Abstract

• If we base our understanding of religion on examples familiar to the Western tradition, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it seems as though there is some basic commitment (such as a belief in God, and the afterlife) that characterizes religion. However, viewed globally, it becomes obvious that there is no such commonality, but that whether a position is considered as religious or spiritual has everything to do with the ethnic and racial origins of the theories: if something can be shown to be rooted in the Western tradition with roots in ancient Greek literature, it is called secular. If it comes from outside of this tradition, it is religion, or spirituality. But the same mechanism that elucidates the spread and creation of religious identity under colonialism (religious identities such as “Hinduism,” and “Buddhism”) explains the creation of racial and ethnic identities, along with the correlative racism, and xenophobic nationalism. Participants will be introduced to this history and given pointers of how to benefit from the intellectual contributions of Yoga and other non-western traditions, without participating in its history of discriminative marginalization.
Is Yoga Religion or Spirituality? Can Yoga Be Culturally Appropriated?

• Answer: kind-of, not really

• The same answer I would give to the question of whether I’m a POC. It’s a designation that comes from a colonial power, but it doesn’t define what I am or what I have to contribute to the world
**Explanation**

- **Interpretation.** Explanation from one’s perspective. What are the problems: not objective, confuses propositional attitudes with truth of proposition. Not reasonable. In capable of comprehending dissent

- **Explication.** Alternative: we understand perspectives as providing reasons for their conclusion, judge the reasons in terms of their capacity to support conclusions (and vice versa), understand the topic off inquiry in terms of what we can disagree with
Beginning of the *Yoga Sūtra*

- Presents us with these options. The first is identification with experience, the second is *yogaś-citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ* (YS I.2)

- Explication is yoga as it provides a method for us to be in charge of our experiences, which is to say not influenced by what we contemplate

- The explicatory argument begins not with what one believes, but options, and reasons for divergent conclusions
My explicatory research

• Like all conclusions of research, the researcher employing explication believes that they arrived at a conclusion, but that’s not the same as them thinking that the conclusion is true or a good idea (E.G. one can imagine concluding by research that not wearing masks aids the spread of Covid 19, but that’s not necessarily what the researcher thinks is a good idea or that we should endorse.)

• So explication applied to the study of world tradition leads to conclusions, but not all of them are worth endorsing
My PhD Research

• Studied contemporary approaches to translation in the western tradition

• Noticed that they all assumed the linguistic account of thought, and that this was also an ancient model of thought in the Western tradition

• It was assumed, never defended, and without this thesis, most everything in this tradition (such as communitarianism and anthropocentrism) would be unjustified

• Linguistic account of thought is the saṃskāra of a tradition we might call the Western tradition, which connects contemporary philosophy with ancient Greek roots

• (saṃskāra=subconscious commitments that is used to interpret experiences)
Linguistic Model of Thought → Interpretation

• Thought is the meaning of what I say → I have to understand others in terms of what I would say

• As this is the saṃskāra of the Western tradition, then it treats its intellectual history as the content of thought and explanation, and anything that deviates is sub-rational, difficult to understand, merely sociological or anthropological: not a philosophical alternative that one has to understand in terms of reasons
The West vs. the west

- Small “w”est is just the geography or ethnographic contingency of being western. English is a western language, and being a Canadian or American is a matter of being geographically western.

- The West is the practice of interpreting on the basis of the western tradition.

- It’s the tradition of imperialism.
Political and Moral Outcomes of the West

- Anthropocentrism (LMT)
- Communitarianism (LMT)
- Western colonialism/imperialism (western tradition + LMT) → interpretation of the world by the West → inability to understand dissent from the non-western

- And more…
Disappearance of Non-Western Moral Philosophy

• If we explicate, all we find are philosophical disagreements across traditions

• “Dharma,” in South Asia, “Tao,” in East Asia, and “ethics”/“morality” are the terms that articulate the basic concept of moral philosophical disagreement: *the right or the good*

• Explication never gives rise to distinctions between the secular and the religious or the reasoned vs. the spiritual: it’s all reason’s in favour of controversial conclusions

• But Western interpretation disappears non-western moral philosophy and replaces it with religion/spirituality
Religion and Spirituality

• These are terms used in the Westernized world to talk about intellectual traditions that are not rooted in the West

• Why? If we interpret on the basis of the Western tradition, then we use beliefs about this tradition and its paradigm intellectuals and intellectual traditions as the measure of reason, and then what cannot be explained by these beliefs (because they are not rooted in this tradition) are problematized as mysterious, non-rational, merely sociological, but also otherworldly (as the interpreted traditions do not appear to talk about the interpreter’s world)
Religion as Understood by the West

• Religion is defined in the West as theistic religions familiar to the Western tradition: Judaism, Christianity and Islam

• Common features of these religions (developed in large measure in consort with Western philosophy, especially Christianity and Islam) are then used to interpret all religions

• So, from here we get the idea that religion is about: God, the afterlife, sacred books like the Bible or Quran

• Greek gods becomes literature, and the European is depicted as a person without religion (and has to get it from elsewhere) while everyone else has it, just as the European is without colour and everyone else is a POC
Historical reality of Religion

- The term originates with the Romans, who distinguished between *religio* and *superstitione*.
- As the Western tradition spreads, it categorizes alien intellectual traditions as religion.
- Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism…
Nothing to Do With the Content

• The West, beginning with Plato defends a belief in God and reincarnation = *secular*

• Same position articulated in Asian Sources = *religion*

• South Asian atheistic views that explain reality as an evolution of matter or causal connection (Sāṅkhya, Buddhism) = *religion*

• Same content, but whether the position is classified as religion or not has to do with the racial origins.
Hinduism: In Some Ways is a Continuity of the West

• Foreign geographic term from Persian, used to categorize *all indigenous South Asian thought by the British as colonial masters*

• Two kinds of categories: class (group membership does not define the individuals, e.g. fruit salad), and kinds (group membership defines the individuals, e.g. colour red).

• The *West* creates the class (not the kind) of Hinduism: defined by the class membership rule of South Asian, no common founder

• Hinduism is unique for being a class defined religion: microcosm of the disagreements of philosophy

• At the same time, other groups who wished their own bureaucratic designation gained it: Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism are prominent examples.

• Given the fruit salad definition of Hinduism, you could be a Hindu first and a Sikh second, but not the other way around

• The *Western* aspect is not only the foreign (racial) naming, but the identity of Hinduism as a religion because of its deviation from the *West*
(Right Wing) Hindu Nationalism: Continuity of the West

- Colonial invention of Hinduism, the class, and the passing on of Western modes of political organization and understanding (via language, ethnicity) leads to the:

- Construction of linguistic identities along religious identities (Hindi vs. Urdhu out of Hindustani)

- Creation of a high caste (Brahminical) representation of Hindu Orthodoxy, which along with interpretation (passed along in the Westernization of South Asia) results in the discriminative marginalization of those who deviate from the supposed paradigm cases: e.g. Dalits, Muslims

- Contemporary India, and South Asia, with its religious modes of self-understanding, are not indigenously South Asian, but a continuation of Western imperialism from whence we derive religious distinctions
My book: Hinduism: Contemporary Philosophical Investigation

- Orthodox Indology and contemporary state of Indian politics and self-understanding are both a continuity of the West, and do not reflect indigenous pre-colonial modes of understanding.

- In scholarship, Western scholarship is signed by an over-indexation on the study of languages, South Asian culture, and religion, and the correlative neglect of an explicative engagement with philosophical dissent.

- The pre-colonial was explicative, largely influenced and guided by the values of yoga.

- This is the South Asia that was open to a diversity of people’s and ways of life.

- If we are going to take “Hindu” seriously as a label for the indigenous tradition, then what it names isn’t a unified view, but the microcosm of philosophical disagreements, which stands as a contrast to the West.
Hindu Right and Yoga (the West)

- The West Creates/confabulates/Hinduism as a unified religion with a comprehensive platform that all Hindus are committed to
- Hinduism is thereby a religious alternative to every other option
- Yoga becomes part of the Hindu self-identity in the construction of Hinduism as a comprehensive doctrine
- Yoga is treated basically as āsana, or any number of practices that do not directly involve criticizing interpretation (such as the yamas and niyamas)
- We find the same de-moralization of yoga in North America, where “yoga” primarily means āsana. *This is the West*
Cultural Appropriation?

- Given an interpretive paradigm, understanding is cultural competence (experience) and all understanding of alien cultural traditions via interpretation is a case and example of cultural appropriation.

- This is common place in the academic study of South Asia, including and especially when categories of Western imperialism are employed.

- South Asians who interpret are participating as individuals colonized by the Western tradition and if and when they interpret Hinduism or yoga, they too are engaging in cultural appropriation.
In Western depictions of Yoga (White or South Asian)

- Conflation of Yoga with cultural trappings of being South Asian (whatever that means), such as saying “Namaste,”
- Reduction of yoga to āsana
Why Yoga Can’t Actually be Culturally Appropriated

- Yoga is the criticism of interpretation by way of explicatory practices
- So one cannot adopt it as one’s perspective, for that would be to interpret
- Real engagement in yoga is political, anti-colonial in its logic: it would have to confront the imperial frame of the West---interpretation
- The anti colonial philosophy of Yoga begins with the Yamas, that ask us to start with ahimsā (disruption of harm) before we can recognize the truth (satya) about people and their property (asteya), who we can learn from (brahmacarya) while not hording (aparigraha) (YS II.30)
- Yoga is understanding, which means getting over your own egotism (asmitā)
- It is something that one can practice in any cultural context as it is not the same as any cultural context
Political Symptoms of Real Yoga (More Next Webinar)

- Political confrontation of: communitarianism, anthropocentrism, colonialism, imperialism, and the other isms

- Move to understand not in terms of one’s experiences, but in terms of our shared interest in sovereignty (Īśvara)

- Appreciating the Western context in which āsana practice has come to almost eclipse Yoga the moral philosophical paradigm

- Understanding the roots and ground of progressive, inclusive activism as essential to the practice of yoga. (More on that in the final webinar)
Symptoms of Failing to Respect Yoga, sticking to the *West as a culturally appropriative practice*

- Carrying on as though one can do yoga (āsana) and not confront every moral and political aspect of life: the reduction of yoga to any number of limbs of yoga except the yamas and niyamas, which have to do with moral and political activism

- Treating the study of yoga as something that is a *matter of perspective and experience* (South Asian, western…)

- Treating moral and political questions as a matter of opinion (interpretation) and not something answered by the practice of devotion to Īśvara/sovereignty

- Treating yoga as something that has to conform to your beliefs, as though yoga is not transformative
Direction for Practice

• Invert the conventional importance given to āsana: it’s not primary but at most of derivative importance

• Ground practice in the philosophical orientation of Yoga, as a master practice for learning and understanding diverse philosophies

• Give priority to the Yamas and Niyamas

• Think critically about the role of saṃskāra-s (interpretive principles) in your own life: how are they playing a role in structuring your experiences? Can we do without them by engaging in yoga? Of course. That will take some courage, but you’ll be better off for it
Limited Bibliography

• King, C.R. *One Language, Two Scripts: the Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*. Oxford University Press, 1994
