

## **Religion Understood as "Science": Yogic Technique and Cognitive Liberty**

by Jason Mierek

In American culture, the term "religion" has historically referred to Christianity (and to a lesser extent Judaism). While the explicit American cultural understanding of religion becomes progressively inclusive as encounters with different religions increase, religion and religiosity are still implicitly understood primarily in Christian, particularly Protestant, terms of belief and faith. In contrast, religions of Indian origin, particularly modern interpretations of Hinduism and Buddhism, provide us with a different understanding of religion, defined not solely in terms of belief, but also as liberation through investigation into and transformation of the self or the mind. Many modern teachers within these traditions even refuse the label "religion," preferring instead the word "science." I will explore this different understanding of religion as "science," looking at some works of these teachers while elucidating their experimental character. When religion is understood as "science," i.e. in general terms of inner investigation and transformation, practice of one's religion mandates free access to alternative states of consciousness and techniques of consciousness modulation. With this alternate understanding comes the concomitant awareness that one *must* possess cognitive liberty, i.e. the ability to experiment with the form and contents of one's consciousness, if one is to enjoy free practice of one's religion.

This essay is an attempt to establish philosophical grounds for an entirely different way of understanding religion and religiosity. I shall not feign "objectivity" in this essay; a Lutheran upbringing familiarized me with the conflation of religion and belief, while my Buddhist practice makes me one whose religion is left potentially unprotected by the contemporary aegis of religious liberty. It is my opinion that the tacit hegemony of Christianity (particularly Protestantism) has for too long held sway in our increasingly diversified nation, and this essay is an attempt to provide a model of religiosity that (hopefully) provides more people with the freedom to think about and follow whatever spiritual path they choose. It is my hope that this

model will encourage novel directions of scholarship and activism by those interested in history and/or jurisprudence who also share my desire to promote cognitive and religious liberty.

### **Christian creeds, Protestant faith: Religion understood as Belief**

A bit of historical background is in order. Political documents antedating the Bill of Rights reflect the early American cultural conception of religion as (exclusively) belief. The Maryland Toleration Act of 1649 expressly prohibited the molestation of anyone “professing to believe in Jesus Christ,” while the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1647) similarly protected anybody “professing the true Christian Religion.” While the emphasis on the “true Christian Religion” is interesting, it is not what I wish to discuss here. Instead, what I would point out is the importance that both documents place upon the act of “professing (to believe).” It is belief, the profession of faith, which the liberal author’s of these documents held to comprise religion *in toto*. That religiosity could consist of factors other than belief may have simply been inconceivable to those for whom belief and religion (and Christianity) were synonymous. Although heirs to the American cultural and legal legacies may not (all) be Christian, they have nonetheless inherited this implicit understanding of religion (and its free practice) as professing to believe.

This Christian understanding of religion as “belief” (or “belief in”) can be clearly seen in three different facets of Christianity: the Christian scriptures, the Christian creeds, and the Protestant reliance on “justification through faith.”

An example of the Christian scriptural foundation for religion as faith is to be seen on signs waving behind home plate at

Wrigley Field or in the stands at college football games. These ubiquitous banners read simply, “John 3:16.” This code, cryptic to

non-Christians, is immediately decipherable to the well-studied Catholic or Methodist: “For God so loved the world that he gave his

only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (New Revised Standard Version). This

verse was affectionately described to those in my Lutheran catechism class as “the gospel in a nutshell,” underscoring that *belief in*

*Christ* is a necessary condition for salvation. The three synoptic Gospels emphasize faith’s

curative power, while according to John

the theological importance of faith, wherein belief in Christ is the key to eternal life, cannot be stressed enough (see John 3:18,

3:36, 5:24, 6:35, 7:38 NRSV). “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved,” explain Paul and Silas to their inquisitive jailer,

who stands amazed at seeing his jail doors flung wide (Acts 16:31 NRSV). Likewise, the Letter of Paul to the Romans (5:1 NRSV)

proclaims that the Christian is “justified by faith,” a proclamation that stands at the heart of the doctrine of God’s grace and

forgiveness. Belief in Christ is, pardon the pun, the crux of the Christian faith as rendered by the authors of the New Testament.

With this crucial emphasis on belief, it was critical for the early Christian to discern what was to be believed from what was not, and so the early Christian church, in order to separate “the wheat from the chaff,” developed doctrinal formulations of faith, or creeds. From the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe,” the creeds outlined not only the tenets in which the true Christian must believe, but also served to highlight those doctrines which the Church deemed heretical. The first, the Apostles’ Creed, was compiled in around the year 150, and “was a means whereby Christians could distinguish true believers from those who followed the various heresies circulating at the time” (Gonzalez 1984, 63). The creeds also helped to pin down doctrines upon which the Bible was ambiguous. In 325, responding to the Arian heresy, the First Ecumenical Council formulated the Nicene Creed. After “it soon became evident that by limiting itself to biblical texts the Council would find it very difficult to express its rejection of Arianism in unmistakable terms,” the Council “decided to agree on a creed that would express the faith of the church in such a way that Arianism was clearly excluded” (Gonzalez 1984, 165). The last of the creeds (and coincidentally the longest) is the Athanasian Creed, formulated in the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> century. In its opening passage—“whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he holds the catholic [universal] faith”—the Athanasian Creed mandates faith in its particular doctrinal formulation as the necessary condition for salvation.

If the Christian scriptures promoted faith as a necessary condition for salvation, with various creeds establishing exactly what one was to have faith in if one was to be considered

a Christian, then the theologians of the Protestant Reformation asserted that faith, and only faith, was sufficient for redemption from sin. Protestant reformers throughout Europe took very seriously Paul's aforementioned Letter to the Romans, with its doctrine of justification through faith in Christ, in their reformulations of Christian dogma. To many, including John Calvin and Martin Luther, faith was not merely the assertion of a particular formulation of tenets but also the heartfelt experience of God's transforming grace through Christ "The principle of justification through faith was an intellectual statement of that which had been their experience ... This [faith] was not a belief of the mind, it was an experience which was theirs in the depths of their spirits" (Dunstan 1961, 90). Belief in Christ and his redemptive grace is affirmed as the core of the (Protestant) Christian life; if such faith is lacking, all other facets of the Christian life (e.g. meritorious works, participation in the sacraments and religious rituals, contemplation and mystical experience, etc.) are understood as insufficient for salvation. We hear echoes of this affirmation in a question from the Lutherans' Augsburg Confession (IV.52): "For why did Christ have to be offered for our sins if our own merits make satisfaction for them?" Because of this utter emphasis on faith, I feel it may be safely asserted without risk of over-generalizing, that belief is the *sine qua non* of the Christian religion as interpreted by its Protestant Reformers.

This Christian (particularly Protestant) notion of religion equaling "belief in" is our cultural legacy. We are told from an early age that our foreparents sailed to these shores to escape from religious persecution at home, the fate of those relatively new Protestants in a world without religious liberty or tolerance. My childhood images of early Americans feasting on turkey, corn and squash with native peoples, are now recognizable as Protestant Quakers and Puritans. Protestant Christianity, if not explicitly named as the predominant religious tradition of our progenitors, is implicitly described in our folk stories and popular culture. Yet even in our secular post-modern consumer culture the vestiges of this Christian heritage are apparent, as when we look to the dictionary and find religion defined as "the expression of belief in and reverence for a superhuman power recognized as the governor and creator of the universe" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "religion"). Not all religious people believe in a superhuman creator. Nor do all who believe in a superhuman creator necessarily revere It. This

understanding of religion as “belief in” is simply not an adequate description, particularly when it is applied to the spiritual traditions of Indian origin. In the next section I will explore a different understanding found in the traditions of India, that of religion as “science.”

### **Hindu Yoga, Buddhist Yoga: Religion understood as “Science”**

Belief is an important ingredient in many of the varied Indian conceptions of religiosity, but it is not necessarily understood in the same way to a Hindu or Buddhist as it is to a Lutheran or Baptist. Nor is religion necessarily understood as synonymous with belief. Indeed, because of the aforementioned conflation of religion with belief, many contemporary teachers within these Indian traditions<sup>1[1]</sup> have even denied that they practice a “religion,” preferring instead the term “science” as a more adequate description. My own Buddhist teacher, The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, has commented on this application of the terms “religion” and “science” to Buddhism:

We can say that Buddhadharma is not a religion. It’s a science ... Fundamentally it’s the science of working with the very basic nature of our mind ... Buddhadharma is not a religion in the everyday connotation of the word ... our regular mundane understanding of religion is somewhat simple: it’s a belief, a dogma that we have about some supernatural beings outside ourself (Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche 1992).

Is there some general accord that connects Rinpoche-la’s understanding of Buddhadharma as “science” with other Buddhist and Hindu teachers’ use of the same term?

I contend that the concept of yoga as technique for liberation provides the common ground we seek in the use of the term

“science,” and further, that it is the practice of yoga that substantially differentiates religion as “science” from religion as “belief.”

The central position of yoga is evinced by historian of religion Mircea Eliade in his outline of the four “kinetic ideas” in Indian

religion/cosmology. As further support, several specific examples of Indian religious “science” will be examined to find points of

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<sup>1[1]</sup> I must here note that my usage of the phrase “Indian traditions” includes Buddhism, which although Indian in origin, is mainly known in its contemporary non-Indian forms, having been all but wiped out in its native land. Thus Tibetan teachers are here referred to as Indian teachers, etc.

convergence with Eliade's outline (and to see if this outline reflects the actuality of the specific traditions). Last, the correlation of

yoga to "science," and thus its relationship to science (in its standard usage, e.g. physics, neurobiology), will be explored through

reference to Ken Wilber's idea of "three threads of valid knowledge."

As a point of departure for his groundbreaking study *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Eliade presents an outline of Indian religion, averring "four basic and interdependent concepts, four 'kinetic ideas,' bring us directly to the core of Indian spirituality" (Eliade 1969, 3). Briefly, these four "kinetic ideas" are: 1) *karma*—the law of universal causality that condemns humans to ceaseless rebirth, and worse, re-death; 2) *maya*—the veil of illusion which is accorded validity by a humanity mired in ignorance and delusion; 3) *nirvana*—the unconditioned Truth, inseparable from the here and now but (seemingly) hidden behind the veil of illusion; and 4) *yoga*—various means of gaining knowledge and understanding of Truth (Eliade 1969). In general, the Indian cosmos is conceived of as a ceaselessly spinning wheel to which one is bound solely by one's ignorance of one's true freedom. All individuals' actions and their effects keep them bound or help them attain liberation, ergo if someone seeks freedom she must cultivate the means by which she can penetrate the veil to the truth behind. In Indian religion the knowledge of the truth will set us free; the practices of yoga are the means to achieve this knowledge.

Hindu teacher Sri Yukteswar (perhaps best known as the guru to Paramahansa Yogananda, author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*) describes his "holy science" in terms consonant with Eliade's "kinetic ideas." "The Eternal Father, God, *Swami Parambrahma*, is the only Real Substance, *Sat* [Being], and is all in all in the universe" while the cause of the experience of the phenomenal world, the "Atoms," "are called en masse *Maya*, the Darkness, as they keep the Spiritual Light out of comprehension" (Yukteswar 1990, 21-5). The Reality behind the phenomenal, created world is separated from an ignorant humanity, obscured by the shadow of *maya*, yet all is not lost. One can enlighten this darkness and reveal the truth, obtaining emancipation, "when one realizes the oneness of his Self with the Universal Self, the Supreme

Reality" (ibid., 41). Having described the "Gospel" of Supreme Reality and the "Goal" of liberation, Swami Yukteswar explicates the "Procedure" for attaining this goal of liberation. Preliminary exercises purify the mind and body, while devotional practices develop confidence, as one cultivates yogic disciplines of posture (*asana*), breath (*pranayama*), the senses (*pratyahara*), and the mind (*smriti* and *samadhi*).

Hence arises *Samyama* ('restraint' or overcoming the egoistic self), by which one experiences the *Aum* vibration that reveals God....This is the state of Divinity (ibid., 75).

Please note that nowhere here is salvation described as a matter of belief. Instead, in order to attain liberation through the "holy science," one cultivates an alternative mode of consciousness, characterized by egoic restraint, until the identity of one's Self with the Supreme Reality is made an actuality ("realized").

The founder-acarya for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (a.k.a. the "Hare Krishnas," a sect of Vishnu-worshipping Hindus), A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, presents a different understanding of the same basic teachings: the Krishna consciousness movement is "an authorized, scientific approach to the matter of our eternal necessity in relation with the Absolute Personality of Godhead, the Supreme Enjoyer" (Prabhupada 1992, 2).

Likewise, the goal of the Krishna consciousness movement is similar to the goal outlined by Swami Yukteswar—emancipation:

One who is convinced of his spiritual identity and is freed from the material conception of existence, who is free from illusion and is transcendental to the modes of material nature, who constantly engages in understanding spiritual knowledge and who has completely severed himself from sense enjoyment can go back to Godhead (ibid., 7).

This freedom, according to Swami Prabhupada, consists in awakening (and awakening to) the Krishna consciousness that lies dormant inside everyone's hearts. Because all are like "small particles of God," it is the realization of this divine identity that will bring true happiness. Whereas the procedure described by Swami Yukteswar involved the cultivation of various yogic disciplines, the path of Krishna consciousness consists solely in the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra. No

other means are needed, nor are any regarded as efficacious.<sup>2[2]</sup> While this approach may appear like religion of “belief” because it is theistic, viewing the Absolute Reality in terms of Supreme Personality, it must be stressed that this religion does not have “belief” as its defining feature. Belief in Krishna or faith that Krishna consciousness is at the core of one’s being does not equal self-realization. One must take up the practice of chanting Hare Krishna, and by virtue of this practice one’s heart and mind will be purified. According to Swami Prabhupada, it is only through this “science” of self-realization that one’s own Krishna consciousness will be awakened.

Transcendental Meditation, the yoga taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, is different from the preceding traditions because Maharishi (and his followers) steadfastly denies that this “science of being” is in any way religious.<sup>3[3]</sup> “Transcendental Meditation is a technique, pure and simple. It involves no religion, belief, philosophy, or change in lifestyle” (Roth 1994, 155). This technique exists within a cosmology similar to that described above by Swami Yukteswar, albeit one that is secular in tone:

The Science of Being not only postulates a theory of one absolute element at the basis of the entire creation, but also provides a systematic way whereby any man [sic] may have direct experience of the essential nature of transcendental absolute Being (Maharishi 1995, 44).

Absolute, unbounded, pure Being is held to underlie the existence of manifold phenomena, the evolution and continuation of which are perpetuated through the force of *karma* (action).

Phenomena may be transcended and the field of Being directly contacted and known through the regular practice of Transcendental Meditation, or TM. When one regularly practices the technique, by sitting quietly with eyes closed and repeating a silent mantra, then the mind’s

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<sup>2[2]</sup> This emphatic difference in method has its origins in the Indian notion of the Kali Yuga, or “degenerate age,” in which it is thought that we now live. “Other systems of self-realization, the *jnana* process or *yoga* process, are also recognized [in the Vedas], but it is not possible to practice them in this age” (Prabhupada, 1992, 172). We just don’t have the strength of character to achieve liberation any other way.

<sup>3[3]</sup> Though Swamis Yukteswar and Prabhupada both affirm their traditions as “sciences” they do not simultaneously deny them as religions. Perhaps it would be too dissonant to discuss God or Godhead on the one hand, and to thoroughly disclaim religiosity on the other.

attention is gradually drawn away from the transient waves of thought to the profound depths of the ocean of awareness. The technique is explicitly central to the TM philosophy (which, contrary to Roth, is a philosophy and worldview rooted in the Vedic religion).

Buddhism, too, holds liberation from ceaseless suffering and re-death as its ultimate aim. As with the Hindu-derived traditions above, the various schools of Buddhism provide a multitude of meditative disciplines to achieve this goal. The *vipassana* meditation practice of Theravada Buddhism (and its counterpart *shamatha-vipashyana* in the Tibetan schools) allows the meditator to simply sit in silence and pay attention to whatever arises in the mind, without judgment. This technique is said to develop the mental faculty for focus and attention while also creating a sense of space and panoramic awareness. Similar is the familiar Zen sitting meditation practice of *zazen*. A technique for developing love and compassion is *tonglen*, which is usually practiced after one has cultivated focus and calmness through *shamatha*; in the practice of *tonglen*, one actively trades places with others, actively wishing them joy and peace while taking on their pain and suffering. Still more liberative techniques include *ngondro*, the preliminaries to tantric initiation that are intense prostration and visualization practices intent on purifying the mind; the full-sensorium tantric *sadhanas* that combine mantras, postures, devotions, and visualizations; and the Pure Land practice of whole-heartedly chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha to be transformed and reborn in the Pure Land whence ultimate liberation is more easily achieved. All are techniques for transforming the quality of one's consciousness, to make oneself more compassionate and wise, so that one may achieve liberation from suffering. In the words of computer lover Ponlop Rinpoche, "we are holding the keyboard; we ourselves are the programmer" (Ponlop 1992); these various forms of meditation allow us to debug ourselves.

As noted above, the presence of these myriad techniques for achieving lasting transmutation of consciousness, or "yogas," are what distinguish "scientific" religion from religion as mere belief. Though the goals of these manifold practices are similar --- the achievement of liberation or transformation --- the specific techniques are not necessarily similar in form, nor do they all manifest transformation in the same way. Ancient Vedic scholars recognized many types

of yoga, including *jnana* “wisdom” yoga (the recognition of one’s ultimate nature), *karma* “self-less action” yoga, *bhakti* “devotional” yoga and *mantra* “sacred sound” yoga (Feuerstein 1996).

Buddhist scholars acknowledged still more. As each person is unique, so to must be the yoga that they practice, hence the variety of methods for attaining liberation(s). It must be emphasized again that all of these diverse techniques have as their purpose, in one way or another, the salvation of liberation through the transformation of consciousness. Belief in liberation is impotent without the means to catalyze this necessary transformation, and the “science” of yoga, whatever its form, provides this catalyst.

The metaphor of “science” is appropriate here because of the weight the scientific enterprise places upon direct observation through experiment, as opposed to mere reliance on hearsay or dogma, in its validation of hypothetical truth claims. Likewise, the yogic aspects of the Indian religions also place special emphasis on direct apprehension of truth through practice of particular methods. Transpersonal theorist Ken Wilber, in *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (his attempt to happily wed science and religion), divines a general scientific method that he applies to both science *qua* science and the “inner sciences” of the yogic/meditative traditions. His outline of this general model, what he calls the “three strands of valid knowledge,” proceeds as follows: the scientist first applies an (1) instrumental injunction to the phenomenon in question, by which she gains a (2) direct apprehension, after which the details of this apprehension are presented to her peers for (3) communal confirmation/rejection---repeat as necessary (Wilber 1998).

The thrust of Wilber’s model is that those religious practices and techniques whose aim is transformation via direct apprehension (what Eliade called “nirvana”) share with the scientific method an attitude that can only be described as experimental. In approaching a new domain of knowledge, whether the heavens or the nature of our minds, if we want to know something about that domain, then we must take up a particular discipline such as looking through a telescope or sitting *zazen*. The discipline so taken up is what Wilber calls an “instrumental injunction.” As an example the Buddha provided countless instructions to his students on how to develop the understanding of mind that liberates from suffering. Once we

have taken up the injunction (here the Buddha's meditation instructions), we use it to observe directly the object of our inquiry. The injunction of looking through a telescope provided Galileo with direct apprehension of the solar system (e.g., he saw moons orbiting Jupiter) and initiated a new understanding of the cosmos. Similarly the Buddhist scriptures tell of those students who, after taking up meditations taught by the Buddha, were able to directly apprehend the same quality of mind, free from suffering and turbulence, that the Buddha characterized as being free from suffering. For both Galileo and the Buddha, it was not enough to rely upon received opinion; instead methods had to be devised by which they could test this opinion for themselves.

This experimental quality that characterizes the various practices subsumed under the rubric "yoga" provides the essential distinction between religious paradigms (i.e. religion as belief versus religion as "science"). Religion as "belief" may tell us that we need to believe in something, but it does not provide us with a means to experience that something for ourselves; religion as "science" is emphatic in its demand for such means. Religion as "belief" is about doctrine---at worst the rote repetition of empty philosophical tenets and at best a heart-felt explanation of experience that cannot be otherwise transmitted; religion as "science" is about developing the means to allow others to experience first-hand what all the fuss is about. Religion as "science" is about active internal exploration in the hope of effecting profound transformation. This transformative, experimental understanding of religion and its free practice is crucial in the conception of cognitive liberty.

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