MacGregor's body is fit, flexible, and female, and her movements imply a level of spiritual enlightenment. She is not robust, grunting, or heaving, but light, at times almost floating. This light, flowing movement not only separates yoga from other forms of American physical culture but, as demonstrated in the writings of Jois and Iyengar, the words of Ozark yogis, and MacGregor herself, is taken to be indicative of something spiritual.²²⁶

The physical body is front and center in how North American yogis disseminate yoga. More specifically, a white, fit, flexible female body is more likely to be associated

²²⁵ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 208.

²²⁶ Laura Stefani, "Kino MacGregor: Interview with an Ashtanga Goddess," *Elephant Journal*, June 22, 2012, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/06/kino-MacGregor-interview-with-an-ashtanga-goddess/>. Here MacGregor says "when I am teaching I honestly feel that it is not about me, it is about inspiring people to come to the spiritual practice." In Figure 4, the text from her Facebook post explains how yoga is a spiritual practice, not stretching and strengthening.

with yoga than any other type of body.²²⁷ Regarding this gender disparity, *Washington Post* writer Eric Niiler offers the observation that yoga is perceived by men in America as a “chick workout . . . too touchy-feely . . . not made for men’s bodies.”²²⁸ While certainly men can be and are yogis (for example, Rodney Yee, John Friend, Bryan Kest, and three of my informants) their physical condition embodies a stereotypically feminine air with long, lean muscles and thin stature, the body type that Niiler’s interviewees say that yoga is made for.²²⁹

A yogi’s body not only advertises her physical abilities, but in yoga culture her physical appearance indicates her spiritual achievements. As evidenced by Ozark yogis and scholarship on MPY, the argument that yoga is a spiritual practice is ubiquitous. It is spiritual, but it is also very physical, even if the focus is, as Beth emphasized in Chapter One, on the breath. Breathing is a physical endeavor. Meditating is a physical endeavor. A discussion about the spiritual practice of yoga with an emphasis on how bodies are imaged and presented betrays that physical practices may not be so secular. In other words, physical practices can also be spiritual ones. If bodies reflect our “spiritual, moral,

²²⁷ One need only to perform a Google image-search for the word yoga. It is over twenty images before one can find a male body, and even then it is one among tens of thin, white women performing postures.

²²⁸ Eric Niiler, “Why yoga is still dominated by women despite medical benefits to both sexes,” *Washington Post*, October 21, 2013, accessed December 2, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/why-yoga-is-still-dominated-by-women-despite-the-medical-benefits-to-both-sexes/2013/10/21/a924bed2-34f5-11e3-80c6-7e6dd8d22d8f_story.html.

²²⁹ Niiler, “Why yoga is,” http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/why-yoga-is-still-dominated-by-women-despite-the-medical-benefits-to-both-sexes/2013/10/21/a924bed2-34f5-11e3-80c6-7e6dd8d22d8f_story.html. Niiler interviews Danny Poole, an instructor in Denver who claims that “Athletes with big muscles take a regular yoga class and it kicks their butt . . . they tend not to come back.”

and emotional state[s],” and MPY is a spiritual practice, then the condition of a yogi’s body also represents her spirituality.²³⁰

This project asks questions about physical bodies and spirituality in yoga that remain quite undiscussed. Since the interplay between physical and spiritual adeptness has been ubiquitous throughout MPY so that the condition of one’s physical body remains the plane on which an individual’s spiritual vitality is judged, yoga can serve as a gateway for scholarship on bodies and spirituality. Stephanie Syman demonstrated how yoga aided in the reimagining of bodies in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Looking forward, yoga can also reimage how scholarship understands the relationship between the physical and *spiritual*, *religious*, or *secular*, a gap which can be bridged by focusing on how bodies inhabit discursive spaces.

It is vital to draw attention to currents within popular yoga culture that challenge yoga’s stereotypical body. The white, affluent, fit, flexible, female body that I analyzed above is indeed the most ubiquitous image for yoga, but perhaps not for long. Decolonizing Yoga is an online resource for news and support aimed at assisting yogis around the world with making their practices and classes more inclusive.²³¹ More specifically, “the Decolonizing Yoga Facebook Page and website has highlighted the voices of queer people, people of color, disability activists and more in relationship to yoga, spirituality and social justice.”²³²

²³⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 98.

²³¹ “About,” Decolonizing Yoga, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/about-2/>.

²³² “About,” Decolonizing Yoga, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/about-2/>.

This movement, to include more diverse bodies in images of yoga, also focuses on body size. For example, Kayleen Schaefer of the *New York Times* reported on “Fat Yoga,” stating that “yoga conjures stringy, bendy, barely clothed bodies—not soft, round ones. But that’s the stereotype that specialized classes and studios, like Fat Yoga, around the country are trying to combat in an effort to reclaim the practice for people of all body types.”²³³ If an explanatory model for yoga is to reflect its multi-vocality, that model must also reflect yoga’s body diversity.

Concluding Reflections

Yoga is religious. Yoga is spiritual. Yoga is secular. Yoga is physical. To practice MPY is to engage one’s body in pursuit of a self-serving practice that can be experienced as either religious, spiritual, or secular, but also as any combination of the three. Because yoga practices are diverse and multi-vocal, so too are the experiences of yogis. That variety must be reflected in the explanatory models and vocabulary that scholars use to study and analyze yoga. That is, our ways of approaching MPY in text, in culture, and in the field, must begin with an appreciation for myriad voices and in turn seek to understand MPY in terms of flexible, blended, permeable categories and descriptors that can capture, to use Andrea Jain’s phrase, the malleability of yoga.

²³³ Kayleen Schaefer, “They’re Not Afraid to Say It: ‘Fat Yoga,’” *New York Times*, April 15, 2014, accessed October 1, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/16/fashion/theyre-not-afraid-to-say-it-fat-yoga.html?_r=0. See also “Big Gal Yoga,” “Curvy Yoga,” and “My Real Yoga Body” online communities where practitioners and instructors post photos to Facebook, Instagram, and other online platforms of diverse bodies in various yoga postures.

The explanatory model that I discussed earlier in this chapter is an attempt to illustrate how Ozark yogis talk about and practice MPY. The areas of overlap reflect Nancy Ammerman's plea to move away from understanding religion and spirituality as opposites. Ammerman argues that often religion and spirituality are intertwined.²³⁴ The model I propose above also displays the interconnectedness of the categories *religious*, *secular*, and *spiritual*, agreeing with Wade Clark Roof's argument that we must conceive of categories with "boundaries [that] are porous, allowing people, ideas, beliefs, practices, symbols, and spiritual currents to cross."²³⁵

Finally, the model I propose allows scholars to escape the unnecessary and inaccurate process of pigeonholing yoga into just one category. In the introduction I analyzed how prominent yoga scholars (Mark Singleton, Elizabeth De Michelis, Joseph Alter, and Andrea Jain) write about yoga. This analysis demonstrated how confused scholars are about yoga's status and how difficult it is to understand yoga when categorical boundaries are rigid. Recall, for example, De Michelis' conclusion that yoga is a "healing ritual of secular religion," and Alter's statement that yoga is the "functional equivalent of a distinct religion."²³⁶ My model allows scholarship on yoga to move away from such vague and problematic terminology. Instead of having to reject or ignore insider claims about yoga's status in favor of academically pleasing language, this new

²³⁴ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 289.

²³⁵ Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 34.

²³⁶ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 249. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 13.

model allows yogi voices and scholarly analysis to share in depicting how yoga exists in the world.²³⁷

²³⁷ See Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98. In this chapter Jain cites yogis and discourse on yoga which claims that yoga is spiritual. Her proposed category for understanding yoga as a “body of religious practice” either ignores or rejects how her sources talk about yoga since her explanation of her typology says nothing about spirituality.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 — Yoga Interview Script

The purpose of this interview is to find out how people who practice yoga, view, describe, and engage in the practice of yoga. Very little research in this area has considered how everyday people describe the practice of yoga, which is what I am interested in. There are no right or wrong answers, I am interested in people's stories and experiences in their own words.

To get started, tell me how old you are, where you grew up, where you went to school and your occupation. Tell me about your religious or spiritual beliefs, if any.

Now, tell me about how you came to practice yoga. Maybe start with when you first heard of yoga or when you first tried yoga.

In your own words, what is yoga?

Is yoga religious or spiritual in any way? How or how not?

If yes, is there any way it could be made not religious/spiritual?

If no, is there any way it could be made religious/spiritual?

For you, has yoga ever presented a challenge to your religious/spiritual beliefs?

For you, has yoga ever enhanced your religious/spiritual beliefs?

Have you, or has anyone you know, experienced criticism for practicing yoga?

For you, are there certain aspects or parts of yoga that you don't participate in or change? Do you notice others declining to participate in or changing aspects/parts of their yoga practice?

Is it appropriate to offer yoga classes in a secular environment like a public school? Why/why not?

If no, could anything be done to make yoga appropriate for that secular environment?

Is it appropriate to hold a yoga class in a church? Why/why not?

Describe for me, in your own way, what the following words mean: religious, spiritual, secular.

Which of those words, religious, spiritual, or secular, would you use to describe yoga? Any answer, including all, some, or none, is welcomed.

Did any of the questions make you think of anything you'd like to go back to or is there anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix 2 — IRB Approval

Approval Date: 3/13/2014

Expiration Date of Approval: 3/12/2015

RE: Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)

Submission Type: Initial

Expedited Category: 7.Surveys/interviews/focus groups

Study #: 14-0335

Study Title: Yoga in the Ozarks

This submission has been approved by the above IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal.

Study Description:

The purpose of this project is to document current beliefs and practices of people who practice yoga in the Ozarks. It will also document attitudes and beliefs of religious and non-religious persons toward the practice of yoga and its debated religiosity.

Investigator's Responsibilities:

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented (use the procedures found at <http://orc.missouristate.edu>). Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB following the adverse event procedures at the same website.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.