

# “Development of Body, Mind, and Soul:” Paramahansa Yogananda’s Marketing of Yoga-Based Religion<sup>1</sup>

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“What is meditation?” Brother Nakulananda, of Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), posed this question in the title of a 2017 *World Religion News* article. Challenging the widespread assumption that “the practice’s benefits for stress reduction, physical health, and better brain functioning” captured its essence, he averred that “meditation serves, above all else, as a pathway to the Divine.” His assessment that “the supreme purpose of meditation is to know God, to reunite the individual soul with Spirit,” directly echoed the founder of his organization, Paramahansa Yogananda, who, according to Nakulananda, taught several “definite scientific techniques for attaining direct, personal experience of God,” the most significant of which was Kriya Yoga.<sup>2</sup>

Before Anya P. Foxen’s recent work,<sup>3</sup> scholars of yoga had largely ignored Yogananda, even while acknowledging his significance.<sup>4</sup> This omission is both puzzling and instructive. It is puzzling in light of the penchant of contemporary Indians and Indian Americans to refer to him, with some hyperbole, as “India’s first guru in the U.S.”<sup>5</sup> or “the teacher who first introduced the modern world to the transformative power of yoga as a timeless inner discipline.”<sup>6</sup> In 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in commemorating the centennial of Yogananda’s first Indian ashram, praised the way he “made spirituality so approachable and tangible that in these hundred years since he started it, his work has become a worldwide movement, a perennial resource of spiritual understanding.”<sup>7</sup>

The general scholarly neglect of Yogananda is also instructive in what it reveals about the focus of yoga scholarship. Foxen suggests that Yogananda has been ignored because of his relative indifference to *āsanas*, often treated as the defining element of modern yoga. This raises the question of why he was indifferent to *āsanas*. Foxen argues

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that he substituted his “energization exercises” as a kind of “yoga calisthenics,” which served the same purpose as *āsanas* in developing the power of will.<sup>8</sup> Although this is true, the deeper answer is buried in a footnote in his *Autobiography of a Yogi*, in which he suggests that the technique is not worthy of attention because it is “little used by yogis bent on spiritual liberation.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than health, flexibility, or energy, his ultimate concern was spiritual liberation, and he subordinated these very real temporal benefits to the goal of transcending earthly existence altogether through God-realization. Yogananda’s search for God is the central plot of his famous autobiography, which mentions *God*, *deity*, *the divine*, and *divinity* more than six hundred times—more than his combined references to yoga and yogis. His other publications reinforce this picture. Two extensive bodies of texts that have not been systematically studied by previous scholars, his *East-West* magazine and his yoga correspondence course, routinely emphasize the centrality of God-realization. Together, these texts clearly reveal that metaphysics, far from being a “departure” from “practical goals” like stress management and weight loss, was always his primary concern.<sup>10</sup> From the beginning of his ministry in the United States, he emphasized that life’s purpose is divine communion, and yoga is the means to train body and mind to attain it. Although he described God-contact in many ways, his most common language reflected intimate encounter with a personal Being more in line with the *bhakti* tradition than with the austerity of Advaita Vedanta’s impersonal Brahman, a depiction that resonated well with his U.S. audiences.

His central teaching, which undoubtedly contains modern and syncretic Western features, nevertheless retains key similarities to medieval yoga tradition, a “unified body of practice,” according to David Gordon White, whose goal of journeying to the “highest reaches of transcendent being” was achieved through “yoking oneself” (the meaning of the Sanskrit root from which the word *yoga* derives) to divine beings, including “the absolute itself.”<sup>11</sup> Fully accomplished yogis might perform the miraculous feats Patanjali delineated in the *Yoga Sūtras*. A central attraction of Yogananda’s religious instruction was his disciples’ conviction that he was a divine guru who, freed from *karma*, could read their minds, infallibly guide their lives, and commune with them after his 1952 *mahasamādhi*, the freely chosen surrender of his body as a fully self-realized individual.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond these fundamental theological convictions, the SRF bears the typical marks of a religious organization: It is a hierarchical institution, invites formal membership, and provides normative beliefs and practices. SRF reflects the “Modern Denominational Yoga” Elizabeth De Michelis delineated in her well-known yoga

typology, but has shown relatively little interest in exploring. SRF promotes, in De Michelis's words, "adherence to [the] school's own beliefs, rules and sources of authority." It is "collectivist," "tightly structured," makes "demands on members," and has "stable belief and organizational systems."<sup>13</sup> Because the various institutional dimensions of SRF cannot be pursued in detail here, this article focuses largely on the theological dimension that makes Yogananda's yoga-based movement notable.<sup>14</sup>

As founder of a religious movement emphasizing soteriological goals, Yogananda is at odds with the prevailing scholarly portrayal of yoga as a modern, syncretic bodily practice focused on mindfulness and physical well-being that, even when employing the language of transcendence, magic, or the supernatural, typically has this-worldly perfection in mind. To be sure, a number of scholars have explored modern yoga teachers, especially those headquartered in India, whose teaching and organizational structure emphasize soteriological goals.<sup>15</sup> But such figures remain minor themes in a dominant narrative that takes for granted that "the ascendancy of reason, characterized by an emphasis on science, technology, and empirical thinking" has forced the inevitable collapse of the sacred canopy.<sup>16</sup> Sarah Strauss summarizes the narrative trajectory of the field as a transformation from "a regional, male-oriented religious activity to a globalized and *largely secular* phenomenon."<sup>17</sup> The secular teleology of yoga scholarship thus better explains Yogananda's neglect by scholars, because, as David Gordon White points out, any element of yoga that falls outside the "modern-day *sensus communis*" of yoga scholarship tends to be ignored.<sup>18</sup>

Yogananda and SRF thus offer an important counterpoint to the dominant historiography of yoga. Fully at ease in the modern world, Yogananda nevertheless believed that the sacred canopy remained fully intact. He was one of the first "global gurus," figures who "function as spokespersons, apologists, and unifiers of the Hindu religion" and "creators of newer and more universalized religious forms that break the bounds of territory, race, and ethnicity."<sup>19</sup> More recent gurus have benefited from the growth of diaspora Indian communities, routine air travel, and, in the last few decades, the emergence of the Internet, to fuel the expansion of their global ministries.<sup>20</sup> Without the advantage of any of these later developments, Yogananda nurtured a fruitful transnational ministry. Like more recent gurus, Yogananda reversed the globalist narrative, spreading a message from the global periphery to the center. Whereas other gurus have often remained based in India and have recruited heavily among diaspora Indians, however, Yogananda was

the first Indian to establish a thriving, yoga-based Hinduism among white converts in the United States, where he made his home.<sup>21</sup> Although Vivekananda often receives this honor, he had no formal training in any yoga school and his U.S. ministry was not successful institutionally, his fame notwithstanding.<sup>22</sup> Yogananda provides essential insight into the development of modern Western yoga as an Indian import, in contrast to homegrown theosophical instruction, in the context of early twentieth-century religious pluralism. Given Yogananda's significance, it is understandable that SRF routinely labels their founder "the Father of Yoga in the West."<sup>23</sup>

I begin by considering Yogananda's vision of the "science of religion," language that reflected not a materialist reduction of yoga to somatic goals, but a precise, systematic meditation method designed to achieve God-contact through proper attunement of mind and body. I then turn to the U.S. religious marketplace. Whereas later global gurus had to compete with each other in an increasingly crowded spiritual marketplace, Yogananda faced the very different challenge of making his brand of Hindu religion compelling in the often hostile milieu of a dominant Christian culture.<sup>24</sup> Southern California's identity as a "spiritual frontier" that drew nonmainstream religious practitioners offered a uniquely conducive space to launch a Hindu religious movement in a virulently xenophobic era. I consider Yogananda's commoditization of various products in an effort to build revenue and brand loyalty for his religious organization. Although he strategically promoted the very real health and energy benefits of his instruction to white-collar professionals, this did not reflect his teaching's ultimate objective. In the final section, then, I explore the heart of his commercial and spiritual enterprise: the yoga correspondence course that promised to train disciples in God-contact and ultimate liberation, and presented him as the embodiment of that reality.

## **The Science of Religion**

Born into a civil service family in northern India in 1893, Mukunda Lal Ghosh had been drawn to the spiritual path of a renunciate at a young age. After many years of spiritual seeking, Ghosh found a mentor in Swami Sri Yukteswar, who taught a "scientific" Hindu pathway to divine encounter through Kriya Yoga, an esoteric variation of classical yoga. Under Yukteswar's supervision, Ghosh took his vows in 1915, becoming a member of the Swami Order

and choosing for his monastic name "Yogananda," or "yoga of bliss." Henceforth, he would be known as *Swami Yogananda*.

Yogananda's early views reflected the influence of his mentor. In 1894, Yukteswar authored *The Holy Science*, a short book he described as a search for the truth in all religions. It presented a view of yoga—although he used this word sparingly—as part of a coherent, systematic practice that would lead to the highest goal of religion, self-knowledge. His language reflected Christian terminology: The first chapter, "The Gospel," discussed God the Father, sin, and repentance. Employing this Christian vocabulary enabled him to translate Christian theology into the categories of Hindu thought. God the Father was really *sat*, the only reality in the universe. Repentance meant not turning from sin, but abandoning *māyā* (ignorance), rediscovering one's own divinity, and thus experiencing liberation. The practical method to achieve liberation required vegetarianism, as well as spending extended time in the open air and with those to whom one was "magnetically" drawn. Successful practice would lead to supernatural yogic powers:

Life and death come under the control of the yogi who perseveres in the practice of Pranayama. In that way, he saves his body from the premature decay that overtakes most men, and can remain as long as he wishes in his present physical form; thus having time to work out his karma in one body; and to fulfil (and thus get rid of) all the various desires of his heart. Finally purified, he is no longer required to come again into this world under the influence of Maya, darkness, nor to suffer the "second death."<sup>25</sup>

Apart from Yukteswar's instruction, Ghosh's views were shaped by the modern intellectual movement known as the "Bengal Renaissance," which reconsidered traditional Indian beliefs in light of Western evangelical and utilitarian critiques. Bengali intellectuals articulated a vision of Indian religion as an eternal moral and devotional body of practice that was both fundamentally Indian and universal. Indians had traditionally neither sought nor accepted converts, viewing their traditions as inherent to their land and people. Torkel Brekke identifies three stages in the nineteenth-century transformation of Indian traditions that led some Hindus to embrace audiences outside the subcontinent: the objectification of religion as a separate element of social organization; the individualization of religion that severed people from caste, life-stage, and pilgrimages and regional festivals; and the universalization of Hinduism that

“now was linked to human nature and could be applied to anyone, anywhere, any time.” Distilling truths that were independent of the land, culture, and people of the subcontinent made them universal and transportable to new lands. As a result, in the late nineteenth century, “Hinduism became a missionary religion.” This was a dramatic development: “The thought that a Hindu should travel abroad in order to preach Hinduism simply makes no sense before the transformation in religious perception that took place in the nineteenth century.”<sup>26</sup>

This radical development in modern Hinduism was the *sine qua non* of Yogananda’s evangelistic efforts. Shortly after taking his vows, Yogananda envisioned an evangelistic mission to the West. He was “a missionary,” SRF’s current president, Brother Chidananda, once said, evidently uncomfortable with the pejorative connotations of this label, of an “ancient tradition of yoga meditation.”<sup>27</sup> As Wendell Thomas observed in 1930, “The swami is seeking to explain Christianity in the light of the supposedly deeper knowledge of Hinduism. Like Ramakrishna and his followers[,] he is using Hinduism as a basis for the reconciliation of all faiths. Like the Theosophical Society, he regards Hindu lore as the source of the esoteric, or essential, truths that underlie the exoteric, or literal, truths of Christianity.”<sup>28</sup>

In this goal, the ambitious Yogananda sought to emulate his implicit role model, Swami Vivekananda, often viewed as the founder of modern yoga, but equally significant as a founder of modern Hinduism in the West. Vivekananda believed, as Joanne Punzo Waghorne explains, “that the catholicity of his Hinduism, its inherent inclusion of all, could serve as the very model for a rising new kind of universal religion.”<sup>29</sup> Vivekananda died of a stroke at Belur Math, the Calcutta monastery he founded, at age thirty-nine in 1902. This was several years before the Ghosh family moved to Calcutta. Mukunda, therefore, never had a chance to meet him. But Mukunda became an eager, unofficial devotee of Vivekananda’s own guru, Swami Ramakrishna. In his passionate devotionism, Yogananda actually took after Ramakrishna more than the reserved Vivekananda—or the even more austere Yukteswar. He regularly visited Belur Math and Ramakrishna’s former home, the Dakshineswar Temple, conversing with Ramakrishna’s disciples.<sup>30</sup> As a college student, he carried a booklet of Ramakrishna’s teachings in his pocket, meditated on them regularly, and offered to share them with interested acquaintances.<sup>31</sup> Yogananda later established an ashram within view of Belur Math as a fulfillment of his vow as a young man to make a larger organization than Vivekananda’s.<sup>32</sup>

Yogananda indisputably succeeded in this ambition in terms of institution building. Vivekananda only belatedly adopted the role of evangelist. He originally came to the United States seeking donations for social welfare projects in India, gradually adopting the role of religious teacher when he recognized his audiences' interest in yoga and Hindu philosophy. This lack of intentional, strategic evangelizing blunted his influence. Also, Vivekananda spent much less time in the United States than Yogananda; he toured the United States for three years after he attended the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, held in conjunction with the Columbia Exposition in Chicago. He also paid a short second visit in 1899 just before his premature death.

After a short career running a spiritual school for boys in West Bengal, Yogananda saw an opportunity to fulfill his vision by traveling to the United States as a delegate to a 1920 International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston. Yogananda fancied himself a successor to Vivekananda, viewing the 1920 meeting as an opportunity to emulate Vivekananda's earlier journey and to chart his own course to fame as a spiritual leader. Despite its grand vision, the Congress was a modest affair. The World's Parliament of Religions had included more than two hundred formal addresses, drew several thousand participants a day, and lasted more than two weeks.<sup>33</sup> The 1920 gathering lasted five days and offered a much smaller slate of presentations. Yogananda was relegated to a special session on the relationship between "Oriental" religions and liberal Christianity, which was held apart from the main gathering.<sup>34</sup>

In his address, Yogananda, echoing *The Holy Science*, spoke about "the science of religion." As Joseph Alter points out, modern Indian yoga literature frequently refers to yoga as a science, with the meaning of a "precise and special way of knowing," with an ultimate goal "to transcend knowledge and realize absolute truth through direct experience."<sup>35</sup> This language has typically encoded a reinterpretation of premodern yoga's soteriological goals in terms of a materialist goal of bodily perfection. Yogananda, however, did not employ scientific language this way. Rather, scientific language expressed the congruence of yoga's transcendent power with modern empirical research. It also served as a precise idiom for articulating the practical, systematic techniques for achieving the timeless human goal of experiencing God. These techniques aimed not to perfect the body, then, but to overcome the "delusion" of confusing the Self with the body, and thus to escape embodied existence altogether.

If Yogananda used scientific language without compromising the soteriological goals of yoga, he also, like Yukteswar, used the language of Christian evangelicalism without adopting its theology. The narrative arc of his address imitated a revival sermon or a gospel tract that moves from despair to hope. It begins with the universal desire of humanity to know God, unveils the false and idolatrous substitutes humans find, and concludes with the liberating transformation that comes when people discover the truth. Yogananda's gospel, however, originated not in the Bible, but in Vedanta. Although he used the English word *Bliss* instead of the Sanskrit word *ananda*, he argued that Bliss was the goal of life (which, for him, was identical to the experience of God), that the search for Bliss could be achieved only by destroying desire and attachment, and that behavior is shaped by innate tendencies known as *samskāras*. Although he avoided use of the word *prāṇa* or *prāṇayama*, he prescribed specific techniques for "the control, regulation and turning back of the *life-force* to transcend the body and mind and know the 'Self' in its native State."<sup>36</sup>

His use of Christian language reflected his effort to present a faith through which all other religions found their true meaning. He explicated the "one truth" underlying all religions, explaining "that unless you know yourself as spirit, as the fountain-head of Bliss—separate from Body and mind—your existence is devoid of meaning, your life is akin to that of a brute. We can know God only by knowing ourselves, for our natures are similar to His. Man has been created after the image of God. If the methods suggested are practised in right earnest you will know yourself to be Blissful spirit and in it you will feel God."<sup>37</sup>

His portrayal of God was complex and undogmatic: "God may be or become anything—Personal, Impersonal, All-merciful, Omnipotent, etc., etc. But what I say is that we do not require to take note of these. *What conception we have put forth is just according to our purpose, our hopes, aspirations and our perfection.*"<sup>38</sup> On one hand, he spoke of the divine as immanent, and, employing the language of Advaita Vedanta monism, suggested that God was equivalent to Bliss.

At the same time, he simultaneously advanced a view of God as transcendent and personal. Acknowledging that "our spiritual hopes and aspirations . . . require the conception of God as a Personal Being," Yogananda assured listeners that "He is a Person in the transcendental sense. Our being, consciousness, feeling are limited, and empirical, those aspects of His are unlimited and transcendental. Nor should He be thought as an Abstract, Impersonal Being full of His own power and glory, beyond the reach



of all experience—even our internal one. He, as we remarked, comes within the calm experience of men.”<sup>39</sup> Although instruction on Advaita continued throughout his career, this devotional view of a personal deity—a deity on whose reality humans depend and in whose nature they partake—became most characteristic of his teaching. Finding a sympathetic ear for his message of divine communion through yoga’s physical and mental disciplines would require the right audience.

### **Southern California: Landscape of Health and Alternative Religions**

After the Boston gathering, Yogananda decided to stay in the United States, attempting to establish a solid base for a permanent ministry that taught yoga as a means to God-realization. He struggled to find a foothold, however. When he arrived in Los Angeles in January, 1925, he felt at home in the United States for the first time since his arrival five years earlier and immediately decided to relocate there. For one thing, the temperate weather was more familiar to the India native than Boston and New York, where he had spent most of his time since the 1920 gathering. He was also immediately smitten by the Hollywood film industry, which inspired him to describe life as a “Paramount picture, shown in serials and by installments, infinitely interesting, ever-fresh, ever-stirring, ever-complex.”<sup>40</sup> But it was the spiritual climate that really made him feel at ease. Having traveled throughout the United States, he accorded Southern California special honor, proclaiming on one occasion, “I have always considered Los Angeles to be the Benares of America,” the “most spiritual place in America.”<sup>41</sup> He experienced hospitality toward his integrated religion of mind, body, and spirit there as nowhere else in the United States. Although Anglo Protestants enjoyed cultural hegemony well into the twentieth century, the city was also home to a small but vibrant collection of religious and spiritual traditions, including Christian Science, New Thought, and new movements like Pentecostalism.<sup>42</sup> The fertility of new religious movements in Southern California helps explain both Yogananda’s decision to locate there and some of the success of his subsequent ministry. There was something in the soil—or at least in the landscape—of the City of Angels.

By the late nineteenth century, the greater Southern California region had become an increasingly powerful magnet for various migrants.<sup>43</sup> Sublime encounters with blue skies, golden sunlight, and the vast Pacific inspired evocations of Eden.<sup>44</sup> Some visitors who

saw the region as paradise were looking to form spiritual communities there. The lack of a single population center and the geographic openness of the Los Angeles Basin allowed religious diversity to flourish despite Protestant hegemony; groups literally had space to invent their own traditions largely free from the pressure of cultural elites. Southern California became a magnet for a self-selecting group of spiritual eccentrics, a point that was as obvious to contemporary observers as it is to later scholars.

From at least the beginning of the century, Los Angeles-area residents noted the bewildering diversity of the region's spiritual landscape. In 1900, a columnist proclaimed, "Los Angeles is the headquarters for scientific, socialistic, humanitarian, occult and other societies dealing with matters—or rather with ideas—that are more or less beyond the ken of the average every-day mortal," including "Harmonial Spiritualists, the Universal Brotherhood, the Cooperative Spiritual Workers, the Theosophists, a School of Metaphysics, a school of 'sciento-philosophy and psycho-pneumatic culture' (God save us!) and a 'home of truth.'"<sup>45</sup> Art critic Willard Huntington Wright noted the city's taste for "spiritualists, mediums, astrologists, phrenologists, palmists and all other breeds of esoteric windjammers."<sup>46</sup> An editorial, noting the exotic ethnic and religious diversity, sardonically encouraged readers to let everyone come and avoid the inconveniences of travel. "We can have the world in a nutshell, so to speak, in this cosmopolitan city."<sup>47</sup>

Not all white Angelenos were this sanguine about the city's growing cosmopolitanism. Some ethnic groups made them genuinely anxious, including Mexicans and, later, African Americans. But Asian immigrants posed a special threat as practitioners of non-Christian religions. In 1907, Los Angeles residents began expressing concern that Indians facing harassment in Vancouver might begin migrating to the Southland.<sup>48</sup> Their anxiety about a heathen Hindu invasion fused racial, cultural, and religious prejudices. Many whites, who assumed a link between racial and civic identities, doubted that Indians could make good citizens.<sup>49</sup> White critics also insinuated that Hindus displayed a general disposition toward crime, violence, and immorality. Many whites feared that unfamiliar religious beliefs were at the root of lawless behavior. Practices like meditation were related to hypnotism, superstition, astrology, and palm reading—questionable activities often popularly linked to crimes of passion and sexual degeneracy.<sup>50</sup> State and municipal government officials took the threat of psychics and palm readers seriously enough to launch a major campaign in late 1924 to "seriously cripple, if not eliminate, purported psychic and pseudospiritualist activities on the Pacific Coast."<sup>51</sup>

Despite this consistent negative discourse about Indians, however, countervailing forces were also present. Two groups with religious or spiritual overtones flourished in Southern California in this period that contributed to making the region hospitable to Hindu leaders like Yogananda. The availability of open spaces in a mild climate encouraged Utopianism to flourish at the turn of the century in California as in few other places.<sup>52</sup> By no means were these communities all religious but, as Robert Hine, the preeminent historian of the state's utopian communities, put it, "perfectionism lay at the heart of California utopianism." *Perfectionism*, Hine explains, is a spiritual ethos encouraging members to agree that humans "can achieve in this life not only freedom from sin, but the highest of the virtues, truth, beauty, goodness. And society itself, like man, can be perfectly remolded. In this sense, utopians were also millenarians looking for the coming of the ideal commonwealth and eternal happiness on this earth."<sup>53</sup>

Good climate also drew "health seekers," who often mixed spirituality with their quest for health. This included, for example, John Harvey Kellogg's Adventist-inspired back-to-nature sanitariums and Christian Scientists pursuing Mary Baker Eddy's claim that tuberculosis existed only in the mind.<sup>54</sup> This quest often produced unorthodox medical approaches tinged with spirituality, giving Los Angeles a reputation "throughout the medical world as one of the richest stumping grounds in the country for medical quackery and 'cultism,'" according to the 1930 editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Writer Louis Adamic found in the early 1920s "no end of chiropractors, osteopaths, 'drugless physicians,' faith healers, health lecturers, manufacturers and salesmen of all sorts of health 'stabilizers' and 'normalizers,' psychoanalysts, phynotists, mesmerists, the flow-of-life mystics, astro-theraputists, miracle men and women."<sup>55</sup>

Interest in perfectionism, health, and nontraditional medicine created some respect for Indian traditions. Los Angeles doctor Philip Lovell became a sort of 1920s public intellectual for health with his regular *Los Angeles Times* column, "Care of the Body." Lovell was a naturopath who was deeply interested in all dimensions of health—environment, diet, mind, and exercise—and a cosmopolitan with at least some knowledge of many global traditions. His column frequently noted beliefs held by "Hindoos," including the importance of breathing and Ayurvedic diet. His tone could be supercilious, but his intellectual openness to Indian traditions contributed a sense of tolerance to public discourse about Indians.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Barclay L. Severns ran a weekly column beginning in

November 1922, on health and fitness issues; he especially emphasized diet, exercise, posture, and breathing. He referenced as an example Indian Murth Naider, whose mental control contributed to his overall health.<sup>57</sup>

American Orientalist tropes, too, projected positive if patronizing attitudes toward India and its people. Americans tended to collapse high-caste Indians, their culture, and fashion into a single exotic East of luxurious princedoms.<sup>58</sup> Unlike most other Americans, who could only learn about Indians through various media, residents of Los Angeles's diverse metropolis had the opportunity to encounter Hindus in person. As early as 1901, one observer noted, "Hinduism has a no [sic] considerable following in Los Angeles."<sup>59</sup>

Hindu leaders who arrived in Los Angeles before Yogananda pioneered in efforts, largely unsuccessful, to reach out to white Americans. They doggedly challenged pernicious Indian stereotypes, appropriated less critical Orientalist tropes, and patiently explained their beliefs. Vivekananda made a splash in Los Angeles during his six-week visit there in 1900.<sup>60</sup> But local enthusiasm soon waned, and his death two years later merited only a terse obituary in the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>61</sup> Nationwide, Vedanta groups struggled to survive for several decades after his death. There were only four organized Vedanta centers in the early 1920s—New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—claiming a total of roughly two hundred members altogether.<sup>62</sup> In the decade before Yogananda's arrival in the United States, two teachers, Swami Abhedananda and Swami Paramananda, attempted to reinvigorate the Vedanta movement. Both were Bengalis and direct disciples of Swami Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Abhedananda originally came to New York in 1897. Tensions grew as Paramananda, Abhedananda's charismatic young assistant, became a more popular speaker. In 1910, after a number of difficulties with the New York leadership, Abhedananda was suspended from the organization, and began touring the country independently before departing the United States for good in 1921.<sup>63</sup> Both men made routine speaking visits to Los Angeles, although neither established a firm foothold in the city.

The Hindu sage whose ministry in early twentieth-century Los Angeles most effectively paved the way for Yogananda's own work, however, was not associated with the Vedanta movement. Like Yogananda, Baba Bharati forged his own independent movement. Born into a well-off Calcutta family, Bharati received a college education that included English.<sup>64</sup> Sponsored by Indian elites, he came to the United States as a Hindu evangelist or, as a reviewer of one of his books labeled him, as a "self-identified missionary," a

"chosen instrument of God to carry the religion of the sages of India to western lands."<sup>65</sup> He spent a few years in Boston and New York before settling in Los Angeles, because he felt most at home in the nation's spiritual frontier. As he put it, "of all spots of Columbia, the most blessed is Southern California: more warm-hearted than any other part of the Union; in her center here in Los Angeles, I have met the warmest American hearts."<sup>66</sup> When Bharati went back to India, he intended to stay for only a few years; he planned to return to Los Angeles and build a large temple in the city with "the Greatest number of Brahmin Hindoos in America."<sup>67</sup> His plans, however, never materialized. With no institutional infrastructure, he lacked the ability to raise sufficient funds to make his dreams reality. Bharati's movement expired with him when he died in Calcutta in 1914.<sup>68</sup>

These diverse Hindu teachers in early twentieth-century Los Angeles shared a number of common features that cast Yogananda's own evangelistic efforts in sharp relief. These leaders generally understood their audience and couched their message in the language of modernity, emphasizing realization of the Self, the integration of science and religion, and the optimistic potential of reincarnation. They pushed the attractiveness—indeed, the superiority—of their spiritual product, attempting to balance assertiveness with the equanimity expected in a pluralistic setting. They all faced mixed responses to their racial identity, including curiosity, prejudice, condescension, and some affection. And they disproportionately drew well-educated women from wealthy families, who had some experience in metaphysical or nonmainstream religious traditions.<sup>69</sup>

Despite these earlier teachers' prospects, their movements were moribund or dead by the time Yogananda arrived in Los Angeles. Although the Vedanta Society later came to be associated with Southern California and Hollywood through figures like Christopher Isherwood, at the time, the organization lacked the infrastructure to thrive after Vivekananda's death. His successors were often less gregarious and more ambivalent about outreach than Vivekananda. The organization limped along in the early decades of the twentieth century. Only after World War II did it enjoy vitality in the United States. If Southern California held out the chance of making it big, that opportunity had to be seized. Yogananda would succeed where these Hindu forerunners failed by coupling their instructional approach with his charismatic personality and an aggressive, shrewd marketing plan far more ambitious than anything they had undertaken.

## Marketing Yogoda's Benefits

In the early twentieth century, advertising increasingly blurred consumer goods and the sacred.<sup>70</sup> Some observers characterized advertising itself as a kind of religion.<sup>71</sup> Advertising executive Bruce Barton, the son of a Congregational minister, penned *The Man Nobody Knows*, an immediate bestseller that revealed Jesus as a worldly man who displayed remarkable commercial acumen.<sup>72</sup> It is no surprise that Yogananda favorably reviewed Barton's book in 1926, proclaiming it "original, gripping, alive!" and recommending that all his students read it.<sup>73</sup> A growing body of scholarship explores the commercialization of yoga, a tradition that historically emphasized nonattachment to material possessions, by recent Indian gurus. Yogananda was a significant forerunner of such figures, charting a path for entrepreneurial spirituality in which "every form of exotic cultural knowledge, every yogic posture, and every spiritual technique has become a commodity."<sup>74</sup> A canny entrepreneur, he compellingly articulated a range of benefits yoga-based religion offered.

His marketing shrewdness is evident in various ways. In his newspaper advertisements, he pragmatically acknowledged his teaching's entertainment value and American perceptions of Hindu speakers as novelty acts by placing ads in the entertainment section of local newspapers, as well as the religion section. The uniqueness of a Yogananda ad sandwiched between promotions for vaudeville productions, casinos, and an Al Jolson blackface performance gave him an edge over religious competitors who only advertised in the religion section.<sup>75</sup> Endorsements by famous Americans also provided significant cachet for Yogananda and his work. Renowned horticulturalist and liberal Christian Luther Burbank invoked his scientific authority to provide a vigorous testimonial about Yogananda and his teaching.<sup>76</sup> And opera singer Madame Amelia Galli-Curci's endorsement won Yogananda his first reference in a national publication, when *Time* notified readers in 1928 that she was a supporter of "Swami Yogananda of India and Los Angeles, Calif., a man who looks like a plump woman."<sup>77</sup> Yogananda forged relationships with other entertainers, taking advantage of his proximity to Hollywood to cultivate friendships with key figures in the film industry.<sup>78</sup>

His affection for filmmaking encouraged a theatricality to his live presentations. He displayed an intuitive understanding that "religions that lend themselves to visual intensity and symbolism have greater appeal in consumer culture."<sup>79</sup> But his performance was

more than this. A warm, magnetic personality, he became his own best advertisement, literally embodying the attractiveness of divine communion and displaying charisma in the original sense of a divine spiritual gift. Besides playing up his visual appearance by emphasizing his long hair, turban, and robes, he developed the aural impact of his dramatic performance, controlling the tone, volume, and pitch of his voice, as he undulated dramatically. Audiences noted how his resonant “God power-driven voice” complemented his eyes, face, and gestures.<sup>80</sup> As one disciple appreciatively explained, “Master’s voice—well modulated—rose and fell in pitch and decibels to express the internal feelings he projected. To capture the full attention of his listeners, his voice ranged from whispered phrases to a great booming volume. It always commanded attention and, no doubt, kept the listeners interested.”<sup>81</sup>

Yogananda found himself in a crowded field of religious “stars” promoting their own personality-driven brands in the 1920s. Given evangelical preachers’ long tradition of theatrical performance, their proficiency at marketing is no surprise.<sup>82</sup> Evangelists’ personas enabled them to entertain large audiences through public addresses, modern print, and radio ministries. However fervently these preachers may have railed against materialism, their approach inevitably turned them into purveyors of a commoditized religion.<sup>83</sup> Billy Sunday, an evangelist with more passion than intellect, became a household name in the 1910s and 1920s and gained a number of friends in Hollywood.<sup>84</sup> He marketed everything he could think of: his biography; his sermons; hymn books; and postcards of himself, his family, and his evangelical team.<sup>85</sup> “Sister Aimee” Semple McPherson claims pride of place as a Southern California personality-driven minister. In her 1927 autobiography, she explained, “Religion, to thrive in the present day, must utilize present-day methods.” Sister Aimee, who became friends with Hollywood celebrities like Charlie Chaplin, was an innovative presenter who appeared on stage on a motorcycle for one sermon, staged theatrical productions, and dramatically displayed the crutches of those physically healed through her ministry.<sup>86</sup>

As an entertainer, Yogananda was every bit the equal of these evangelists, successfully creating his own intriguing cult of personality. One researcher at the time perceptively noted, “Swami Yogananda himself is the biggest advertisement for the Society, in spite of a newspaper announcement that ‘Swami Yogananda keeps himself in the background.’ His face appears in newspapers and on billboards, in some of his books, and several times in his magazine. Every Yogoda class has its photograph; the class-members are seated

while the swami stands well in the foreground."<sup>87</sup> He even stole a page from Sister Aimee's playbook. A report in 1926 announced that a "Los Angeles student, Mrs. Otto Crimman" had thrown away her crutch "in the presence of a large number of students." Her name and address were offered as verifiable proof of the effectiveness of Yogananda's cures.<sup>88</sup> In one case, McPherson's ad appeared directly above Yogananda's, a juxtaposition that captures their competition. Other than his foreign-sounding name and exotic image, Yogananda's ad was scarcely distinguishable from one she might have placed: It described a Sunday devotional service and Sunday School; announced the upcoming talk, "Healing by Christ Power"; and explained how the previous week's "Healing Prayer" service had led to a woman being healed and throwing away her crutch.<sup>89</sup>

And like these evangelists, Yogananda particularly reached out to the striving professional class, a group potentially open to his self-improvement message as a path toward career advancement and with the means to pay for various spiritual products. The era's consumer and service revolution catalyzed the emergence of a new "white collar" middle class composed of civil servants, salesmen, managers, and advertising agents.<sup>90</sup> In Los Angeles, the booming economy in the manufacturing, real estate, film production, and leisure industries increased that region's white-collar pool.<sup>91</sup> He appealed directly to such workers, claiming that the "ordinary successful business man uses his powers of concentration only about twenty-five per cent," while "the student of Self-Realization can develop his power of concentration one hundred per cent and can use it scientifically to bring him success."<sup>92</sup>

To attract these audiences enmeshed in worldly affairs, Yogananda presented his ministry and its products in a holistic way, but often foregrounded this-worldly benefits. This effort can be seen in his *East-West* magazine, which he pitched as a cosmopolitan periodical attuned to pluralism, curiosity, engagement, and conversation.<sup>93</sup> In the magazine's second issue, he began a column that offered an integrated view of mind, body, and spirit. Soon titled "Three Recipes," the column offered helpful tips on "Spiritual," "Intellectual," and "Health" issues. By labeling all three sets of suggestions "Recipes," Yogananda conveyed a cozy domestic tenor while reinforcing the notion that disciplined practices were a kind of applied science, in this case home economics: If readers carefully followed the steps, they could be assured of the desired outcome.<sup>94</sup>

Yogananda's Intellectual Recipes were the most half-baked element of his "Three Recipes" column, revealing his own limitations on any subject that ranged beyond metaphysics. He routinely



recommended reading classic and contemporary devotional books, as well as science books and magazines. His suggestions were often vague or redundant, and in some months, Intellectual Recipes were absent altogether. In the midst of an unrelenting work schedule, he undoubtedly had little time to read new materials. He, furthermore, seems to have made intellectual development a relatively low priority, his admonitions to others notwithstanding. His failure to follow his own advice was evident in the pages of *East-West*, where he often unwittingly revealed his naiveté, as when he expressed admiration for both Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.<sup>95</sup>

By far the longest and most consistent member of the "Three Recipes" dealt with physical well-being. Various entitled "Health," "Food," and "Health and Food," topics in this category included a variety of tips on physical health. Readers should fast regularly to give "needed rest to the body-machine which overworks incessantly thru over-eating or wrong eating." Chewing food thoroughly was necessary to proper digestion. In warning against alcohol, Yogananda matched the fervor of contemporary temperance advocates: "Awake! Young men and women! Fight the liquor habit!"<sup>96</sup>

Physical health, however, involved more than good diet. "Oversex" was as dangerous as gluttony. Daily bathing "cleans the body pores and keeps the sweat glands working properly, eliminating impurities." This was a spiritual practice recommended by "the Hindu savants," who taught that "the person who bathes daily and keeps the pores of his body open, helps his increased body heat to escape through these pores." Adequate exercise and rest were vital. And Yogananda repeatedly recommended "bathing in the sunshine everyday," which had proven scientific benefits. "The ultra violet rays are the death rays which penetrate the homes of enemy bacteria hiding in the finger nails and body pores, and scorch them out."<sup>97</sup>

The bulk of the Food and Health Recipes space was given over to actual recipes, which were always vegetarian. Yogananda eventually found a way to commoditize his advocacy of vegetarianism, developing his own small line of health foods that could be purchased from his Southern California headquarters and shipped across the country. In promoting these products, Yogananda characteristically reinforced the link between mind, body, and spirit. "This intuitive food builds brain, muscle, and mind. It is also a Soul Food. It will help to invigorate the body, make youth lasting, increase the beauty of body and skin, and create a serene mind and temper."<sup>98</sup>

Yogananda's vegetarian foods were truly innovative. His first product, and the one that enjoyed the greatest longevity, was the mysteriously labeled "nutritive nuggets." The ingredients were never disclosed, but because nutritive nuggets were rich in oil, they benefitted "the digestive tract, liver, and gall bladder." And "although mildly laxative," ads reassured readers, they "are not habit-forming." "India nut steak," another popular longterm product, was "[u]ndoubtedly the most perfect meat substitute ever offered to the public," an ideal product for "spiritually minded people." "[J]ust as nourishing as a large steak, but . . . free from meat poisons," nut steak allowed vegetarians to "have the same enjoyment as they would eating steak."<sup>99</sup>

But beyond vegetarianism's undoubted health benefits and the opportunity for revenue that promoting them offered, Yogananda's attention to diet ultimately pointed beyond pragmatic bodily well-being. Spiritual well-being could never be achieved by those who remained "physically idle under the pretext of being too busy with spiritual things." Those wishing to avoid the contagious disease of "spiritual melancholia" must keep "their blood of energy warm and immune with constant healthful worth-while activity."<sup>100</sup> Physical care was not the final goal in its own right, because the Self is not the body. Rather, the "bodily machinery" God has given you is intended "to enable you to accomplish certain works on this material plane."<sup>101</sup> If the Spiritual Recipes section of his Three Recipes column was anemic, it was only because he addressed this topic so thoroughly elsewhere that he had little new to add.

### Capitalizing on Divine Yoga

In the early years, Yogananda commonly labeled his yoga instruction "Yogoda," a neologism designed to be a brand name that differentiated his product from the other forms of yoga practice. He brushed off objections that "Yogoda" was a grammatically incorrect rendition of the Sanskrit and infelicitous because it sounded too much like his own name.<sup>102</sup> He used "Yogoda" in various ways: as the title of a 1923 booklet that addressed only the introductory "energization exercises," as a brand name for his full proprietary yoga course (which subsumed the energization exercises as preliminary instruction), and as a title for his organization until he renamed it Self-Realization Fellowship in 1935.<sup>103</sup>

His 1923 *Yogoda or Muscle-Will System of Physical Perfection* was the first product he marketed.<sup>104</sup> This booklet began by teaching proper

posture, then guided practitioners through a set of energization exercises to concentrate on muscles and then to systematically tense and relax them.<sup>105</sup> His discussion of bodily benefits again evoked the language of science and medicine. Like a physician, Yogananda provided a prescription, a frequency, and expected outcomes of Yogoda exercises: Fifteen minutes of practice a day would lead to remarkable results. This appealed directly to the busy working person with only sporadic free time throughout the day.<sup>106</sup>

This booklet must be viewed both in light of his entrepreneurial flexibility and in his overall integration of body, mind, and spirit. *Yogoda* undoubtedly highlighted the "physiological benefits" of Yogoda to introduce "his method into an increasingly secular and practically minded spiritual market," as Foxen indicates.<sup>107</sup> But it was merely an introduction to Yogananda's larger system, and thus the energization exercises offer only limited understanding of his overall vision. Once practitioners saw the physical and mental benefits of the exercises, he could teach them deeper metaphysical truths. But such instruction could not be explicated in a short booklet.

In 1925, Yogananda launched a yoga correspondence course, an elaboration of the 1923 *Yogoda* outline that delved more deeply into yoga proper. The format of Yogananda's yoga instruction was notable. Yoga by distance learning was a radical invention, and only viable in the context of modern mass marketing and a vibrant consumer culture. Correspondence courses fit with the United States' spirit of self-improvement, its belief in the equality of opportunity, the growing importance of education in an industrialized society, and a pragmatic business model of efficiency and profit-maximizing. As the consumer economy blossomed in the early twentieth century, correspondence courses flourished as well.<sup>108</sup> Although practical courses predominated, many theological and religious courses were also available.<sup>109</sup>

Although Yogananda's yoga course had some precedents in biblical instruction, the closest parallels were courses offered by two New Thought leaders. William Walker Atkinson began editing a New Thought journal in 1900 and, as Carl Jackson puts it, "churning out a seemingly endless series of volumes" under his own name and several pseudonyms, including Yogi Ramacharaka.<sup>110</sup> In late 1903, "Ramacharaka" began to offer lessons by correspondence course through the Yogi Publication Society, endorsing himself in an anonymous third-person advertisement as "a student and writer who is renowned for the profundity of his thought, the clearness of his mental vision, the depth of his spiritual knowledge and his remarkable simplicity and plainness of style."<sup>111</sup> His instruction

represented a synthesis of Theosophy and New Thought occult teachings on mesmerism, magnetism, auras, and ether. Another predecessor course was created by a fellow Southern Californian, Max Heindel. In 1910, he converted his twenty "Rosicrucian Christian Lectures" into talks available by mail. The following year, Heindel decided to start a correspondence school. Abandoning the lecture circuit, he established his international headquarters in Oceanside, California, offering "the fruitage of true esoteric research" through a series of nearly one hundred monthly lessons on topics that included "Spiritual Research," "Ethereic Sight," "The Dangers of Excessive Bathing," and "The Color Effects of Emotion in Assemblages of People."<sup>112</sup>

Yogananda's correspondence course shared some broad similarities with his two predecessors' courses. As esoteric knowledge, they all proceeded through a sequence of instruction in which mastery of lower mysteries was a prerequisite for advanced understanding. These self-published efforts relied on initiates' donations to fund their organizations.<sup>113</sup> Whereas Heindel's and Ramacharaka's courses were designed largely to teach only intellectual content, however, Yogananda was unique in promising to mentor devotees in a complex sequence of total personal development involving physical, mental, and spiritual practices.

Distance education was a novel strategy within Hinduism. It represented a dramatic departure from the face-to-face model of transmission from guru to disciple that swamis traditionally considered indispensable. Yogananda's approach was controversial among Indian swamis within Yukteswar's lineage, who groused that "the learning of any spiritual discipline through easily available materials, such as, lessons, books, literature, lectures, seminars, and through organizations, is not the righteous way. Learning through these means could never solve the subtle problems of the seeker."<sup>114</sup> Yogananda's pragmatism yielded significant benefits. Distance-education yoga allowed Yogananda to enroll a larger number of followers than he could ever have trained personally, and thus also provided a steady source of ongoing income. Although his mentorship was, at best, virtual, he continued to insist throughout the lessons that advancement was only possible through his guidance as "Guru-Preceptor."<sup>115</sup>

The course began with the Yogoda energization exercises. Yogananda then introduced two additional stages, concentration and meditation. Reflecting a division in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* between *dhyāna* and *dhāraṇā*, Yogananda distinguished between concentration techniques, which taught disciplined focus on any subject, and meditation proper, which allowed one to engage in single-minded

contemplation of God. Practical instruction was sprinkled throughout, suggesting techniques for improving memory, curing nervousness—which included the suggestion to “avoid jazz and loud music for some time at least” and, instead, listen to violin music—and learning to heal oneself. Cross-promotion was imbedded in the lessons. To deepen one's skills, disciples should buy other Yogananda writings like *Songs of the Soul*, *Scientific Healing Affirmations*, and articles in back issues of *East-West*.

Over a ten-year period, the Yogoda Correspondence Course lessons developed into an elaborate series of instruction on increasingly advanced techniques, including 182 lessons consisting of seven “Steps” of twenty-six lessons each.<sup>116</sup> Each Step ended with an “intermediate exam”; a successful exam score enabled the disciple to receive the next set of lessons. If lessons were completed at the prescribed “fortnightly” rate, the entire sequence would take seven years, although some eager aspirants undoubtedly completed them more quickly. By the early 1930s, the lessons followed a consistent sequence. The lesson began with an inspirational poem or an affirmation, and a prayer. The bulk of the lesson consisted of detailed instruction on one element of concentration or meditation, including a philosophical introduction and practical implementation, often with sequential steps. The lesson concluded with an “apologue”—a fable or allegory that provided some moral truth about yoga—and another affirmation.

Despite Yogananda's routine insistence on the importance of practical religion, his lessons often devoted more attention to theological instruction than to techniques for concentration and meditation. He taught that the universe is a result of the vibration that disrupts the unity of the three *gunas*, or primordial evolute, that created the world. All material reality consists of five *koshas*, or sheaths, “stages of evolution through which all matter has to pass in order to become spiritualized and emancipated.” Creation, although real, is also, in a profound sense, *māyā* or delusion, “which makes the Indivisible spirit seem finite and divisible to all appearances. Matter has existence in the same delusive way as the mirage in the desert.” Human experience is fundamentally shaped by the endless cycles of reincarnation that result from one's karma, the “natural law of cause and effect and law of action.”<sup>117</sup>

After completing the first two Steps (the first fifty-two lessons), the devotee was invited to apply for Kriya Yoga, “a special technique for quickening your evolution.” Then the practitioner had to persevere through one hundred additional lessons as the course meandered through anecdotes and advice before finally introducing “the Higher

Initiation" in Praeceptum 150 with the announcement that "[w]ords are inadequate to express to you the Self-Realization-producing vitality of this Kriya (Kree-ya) Instruction."<sup>118</sup> Despite the promise that initiates would learn proprietary techniques reintroduced to the forbears of Yogananda's lineage by special revelation after having disappeared millennia ago, Yogananda's instruction basically reflected classical yoga as articulated in the *Yoga Sutras* with Tantra-inspired *hatha* yoga elements. Yogananda taught that *kuṇḍalinī* was a "creative nerve force which flows through a coiled passage in the coccyx."

The goal of focusing energy on the Third Eye was, as Foxen describes, achieving "oneness with the effulgent universal sound."<sup>119</sup> This was but one of Yogananda's many effusive descriptions of this state, which he also characterized as seeing the astral world, "finding answers to all the religious queries of the heart," and recognizing that the "illusion of change called 'death' is but a new beginning in another supernal life." Most importantly, it was the condition "in which the devotee, meditation, and God become one."<sup>120</sup>

Yogananda's devotional language throughout is striking. When he explained that "God loves to drink devotion from the secret wine-press of the devotee's heart," he sounded like many a medieval *bhakti* poet.<sup>121</sup> Throughout the lessons, Yogananda's thousands of references to God portray a personal deity with consciousness and volition. Yogananda's God routinely thinks, creates, reveals himself, sends *gurus*, responds to prayer, gives direction, loves, and offers strength and energy. In turn, humans should love God, be devoted to Him, and be intoxicated by Him. In Advaita nondualism, "devotion must occupy a lower position than pure knowledge," and the advanced devotee abandons notions of a personal deity after achieving the realization of *Brahman* as ultimately "devoid of qualities."<sup>122</sup> But Yogananda's instruction rejects this conceptual hierarchy in its steadfast devotionism. In the very last correspondence lesson for his most advanced disciples, he was still counseling disciples to ask God, "[M]ay Thy love shine forever on the sanctuary of devotion, and may I be able to awaken Thy love in Truth-thirsty hearts."<sup>123</sup>

His reading of yoga texts may have encouraged him to express a more theistic outlook. Borrowing Rudolf Otto's terminology for encounter with the divine Other, Stuart Sarbacker argues that one strand of yoga has always celebrated the possibility of liberation through the "'numinous' power of divinity."<sup>124</sup> Edwin Bryant argues that the *Yoga Sutras*, often considered the foundational text for yoga practice, can only be understood in the "greater theistic landscape

of Patanjali's day." Parts of his yoga system "requir[e] a theistic practice." Significantly, it is precisely in the section on *kriyā* yoga—the name Yogananda gave his own practice—that Patanjali's theism is most direct and insistent. *Kriyā* yoga, in Bryant's translation, "consists of self-discipline, study, and dedication to the Lord." "Surrender to God," Bryant concludes, "is a mandatory part of this practice."<sup>125</sup> Andrew Nicholson argues that after Patanjali, "belief in God was widespread" among authors of Sāṃkhya, the philosophical tradition closely associated with yoga.<sup>126</sup> Whatever the source, it is clear that Yogananda characteristically depicted the goal of yoga as the experience of a deep, emotionally affectionate relationship with God.

Yogananda taught that his full communion with the divine had made him a fully self-realized yogi, the embodied presence of divinity who had escaped the bounds of embodied existence. His closest disciples fundamentally accepted his foreknowledge, knowledge of their previous incarnations, ability to read their thoughts, and moral infallibility. His first followers, Minot and Mildred Lewis believed that his "supernatural powers" healed their son, daughter, and Minot himself. This incident was their "first realization of the supernatural powers of Swami Yogananda."<sup>127</sup> Beyond his many miracles of healing, he also demonstrated control over the natural world. On his trip to India in 1935 and 1936, he raised a sinking steamship at the mouth of the Ganges. At Mount Washington, he caused a freak wind storm to suddenly cease, and at Encinitas he drove away rain so that a monk could take a sunny drive with him. Rather than wine, he multiplied a small amount of freshly squeezed carrot juice to fill the cups of all present. He prevented major car accidents that would have killed Dr. Lewis and, years later, Norman Paulsen and Leo Cocks. He rescued a hitchhiking monk from peril. Monks working on construction projects at various SRF sites were saved from serious bodily injury by Yogananda's intervention. In Encinitas, he even restored to life a woman thought to be dead.<sup>128</sup> Far from incidental, Yogananda's miraculous powers play an absolutely central role in SRF's theology, demonstrating the fundamental authority that authenticates his authority as a guru and the trustworthiness of his teachings.

### Paramahansa Yogananda, "The Father of Yoga in the West"

As Yogananda's ministry continued through the 1940s, the burning question eventually became how a religious organization

that epitomized Weber's notion of charismatic leadership would survive his passing.<sup>129</sup> Faced with indisputable evidence of his own looming death, Yogananda announced that the line of gurus would end with him. There would be presidents, but there would never be another guru. This was a significant shift in theology for one who relentlessly discussed the importance of the guru-disciple relationship and the unbroken lineage of his swami order from its founder down to himself.<sup>130</sup> Instead, Yogananda came to view his own teachings themselves as the guru, which would infallibly guide disciples after he was gone.

Yogananda died at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, on March 7, 1952, on the night of a banquet in honor of independent India's first ambassador to the United States. One SRF disciple recalled that Yogananda was so "God-intoxicated" during his address that the banquet room, filled with the ambassador, the mayor, and other officials was "absolutely motionless" while he poured out his heart. He ended his talk by reciting his poem "My India," an autobiographical reflection of his deep affection for India, for "there I learned first to love God." Forced to accept the artificial boundaries of nation-states, he had made the United States his country, but he never forgot his homeland, birthplace of all religions. Shortly after finishing the poem, he slumped to the floor, dead. Press accounts reported his death as a result of "acute coronary occlusion" or heart attack.<sup>131</sup> Devotees immediately understood that it was his *mahasamādhi*.

Yogananda's death did not end his disciples' relationship with him. SRF's official death announcement two weeks later reassured members that, although Yogananda "has taken his physical form from this earth, tremendous waves of spiritual upliftment are being felt by disciples and members, a divine assurance of his omnipresent spirit among us still."<sup>132</sup> Like other gurus, he remained near his closest disciples.<sup>133</sup> These experiences were not confined to monastics who had enjoyed close contact with the Master. Within months, everyday members were writing in to share their experiences of the guru.<sup>134</sup> These visions continued sporadically for decades.<sup>135</sup>

In the years since the Master's *mahasamādhi*, SRF has largely been led two women monks who have maintained Yogananda's teachings and esteemed him as a divine incarnation. When Sri Daya Mata died in 2010 after serving as president for fifty-five years, the memorial service in her honor began by invoking the "living spirit of Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda," *premaavatar*, or incarnation of divine love, and *gurudev*, or personal teacher embodying divinity. The service concluded with audio playback of a talk in which she expressed her "one hunger" that devotees would know the "blissful



love" she had experienced with God, "because he is the greatest lover in the world, he is the one love from whence we have all come. We must learn to live and move and have our being in that consciousness of his love and then one day to melt again back into that immortal love, where we will all meet again."<sup>136</sup> Her successor, Mrinalini Mata, died in 2017, passing to "heavenly realms" where, welcomed by Yogananda "with boundless joy," she now experiences "bliss and freedom."<sup>137</sup>

Under their leadership, SRF has grown steadily. Today, the organization has a global presence with centers on six continents and nearly sixty countries, including 170 in the United States and more than three hundred in other countries.<sup>138</sup> As Yogananda's stature has grown, Indians have increasingly reclaimed him as their own. When leaders of the Indian branch of SRF met with Narendra Modi to thank him for his efforts to establishing International Yoga Day, they celebrated their Master's global religious legacy in working toward world peace "on the basis of humanity's direct perception of the one God."<sup>139</sup>

More recently, in celebrating the centennial of Yogananda's first ashram in India, Modi, an avid yoga practitioner, claimed that Yogananda had taught about spirituality and the "inner journey" in this world, not about religion or *mukti*, the goal of release from the cycles of birth and death.<sup>140</sup> Despite Modi's wishful thinking, Yogananda was both a teacher of yoga *and* the founder of a religious organization. Modi's views probably reflect more than a few scholars' discomfort with gurus who remain firmly committed to a soteriological telos and a supramundane cosmology. The denominational yoga of Yogananda and his disciples offers one important counterpoint to the dominant narrative of a safely secularized modern yoga. SRF's website still describes the organization as providing "methods of meditation for achieving life's ultimate goal—union of the soul with Spirit (God)." In this goal, they are only "carrying on" the work begun and still superintended by their founder, "revered as the father of Yoga in the West."<sup>141</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The title is drawn from Yogananda's description of the purpose of his *East-West* magazine: "An Illustrated Bi-Monthly Magazine Devoted to Spiritual Realization; Development of Body,

Mind and Soul; Practical Metaphysics, Hindu Psychology." See cover, *East-West*, Nov–Dec 1925.

<sup>2</sup>Brother Nakulananda, "What is Meditation? The Teaching of Paramahansa Yogananda," *World Religion News* (July 28, 2017), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.worldreligionnews.com/featured-contributors/meditation-teachings-paramahansa-yogananda>.

<sup>3</sup>Anya P. Foxen, "Yogi Calisthenics: What the 'Non-Yoga' Yogic Practice of Paramahansa Yogananda Can Tell Us about Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85, no. 2 (June 2017): 494–526; and, more recently, Foxen, *Biography of a Yogi: Paramahansa Yogananda and the Origins of Modern Yoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup>Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 131–32, acknowledges that Yogananda "inspire[d] several generations of Western spiritual seekers." David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 246, argues that, along with a handful of other gurus, it is "the life and teachings of Yogananda that have had the greatest impact on modern-day conceptions of yoga as a marriage between the physical and the spiritual, the human and the superhuman." In her influential *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (New York: Continuum, 2004), Elizabeth De Michelis reduces Yogananda to part of one sentence (196). Stefanie Syman, who claims to tell "the story of yoga in America" in her *Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2010), devotes only two terse, somewhat flippant pages to Yogananda and his movement (170–71). In his *Hinduism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 173, David Smith discusses "the most important modern gurus," and ignores Yogananda altogether.

<sup>5</sup>"Paramhansa Yogananda: India's First Yoga Guru in the U.S.," *Times of India* (March 6, 2015), accessed April 23, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/nri/us-canada-news/Paramhansa-Yogananda-Indias-first-yoga-guru-in-the-US/articleshow/46475029.cms>.

<sup>6</sup>Hitendra Wadhwa, "Yoga Modern Civilisation's Great Movement," *Daily Pioneer* (June 21, 2015), accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.dailypioneer.com/state-editions/ranchi/yoga-modern-civilisations-great-movement.html>.

<sup>7</sup>"India's Prime Minister Releases Stamp Commemorating YSS Centennial," Self-Realization Fellowship (March 9, 2017), accessed October 19, 2017, [http://www.yogananda-srf.org/NewsArchive/2017/India\\_s\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_Releases\\_Stamp\\_Commemorating\\_YSS\\_Centennial.aspx#.Weo1KIKZOV4](http://www.yogananda-srf.org/NewsArchive/2017/India_s_Prime_Minister_Releases_Stamp_Commemorating_YSS_Centennial.aspx#.Weo1KIKZOV4).

<sup>8</sup>Foxen, "Yogi Calisthenics," 502, 519.

<sup>9</sup>In the footnote, Yogananda actually explains that *hatha* yoga is "a specialized branch of bodily postures and techniques for health and longevity" and is "useful and provides spectacular physical results." He seems to be referring specifically to the use of *āsanas*, because his Kriya Yoga, as discussed later in this article, employed techniques from *hatha* yoga. See Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 235. Note: Given SRF's widespread practice of rewriting Yogananda's texts, my references are always to the first edition of each text.

<sup>10</sup>Foxen, *Biography of a Yogi*, 153.

<sup>11</sup>White, *Sinister Yogis*, 44–45.

<sup>12</sup>On *mahasamādhi*, see Orianne Aymard, *When a Goddess Dies: Worshipping Ma Anandamayi after Her Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115.

<sup>13</sup>De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga*, 188–189. For a similar typology of "Hindu-inspired meditation movements," see also Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>14</sup>Thus, I do not wish to essentialize either religion in general or Yogananda's religion in particular as depending on belief in God. Yogananda's theological convictions, however, are essential to a proper understanding of his teaching and they set him apart from much of what has been defined as yoga in the twentieth-century United States.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Ellen Goldberg, "Swami Kripalvananda: The Man behind Kripalu Yoga" and Andrea R. Jain, "Muktananda: Entrepreneurial Godman, Tantric Hero," in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Ellen Goldberg and Mark Singleton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup>Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, "Introduction," in Goldberg and Singleton, *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, 2.

<sup>17</sup>Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts across Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), xix, emphasis added. For significant articulations of this view see Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Philosophy and Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga*; and Singleton, *Yoga Body*. Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) treats modern postural yoga as a form of religion in its own right, providing a more capacious definition of religion than I find helpful.

<sup>18</sup>White, *Sinister Yogis*, 47.

<sup>19</sup>Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "Beyond Pluralism: Global Gurus and the Third Stream of American Religiosity," in *Gods in America: Religious Pluralism in the United States*, eds. Charles L. Cohen and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 233.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas A. Forstoeffel and Cynthia Anne Humes, eds., *Gurus in America* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005); Singleton and Goldberg, eds., *Gurus of Modern Yoga*; and Ann Gleig and Lola Williamson, eds., *Homegrown Gurus: From Hinduism in America to American Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup>Amanda Lucia, "Innovative Gurus: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Hinduism," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 18, no. 2 (2014): 221.

<sup>22</sup>On Vivekananda's lack of yoga training, see Dermot Killingley, "Manufacturing Yogis," in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, 17. On his lack of success, see later in this article.

<sup>23</sup>"Paramahansa Yogananda," *Self-Realization Fellowship*, accessed August 4, 2017, [http://www.yogananda-srf.org/Paramahansa\\_Yogananda.aspx#.WZBZFFKZORs](http://www.yogananda-srf.org/Paramahansa_Yogananda.aspx#.WZBZFFKZORs).

<sup>24</sup>On global competition, see Singleton and Goldberg, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>25</sup>Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri, *The Holy Science* (Ranchi, India: Yogoda Satsanga Society of India, 1963), 51.

<sup>26</sup>Torkel Brekke, "Conceptual Foundation of Missionary Hinduism," *Journal of Religious History* 23, no. 2 (June 1999): 203–14; quotes on 203–204.

<sup>27</sup>David Crumm, "Conversation with an Eastern Voice, Now Part of America's Spiritual Culture," *Read the Spirit*, accessed September 6, 2017, <https://www.readthespirit.com/explore/248-conversation-with-an-eastern-voice-now-part-of-americas/>.

<sup>28</sup>Wendell Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1930), 140.

<sup>29</sup>Waghorne, "Beyond Pluralism," 231.

<sup>30</sup>Ghosh, "Mejda:" *The Family and Early Life of Paramahansa Yogananda* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1980), 119; Swami Satyananda, "Yogananda Sanga (Paramhansa Yoganandaji As I Have Seen and Understood Him)," in *A Collection of Biographies of 4 Kriya Yoga Gurus* (Battle Creek: Yoga Niketan, 2004), 183; and Sailendra Bejoy Dasgupta, *Paramhansa Swami Yogananda: Life-Portrait and Reminiscences* (London: Yoga Niketan, 2006), 12.

<sup>31</sup>Satyananda, "Yogananda Sanga," 181.

<sup>32</sup>Swami Satyeswarananda, *Kriya: The True Path* (San Diego: Sanskrit Classics, 1991), 150.

<sup>33</sup>Richard Seager, "Pluralism and the American Mainstream: The View From the World's Parliament of Religion" *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (1989): 301–24.

<sup>34</sup>International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals, *New Pilgrimages of the Spirit: Proceedings and Papers of the Pilgrim Tercentenary Meeting of the International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1921), 7.

<sup>35</sup>Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 32.

<sup>36</sup>Swami Yogananda, *Science of Religion* (Calcutta: Kuntaline Press, 1920), 56.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 54–56.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 30–31, emphasis in original.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 29–30.

<sup>40</sup>Swami Yogananda, "Watching the Cosmic Motion Picture of Life," *East-West*, May–June 1928, 3–4.

<sup>41</sup>Paramhansa Yogananda, *The Master Said: A Collection of Paramhansa Yogananda's Sayings and Wise Counsel to Various Disciples* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1952), 119. Anne Feldhaus, *Connected Places: Region, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 5, 7.

<sup>42</sup>Gregory Singleton, *Religion in the City of Angels American Protestant Culture and Urbanization, Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979).

<sup>43</sup>Wade Clark Roof, "Pluralism as a Culture: Religion and Civility in Southern California," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612, no. 1 (July 2007): 82–99; reference on 86–87.

<sup>44</sup>Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), reprinted in David L. Ulin, *Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology* (New York: Library of America, 2002), 48.

<sup>45</sup>"Sou' by Sou'west," *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1900, IM29.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted in Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 135.

<sup>47</sup>"Los Angeles a Microcosm," *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1908, II4.

<sup>48</sup>"Hindus are Coming South," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1907, I3; "Hegira of Hindus," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1907, I1; "Influx of Hindus: Thousands from Vancouver Now Employed on Western Pacific in California," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1907, III1; and "The Secret of the Green Turban," *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1907, II4.

<sup>49</sup>"A Hindu Problem," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1910, III3. Indians' unwillingness to doff their turbans in a courtroom provided

a key symbolic marker of their inability to assimilate. See "People of the Coast," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 30, 1907, II4; "Hindu's Turban Sign of Guilt," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1913, II2; "Judge Scalps Hindu," *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 1914, II2; and "May Wear Turban," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1916, II9.

<sup>50</sup>The image of the yogi as magician and imposter was a well-established theme in Europe as well. See Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 64–70.

<sup>51</sup>"State Prosecutors Ready for Psychic Inquiries," *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1924, 14.

<sup>52</sup>According to Donald E. Pitzer, around the turn of the century, "the focus of much of America's communal utopian experimentation shifted" to the West Coast, "where all manner of religious and social causes found a sympathetic hearing." "Introduction," in *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>53</sup>Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Communities* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1953), 165–66.

<sup>54</sup>John E. Baur, *The Health Seekers of Southern California, 1870–1900* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1959), 48, 93–96.

<sup>55</sup>Both quotes are from David Sloane, "Landscapes of Health and Rejuvenation," in *Companion to Los Angeles*, ed. William Deverell and Greg Hise (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 449.

<sup>56</sup>For example, May 23, 1926, K24; May 6, 1928, L26; July 1, 1928, K26; and September 9, 1928, K26. The column had a similar tone when Harry Ellington Brook covered it. See, for example, September 24, 1922, XI22.

<sup>57</sup>Barclay L. Severns, June 26, 1923, III4.

<sup>58</sup>See, for example, "Hindu Royalty as Los Angeles Guests," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1919, II3, and "The Orient Contributes a Fashion," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1915, VII8.

<sup>59</sup>"News and Business," *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1901, I2. Vivekananda's death only earned a terse obituary in the *Times*. See "Obituary," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1902, 2.

<sup>60</sup>"Pagan Worship in the States," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1910, I7.

<sup>61</sup>See "Obituary," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1902, 2.

<sup>62</sup>"'Christ, the Messenger:' Swami Vivekananda's Views on the World's Redeemer," *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1900, II2. See Carl Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 108–109."

<sup>63</sup>Jackson, *Vedanta for the West*, 50–56.

<sup>64</sup>J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York: MacMillan, 1915), 296.

<sup>65</sup>Professor Guy Carleton Lee, "The Field of Fresh Literature—What Authors are Saying, Doing, and Writing," *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1905, VI150. Another ad called him the "Henry Ward Beecher of India," comparing him to one of the late nineteenth-century's most famous evangelical preachers. See *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1911, IV1.

<sup>66</sup>"Baba Bharati Bids Farewell," *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1907, II6.

<sup>67</sup>"Good-Goods and Now Brahmins," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1910, II10.

<sup>68</sup>Rose R. Anthon, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1914, II5.

<sup>69</sup>Sara Ann Levinsky, *A Bridge of Dreams: The Story of Paramananda, a Modern Mystic, and His Ideal of All-conquering Love* (West Stockbridge, MA: Lindisfarne Press; New York, 1984), passim, provides numerous examples of such women who were followers of Swami Paramananda.

<sup>70</sup>Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 271–73.

<sup>71</sup>Gregory W. Bush, *Lord of Attention: Gerald Stanley Lee and the Crowd Metaphor in Industrializing America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>72</sup>Matthew Hedstrom, *Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.

<sup>73</sup>"Book Review: *The Man Nobody Knows*," *East-West*, May-June, 1926.

<sup>74</sup>See Jain, "Muktananda" on Mumbai-area guru Muktananda, who launched Siddha yoga in 1956, and Hugh B. Urban, *Zorba the Buddha: Sex, Spirituality, and Capitalism in the Global Osho Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016) on Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who started teaching in India in the 1960s before becoming infamous in the United States as sex-guru "Osho" in the 1980s. Yogananda was never as blunt as Osho, who recognized that he was part of a "marketplace" and claimed to "sell enlightenment." In *Selling Yoga*, Jain has also analyzed more broadly the emergence of counterculture-era American postural yoga through a capitalist framework. In *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 2, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King apply this model to contemporary yoga in a handwringing attempt to "uncover what

amounts to a silent takeover of 'the religious' by contemporary capitalist ideologies by means of the increasingly popular discourse of 'spirituality.'"

<sup>75</sup>"City College Unveiling—A Swami Comes to Town—Arkansas Travelers Arrive Here—Honored by France," *New York Tribune*, November 18, 1923, 11. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 64–70. See later discussion.

<sup>76</sup>"Appeal of Luther Burbank for the Work of Swami Yogananda," *East-West*, November–December 1925, n.p.

<sup>77</sup>*Time Magazine*, February 20, 1928, 26.

<sup>78</sup>In 1928, Sid Grauman invited Yogananda to a Hollywood Association of Foreign Correspondents dinner in honor of Carl Laemmle. Samuel Goldwyn, D. W. Griffith, William C. DeMille (the older brother of Cecil B. DeMille), actress Delores Del Rio, and "dozens of other screen luminaries" were in attendance. "Los Angeles News," *East-West*, July–August 1928, 25.

<sup>79</sup>Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 79.

<sup>80</sup>Joan Wight, *A Trilogy of Divine Love* (Beverly Hills: Joan Wight, 1992), 173.

<sup>81</sup>Mary Peck Stockton, *A Testimony of Love and Devotion: My Life Journey with Paramahansa Yogananda* (Portland, OR: TamalTree Books, 2015), 28.

<sup>82</sup>For revivalists as popular dramatic performers, see Nathan Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>83</sup>R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 106–12; on commoditized religion, see 119.

<sup>84</sup>Lyle Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 95.

<sup>85</sup>Moore, *Selling God*, 186–87.

<sup>86</sup>See Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 76.

<sup>87</sup>Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America*, 171.

<sup>88</sup>"Student Throws Away Crutch at Swami's Healing Meeting," *East-West*, January–February, 1926, 31.

<sup>89</sup>See *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1925, A2.

<sup>90</sup>William Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity, 1914–32* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 197–98.

<sup>91</sup>Clark Davis, "Corporate Reconstruction of Middle-Class Manhood," in *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the*



*American Middle Class*, ed. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2001), 201–16; for Los Angeles see 205–06.

<sup>92</sup>Paramahansa Swami Yogananda, *Your Praecepta* (Dakshineswar, India: Yogoda Sat-Sanga Press), n.d., S-I, P 17, 4. See also Swami Yogananda, "Who is a Swami?" *East-West World Wide*, January-February 1926, 16.

<sup>93</sup>This definition is a paraphrase of Julia Horne, "Cosmopolitan Life of Alice Erh-Soon Tay," *Journal of World History* 21 (3) 422, which is in turn adapted from Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010).

<sup>94</sup>On the growth of home economics in the midst of the early twentieth century's consumer culture, see Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>95</sup>Yogananda reprinted a 1927 Mussolini speech, lauded national dietary plans, and proclaimed that a "master brain like that of Mussolini does more good than millions of social organizations of group intelligence." "Benito Mussolini on Science and Religion," *East-West*, May-June 1927, 10; November-December 1927; Swami Yogananda, "An Interview," *Inner Culture*, February 1934, 3, 25. Yogananda offered his admiration for Hitler's decision to leave the League of Nations. See "Christmas Message to the Nations of the Earth," *East-West*, December, 1933, 25. The month after the Nazi government announced the Nuremberg Laws, Yogananda expressed enthusiasm for "the German awakening—a new Germany," *Inner Culture*, October 1935, 23. (Note: *East-West* magazine changed names several times. *Inner Culture* was its name during much of the 1930s.)

<sup>96</sup>Swami Yogananda, "Three Recipes," *East-West*, September-October 1927, 22.

<sup>97</sup>Swami Yogananda "Recipes," *East-West*, March-April 1930, 22.

<sup>98</sup>*Inner Culture*, May 1934, 30.

<sup>99</sup>*Inner Culture*, September 1935, 32; *Inner Culture*, January 1935, 30.

<sup>100</sup>Swami Yogananda, "The Balanced Life: Curing Mental Abnormalities," *East-West*, November-December 1925, 20–21.

<sup>101</sup>Swami Yogananda, "Three Recipes," *East-West*, November-December 1927, 27.

<sup>102</sup>See Swami Satyeswarananda Giri, *Kriya: Finding the True Path* (San Diego: Sanskrit Classics, 1991), 145–46.

<sup>103</sup>This can occasion some confusion. The ads Foxen cites in "Yogi Calisthenics," 519, refer to the full yoga correspondence course (as the bottom of the ads makes clear), rather than the 1923 *Yogoda* booklet she explicates throughout her article.

<sup>104</sup>*Yogoda or Muscle-Will System of Physical Perfection*, Boston: Sat Sanga, 1923.

<sup>105</sup>He seems to have borrowed the exercises themselves from the Danish physical culturalist J. P. Muller, who made a similar pitch about the ability to practice these exercises in the midst of a busy life in the modern world. J. P. Muller, *My System: 15 Minutes Exercise a Day for Health* (London: Link House, n.d.). His childhood friend and ashram partner, Satyananda, reports Muller's influence, although with some imprecision. See Satyananda, "Yoga Sanga," 244. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 131–32, exaggerates the centrality of muscle control in Yogananda's overall routine.

<sup>106</sup>Satyeswarananda, *Kriya*, 258.

<sup>107</sup>Foxen, "Yogi Calisthenics," 502 fn. 6, 519.

<sup>108</sup>Von V. Pittman, "University Correspondence Study: A Revised Historiographic Perspective," in *Handbook of Distance Education*, ed. Michael G. Moore, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22; Otto Peters, "Most Industrialized Form of Education," in *Handbook of Distance Education*, ed. Michael G. Moore, 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 58–59.

<sup>109</sup>See John T. McFarland, Benjamin S. Winchester, R. Douglas Fraser, J. Williams Butcher, eds., *Encyclopedia of Sunday School and Religious Education* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1915), 23–24.

<sup>110</sup>Carl T. Jackson, "New Thought Movement, and the Nineteenth Century Discovery of Oriental Philosophy," *Journal of Popular Culture* 9, no. 3 (Winter 1975): 539.

<sup>111</sup>Yogi Ramacharaka, *Correspondence Class Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (Palmyra, NJ: Yogi Publication Society, 1903), n.p.

<sup>112</sup>For the founding of the correspondence school, see *Echoes from Mount Ecclesia*, June 1914, 1–4; quote on 3. On the topics for the course, see Mrs. Max Heindel, *Birth of the Rosicrucian Fellowship: The History of its Inception*. Reprint ed. Mt. Ecclesia: The Rosicrucian Fellowship, 2012 [1923], n.p.

<sup>113</sup>Ramacharaka, *Correspondence Class Course*, n.p.

<sup>114</sup>Satyeswarananda, *Kriya*, 280.

<sup>115</sup>*Your Praecepta*, S-I, P 7, 2.

<sup>116</sup>The content of the original lessons is difficult to fully reconstruct. This analysis is based on the *Praecepta* lessons, a consolidation and enlargement of the lessons that was begun in 1934 and completed in 1938, which provide the most complete, sequential presentation of extant materials.

<sup>117</sup>*Your Praecepta*, S-I, P-12, 4; S-V, P 109, 2; S-V, P 109, 2; and S-I, P 3, 3.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., S-I, P 1, 3; S-V, P 150, 1.

<sup>119</sup>Foxen, "Yogi Calisthenics," 518.

<sup>120</sup>*Your Praecepta*, S-V, P 105, 4; S-VII, P 166, 4; S-V, P 107, 3, S-V, P 107, 6; S-V, P 130/4; and S-I, P 7, 3.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., S-I, P 7. p. 3, and S-I, P 5, p. 4; and S-I, P 26/3, 3.

<sup>122</sup>See Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 36.

<sup>123</sup>*Your Praecepta*, S-VII, P 181. 4.

<sup>124</sup>Stuart Ray Sarbacker, "The Numinous and Cessative in Modern Yoga," in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne; and Stuart Ray Sarbacker, *Samadhi: The Numinous and Cessative in Indo-Tibetan Yoga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). On the coining of "the numinous," see Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923).

<sup>125</sup>Edwin F. Bryant, *Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 472, 254, 169, 171. On a somewhat different interpretation of the *Yoga Sutras'* theism, see Gerald James Larson, "Introduction to the Philosophy of Yoga," in *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, vol 12, eds. Gerald James Larson and Ram Shankar Battacharya, 91–100, 136–147.

<sup>126</sup>Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*, 182.

<sup>127</sup>Brenda Lewis Rosser, *Treasures against Time*, 6–7, 47, 53.

<sup>128</sup>Swami Kriyananda, *Paramhansa Yogananda*, 203–210; Paul Gorsuch, ed., *I Became My Heart—Stories of a Disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda: Leo Cocks* (San Diego, CA: Contact Approach Publishing, 2013), 72.

<sup>129</sup>Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 246–49.

<sup>130</sup>Aymard, *When a Goddess Dies*, 152.

<sup>131</sup>"Guru's Exit," *Time*, August 4, 1952, 59; "Funeral Rites for Yogananda Set for Tuesday," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1952, 18; "Religious Leader Dies: Paramhansa Yogananda Stricken at Dinner for Indian Envoy," *New York Times*, March 9, 1952, 92.

<sup>132</sup>Faye Wright letter to Self-Realization Fellowship Members, March 19, 1952, in author's possession.

<sup>133</sup>Swami Kriyananda, *The Path: Autobiography of a Western Yogi* (Nevada City: Ananda Publications, 1977), 548, and Kamala, *The Flawless Mirror* (Nevada City, CA: Crystal Clarity, 1992), 195. On

posthumous encounters with the guru in dreams, see Aymard, *When a Goddess Dies*, 186–87.

<sup>134</sup>“Visions of the Guru,” *Self-Realization Magazine*, November 1952, 43.

<sup>135</sup>Kriyananda, *The Path*, 548.

<sup>136</sup>Self-Realization Fellowship/Yogoda Satsanga Society of India, *Memorial Service: Sri Daya Mata, President and Sanghamata, SRF/YSS* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 2010), accessed May 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DldQmH7Md0A>.

<sup>137</sup>Swami Achalananda, “In Memoriam: Sri Sri Mrinalini Mata (May 8, 1931–August 3, 2017): A Special Message From the Yogoda Satsanga Society of India/Self-Realization Fellowship Board of Directors,” Self-Realization Fellowship (August 4, 2017), accessed October 20, 2017, <https://yssofindia.org/about/A-Special-Message-From-the-YSS/SRF-Board-of-Directors>.

<sup>138</sup>“Locations,” *Self-Realization Fellowship*, accessed April 25, 2016, <https://members.yogananda-srf.org/CenterSearch/SearchMap.aspx>.

<sup>139</sup>Cited in Self-Realization Fellowship, “Prime Minister of India Meets With YSS Monks,” *News* (April 4, 2016), accessed November 3, 2016, [http://www.yogananda-srf.org/NewsArchive/2016/YSS\\_meeting\\_with\\_Modi.aspx#.WBz8WztjrZL](http://www.yogananda-srf.org/NewsArchive/2016/YSS_meeting_with_Modi.aspx#.WBz8WztjrZL).

<sup>140</sup>“PM Releases Commemorative Postage Stamp on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of Yogoda Satsanga Society of India,” *Narendra Modi* (March 7, 2017), accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.narendramodi.in/pm-modi-releases-special-commemorative-postage-stamp-on-100-years-of-yogoda-satsanga-math-534638>.

<sup>141</sup>About Self-Realization Fellowship, *Self-Realization Fellowship*, accessed December 10, 2017, [http://www.yogananda-srf.org/About\\_Self-Realization\\_Fellowship.aspx#.We\\_Cv1KZOV4](http://www.yogananda-srf.org/About_Self-Realization_Fellowship.aspx#.We_Cv1KZOV4).

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**ABSTRACT** *As founder of a religious movement emphasizing soteriological goals, Paramahansa Yogananda is at odds with the prevailing scholarly portrayal of yoga as a modern, syncretic bodily practice focused on mindfulness and physical well-being that, even when employing language of transcendence, magic, or the supernatural, typically has this-worldly perfection in mind. Yogananda, thus, offers an important counterpoint to the dominant historiography of yoga. Whereas more recent “global gurus” often remained in India and recruited among diaspora Indians, Yogananda was the first Indian to establish a thriving yoga-based Hinduism among*

*white converts in the United States. He worked to make his message compelling in the often-hostile milieu of a dominant Christian culture. In this article, I consider Southern California's identity as a "spiritual frontier" that offered a uniquely conducive space to launch a Hindu religious movement in a virulently xenophobic era. I explore Yogananda's vision of the "science of religion," language that reflected not a materialist reduction of yoga to somatic goals, but a precise, systematic meditation method designed to achieve God-contact. Yogananda offered various products in an effort to build brand loyalty for his yoga-based religion. Although he strategically promoted the very real health and energy benefits of his instruction, the heart of his commercial and spiritual enterprise was a yoga correspondence course that promised to train disciples in a devotional relationship with a God he often depicted as a personal Being. I conclude by examining Yogananda's role as the authoritative divine guru who mediated his religious products to devotees and remained present after his death to guide them toward ultimate bliss.*