

flow

GROWING A SPIRITUAL

Yoga Practice in Church

SUSAN W. SPRINGER

with Sirena Dudgeon



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INTRODUCTION

Skeptical but Desperate

Name a sport, and I've probably pursued it: from back-country skiing to paragliding, from cycling to golf, from trail running to kayaking. As an adult I've lived in places like Maine, Alaska, and the Rocky Mountains that are conducive to outdoor sports. I was working as an Episcopal priest in Boulder, Colorado, and playing outdoors as much as I could when a couple of car accidents changed that. As I convalesced, my body hurt trying to do all that it had done before, and I watched myself grow more sedentary. One day, in desperation, I tried yoga.

To say I had an unmerited bias against yoga would be an understatement. Boulder is something of a yoga mecca, where studios abound, and people get dreamy-eyed talking about their favorite teacher. Yoga festivals, schools, and clothing retailers mark every block of the downtown. Yoga talk and Buddhist terms thread themselves through casual conversation. Earnest and wispy young practitioners bicycle about, with dreadlocks flying and tanned, tattooed arms clutching rolled-up mats. As a dread-less, tatt-less older person, I had always determined that yoga was not for me. As one who felt her flexibility, agility, and balance were pretty darn good for a late-middle-aged woman, I had always assumed yoga would not be much of a challenge. As someone more drawn to speed than silence, I had always thought that yoga would be b-o-r-i-n-g. And as a second-generation cradle Episcopalian, I didn't think my theology and spiritual practice needed any accessorizing.

On all counts, I could not have been more wrong.

A fellow yoga-virgin friend and I went to our first class together. It was a community drop-in class open to all levels of practitioners, held after hours in a bike shop. For me, that was a promising sign. Sirena, the teacher, greeted us warmly. I sized her up. Namaste T-shirt? Check. Tattoo? Check. But that was as far as I could take the stereotype. Cascades of blond ringlets framed a blue-eyed cherub face, and the body before me was not wispy—it was a real, lived-in, birthed-two-children body. I was intrigued. Sirena offered the kind of welcoming persona we church leaders seek to offer: genuine, calm, warm, approachable. Ten minutes into my first class, it occurred to me that I

had—ahem—*substantially* overrated my flexibility, agility, and balance. Still, embracing the challenge, I made it through and resolved to come again. And I did. That was five years ago, and I am still practicing.

This book is, in part, the story of how—as my body was learning to fold itself into impossible positions (*asanas*)—my heart was learning to *unfold* itself to see the congruence of yogic philosophy with Christianity. From there, I became inspired to engage Sirena and with her offer yoga in the church I was serving, inviting people in to place their yoga mats on the 117-year-old floor in the lofty and beautiful main worship space of St. John’s Episcopal Church in downtown Boulder. Sirena led the flows (the series of *asanas*), and we took turns exploring a given topic from the perspectives of progressive, mystical Christian theology and the *yoga sutras* and other yogic philosophies. We want to offer you a template for how you can begin a yoga ministry in your church and why you should seriously consider it. This is not a journey I anticipated. Few good and holy journeys are.

The White-Leafed Turning Point

Every significant journey has a turning point, a place where something (often momentous) happens and the traveler confronts a choice about how to proceed. For me that point was quite specific: Monday night bike shop yoga on July 23, 2018. I realize that Methodists more often than Episcopalians can point to the day and time of their heart-strangely-warmed conversion. What can I say? It happened, evidence that the Holy Spirit is not bound by the denominational particularities we observe.

It was the end of class, and we were easing into *savasana*, the final resting pose that typically ends a session of yoga. Sirena cued up a gorgeous chant in Sanskrit performed by a female vocalist as she led us into a short, guided meditation. I remember wishing she would stop talking so I could lose myself in the music, and I remember she said something about getting out of our own way. Without much conscious effort, I proceeded to do just that, and what happened next was extraordinary.

I imagined myself—the ego me—climbing out of my heart-space and crouching at the right side of my supine body to watch. That conscious imagining took just a moment before I became not the thinker or the doer but simply the observer. In astonishment I watched my chest open, the layers of skin and flesh and bone parting bloodlessly, as a white vine at least six inches in diameter began to rise. It was made of a stuff I’d never seen before, closed-cell

spongey like the stem of a forest mushroom but shimmering silver and wet. Fascinated—and, frankly, slightly freaked out—I watched it rise toward the ceiling of the bike shop, lazily winding its way upward through space. I’m not sure how it penetrated the roof or the trees or the power lines, because in the next image the vine and I were spiraling up through what meteorologists would call the *troposphere*—the highest level of altitude to which passenger jets climb and fly. We ascended through layers of clouds stained apricot and purple by the setting sun. It was beautiful and peaceful.

I looked up to see a canopy of white, heart-shaped leaves extend from the vine in all directions. It was the kind of sudden beauty that makes you gasp. I remember a moment of worry that this marked the end of the vision, but it did not. The vine continued its upward climb, and it was then I began to understand where I was going and into whose presence I was entering. Suddenly, I was washed and held in a golden-colored familial love so deep and profound it was pure ecstasy. All the human and canine loves I’ve ever experienced, added up and multiplied a hundredfold, could not begin to approach its power. The God I encountered was not Hindu or Christian or the property of any religion. I began to weep at the joy and the relief of it. A second canopy of leaves shot out from the vine, and then Sirena’s voice called us back to the awareness of our bodies on our mats. Moments later, as I made my way to a sitting position for our final prayer *mudra* and gentle bow, my face and throat were wet and my eyes continued to cascade tears.

I love my church and cannot imagine being anything but an Episcopalian; however, little in my Episcopal worship or spiritual experience has ever, ever come close to touching the unmitigated communion with the divine I experienced that day. What did it all mean? I’m still not sure, but I do know stuff like that doesn’t typically happen to me on a Monday night.

A Journey of Discovery

In the months that followed I began to dig deeper into the yoga sutras and ancient Indian religious texts like the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Every time an ancient saying called to mind the words or the teachings of Jesus or Paul, I scribbled a note to myself in the margins. The pages of my books became littered with notes on the parallels between Christian theology and yogic philosophy. As Sirena and I offered class after class on topics like surrender, anxiety, and community, I realized I was only scratching the surface of all that the two traditions hold in common.

I am far from the first Christian to experience the divine on a yoga mat or to ponder the intersection of yoga and Christianity. Both yoga and Christianity seek to experience communion with the divine and a deepening relationship or identity with the divine. Numerous forms of “Christian yoga,” as well as Christian yoga teacher training schools, have arisen. For me these run the risk of melding two important traditions that do not ask to become one—two rivers that each flow with great integrity on their own, even though they eventually empty into the same sea. This book doesn’t seek to Christianize yoga or yoga-ize Christianity. Rather, it endeavors to notice and appreciate the points of connection between the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and other ancient Indian religious texts with progressive, mystical Christian theology.

I define progressive, mystical Christian theology¹ as that which sees the divine in all things, even (taking a page from quantum physics) in all matter, both animate and inanimate; that does not discount nor minimize the pervasiveness or seriousness of sin and evil but that nonetheless regards human beings as inherently good as opposed to inherently sinful; that humbly acknowledges that Christianity does not have an exclusive claim on the divine nor the only way to experience communion with the divine; that honors tradition while embracing change—even when discomforting; that finds love to be at the heart of God and love to be the divine nature of God; that values contemplative practice as a way of experiencing union with the divine; and that upholds the individual believer’s capacity for divine encounter, unmediated by an ordained cleric or the institution she serves.

I propose that the common teachings of yoga and Christianity can build a framework within which the church can reach out to those who do not know us and who perhaps have never heard of the progressive, mystical stream within Christianity. If yoga in the church is to be a form of evangelism (a gentle doorway into the church or the gentle planting of a seed), then church leaders need to acknowledge they have much repair work to do before they can expect yoga practitioners to become church members. The religious experience of many people is riddled with wounds; their paths are potholed with harmful experiences of institutional religion. Yoga in the church is a way to say quietly, “The judgmental, hypocritical, exclusivist church of your

1. My principal guides in this theology include Richard Rohr and his work on the Cosmic or Universal Christ, John Philip Newell and his work on Celtic Christian spirituality, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and his work on both love and the collective journey of humanity (and creation) toward the Omega Point. Christian scriptures that appear to particularly lend themselves to this conversation include the Gospel of John and the Epistles of Paul, although passages from Hebrew scripture have bearing as well.

upbringing is not who we aspire to be, and in fact to the extent we have been that church, we repent.”

There are many places where Hinduism (the tradition to which yoga was first bound) and Christianity do *not* align, and this book does not try to make them do so. Instead, it seeks to identify and explore those places where yogic philosophy and Christian theology are saying the same things about God and the human experience.

I am motivated in part by a talk I once heard Richard Rohr give to the Episcopal clergy of Colorado at our annual retreat. Rohr declared that clergy do a great job of telling people what to believe and a terrible job of teaching people how to live. I’ve not forgotten his harsh—but true—observation. For me the yoga sutras offer a springboard into the teachings of Jesus—teachings that give his followers a way to live. The church (if it is to survive) can no longer be an institution where one is either in or out according to the measure of one’s right belief but instead must be reimagined as a school for learning how to love: how to love self, creation, others, and God.²

In 2019, the Louisville Institute awarded me a Pastoral Study Project grant to explore and write about the intersections of yogic philosophy with Christian scripture and theology. As part of that grant, I completed my 200-hour yoga teacher training at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Massachusetts. Through all this, Sirena has been my partner in discovery, albeit from a very different background and perspective, and she has cheered me forward. I feel honored to have shared these miles with her.

Recovering Catholic Yoga Teacher Meets Priest: An Introduction by Sirena Dudgeon

Having been raised Roman Catholic in a small northern Indiana town, I found a deep love and respect for spiritual ritual as a way to connect with God. Starting from a young age, I found solace and comfort praying the rosary, singing in the church choir, and helping my grandfather as an usher during Mass. I participated in church school every Wednesday evening and helped my mom teach the preschooler’s Sunday school class. As my interest in spirituality grew, I sought to deepen my knowledge of religious and spiritual philosophy by reading books and participating in meetings for other religious and spiritual

2. For more on church as a school for learning how to love: Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration* (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 50–66.

communities. In college at the University of Northern Colorado, I attended my first yoga class to help balance the stresses of studying and working. This experience provided me a different kind of connection to God—through my body. I had played many sports in my younger years but had never experienced anything like yoga. I was deeply drawn to understanding how and why yoga asana and pranayama could elevate, uplift, and connect my mind, body, and spirit.

As a long-time student of asana and meditation practice, I yearned for more in my yoga journey. I completed my 200-hour Yoga Alliance Certified Teacher Training at Full Circle Yoga in Longmont, Colorado, in 2016. This immediately opened my path to everything the eight limbs of yoga had to offer: mantra, sutras, anatomy, spirituality, ritual, and yogic scripture. Soon after graduation, I started my first teaching job on Monday nights at a community bike shop. This class was held on a bicycle grease-spattered floor, surrounded by high-end bicycles, tires, and helmets, and was intended to present yoga as nothing more than an exercise regimen good for cyclists. I stayed true to the ancient roots of the yogic philosophy and wove the spiritual aspect of it into my flows. I soon established a following of regular students who came weekly to connect, laugh, breathe, and move their bodies. It was the spiritual community I knew I had been longing for but hadn't experienced since childhood. Making lasting friendships and deep connections, this bike shop "Zen Den" became my church.

I met Rev. Susan in this Monday night class. She has curly hair just like mine, laughter that lifts all spirits, a positive attitude, and is a gentle nurturer. She brought her friends to class to try yoga. I love meeting new people and especially those new to yoga; I want to make it accessible, approachable, and relatable. I knew there was something very special about Susan when I met her. Her love for God was especially apparent, and even though I was quite hesitant to share my own feelings about God in class, I gently introduced the topic and was able to open up. It was then that I found out Susan was a priest. As a former Catholic, I'd been taught to regard priests as channels to God. I'd also been taught to fear them, and we were rarely allowed to talk to them. But here was Susan—a priest and a woman! I was excited to learn the Episcopal Church permits women to be priests, and I felt a hope and healing coming into my heart.

Often, at the end of class, Susan would connect my theme to a Christian text or teaching. Susan's voice shattered the glass ceiling of my childhood experiences and allowed me room to explore and feel safe and supported in my curiosity. In the library one winter day, I found *Sophia Rising* by Monette Chilson. This book explains how yoga practitioners from any faith can use

yoga and its inner wisdom (in Greek, *Sophia*) to create a sacred space inside themselves. It also argues that yogic philosophy and Christian theology are not incompatible. I shared the book with Susan, and we came up with a plan for Yoga in the Church, a series of workshops in which we would offer our own explorations of the meeting places between yogic philosophy and Christian theology. We hoped to share these workshops with Susan's church community as well as people from the wider community. When they see our deep respect for both yoga and Christianity, many of our students have experienced profound healing.

As the Bhagavad Gita states, "Yoga is a journey of the Self, Through the Self, To the Self." I am deeply moved to see Susan grow and blossom in her yoga journey, having completed her 200-hour yoga teacher training. I am honored to be on this path together, sharing our love of God, spiritual teachings, and offering this beautiful moving practice in community. Forever a guiding light in my heart, Susan is a beacon of hope. It is our hope that this book will offer encouragement to all yoga practitioners as we discover together that there is one truth with many paths, guided by love and compassion.

A Pandemic Poses a Challenge

The irony of writing a book on yoga as a creative way to invite people into church worship spaces at the *very moment* in history when the Covid-19 pandemic has sent most of us fleeing from such gathering spaces is not lost on me. The word *pivot* seems to be popping up everywhere to describe how people and institutions are adapting to an unwanted new reality. With Yoga in the Church, we pivoted at the start of the pandemic to move our workshops online. Sirena and I teach on Zoom from our respective homes and not from the church, because it makes no sense to us to invite people to a space we can access but they cannot. We acknowledge, however, that other churches offering online-only workshops may wish to livestream from their worship spaces to make the theological statement that doing yoga in a worship space is a perfectly acceptable way of seeking union with God.

Regardless of the location you choose, you can still offer compelling teaching that examines the points of connection between yogic philosophy and Christian theology. You can still wrap your workshops in beautiful sacred music and can create a reverent space in your home. And you can still extend an invitation to participants to visit the online worship services, classes, fellowship groups, and social justice initiatives your church offers. We say more about this in chapter 4.

Writing this book now also serves as a witness to the resilience of the Christian spirit. We believe this pandemic does not represent the end of church life as we have known it but rather a beginning. Sustained by a belief in the unending cycle of resurrection that marks the nature of individuals, institutions, and creation itself, we look ahead to rebirth and transformation even as we walk through a season of decline. To mix in some scripture, even though we walk through a valley shadowed by death, we acknowledge that everything old has passed away, and we see that everything is becoming new.³ It is this faith in the resurrection cycle that sustains us and gives us the confidence to offer you our work.

How to Use This Book

Chapters 1 and 2 make a case for the introduction of yoga into a church's ministry life. Chapter 3 digs in to yogic and Christian texts and presents parallel teachings to whet your appetite. Chapter 4 offers instructions on how to prepare a congregation for this new ministry and practical tips on how to build it. Chapter 5 provides customizable guidelines for a year's worth of monthly Yoga in the Church workshops. Chapter 6 shares some stories from the field—interviews with others from Episcopal churches around the country who have already built yoga into their church ministries. We end by reflecting on what else, beyond yoga, God might be doing in the world outside the church doors and by asking how we might join in that work with God.

3. Ps. 23:4; 2 Cor. 5:17.

1

CROSSING TRAJECTORIES

The word *yoga*, as most of you doubtless know, is the same as our word *yoke*. Y-O-K-E. And the Latin word *iungere*, to join. Join, junction, yoke, union, all these words are basically from the same root. And so likewise when Jesus said my yoke is easy, he was saying really my yoga is easy. And the word therefore basically denotes the state that would be the opposite of what our psychologists call alienation: the view of separateness, the feeling of separateness, the feeling of being cut off from being.

—Alan Watts, former Episcopal priest, “Intellectual Yoga”¹

The End of One Journey Is the Beginning of the Next

The Episcopal Church has been bleeding members in the last fifty years. In that same period, the rise of yoga practitioners in the United States has been remarkable.

In 1958, when I was born into a loyal Episcopalian household, my denomination boasted nearly 3.5 million members. By the time I was ten, I sang enthusiastically in the children’s choir every Sunday, but the Church had lost around 100,000 people. And no—those two facts are not related! By the time I was twenty, we had lost seven times that many members. By the time I was thirty, our losses exceeded one million people; by age forty, 1.8 million. In 2008, when I turned fifty, we had happily gained back 300,000 folks, only to lose them—plus an additional 80,000—by 2018.² Over the course of my lifetime, the Episcopal Church has shrunk by almost half. My spiritual identity and home are in the Episcopal Church. I truly can’t imagine being anything but an Episcopalian and therefore find our dwindling numbers distressing.

1. Alan Watts, “Intellectual Yoga,” Alan Watts Organization, April 16, 2019, <https://www.alanwatts.org/1-2-12-intellectual-yoga/>.

2. These figures can be found by reading the *Journals of General Convention* for the years specified: “Journals of General Convention,” The Archives of the Episcopal Church, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://www.episcopalarchives.org/governance-documents/journals-of-gc>.

In the glory days of mainline Protestantism, it seemed everyone went to church on Sundays, and families gathered afterward for midday dinner. In New England, where I was raised, the rhythm of it was as dependable as the rise and fall of the tide. The world is different now. Religion in America has all but died to its old way of being—and yet it's needed now as much as it ever has been.

We can cling to a nostalgic view of the past and strive to re-create it, or we can acknowledge in faith that God is urging us to explore new ways of being the body of Christ. I believe that God is dynamic and not static, and, as one earthly manifestation of God, faith communities are called to be likewise—to be aware, responsive, agile, and connected to the life that is unfolding in the towns and cities in which they reside. I believe that the very same Holy Spirit who breathed life into the void at the dawn of creation, who whispered in the ears of prophets, and who was exhaled from the lips of Jesus onto his disciples, is alive and well in the world today and continually dances before the faces of the faithful and faithless alike, to draw our attention to where God would have it land.

If one believes in the presence and power of this Spirit, then it isn't a big leap to assert that parishes in decline are not necessarily dying but rather are in the process of being transformed. Because the Spirit is in the business of bestowing aliveness, transformation may include some dying, but it always also includes some resurrection. Nationwide, Episcopal congregations are aging and declining, and yet that downward trajectory is at this moment crossing with another upward-arcing trajectory: the emergence of a new manifestation of Christianity.³ If we want to be involved with this new life the Spirit is bringing forth, we must make a conscious choice to be humble and curious instead of woeful and complacent.

What exactly is this “new manifestation of Christianity?” One possible answer is that it’s a faith that may still be denominationally loyal but tends to be less denominationally bound, less convinced that its doctrines are the only and best right answer for all situations, and more open to considering the gifts that other faith traditions can offer. This new manifestation of Christianity acknowledges that there is no “perfect” religion and that Christians can sometimes learn a great deal about how to live as Christians by studying people of *other faiths*. It’s good for us to be challenged to look beneath the surface of our Christian traditions, creeds, sacraments, and liturgies to find the values that connect us with practitioners of religions unlike our own. Karen Armstrong

3. Insights shared with the author from The Rt. Rev. Rob O'Neill, Tenth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado, personal conversation, December 2017.

did this kind of deep dive in her groundbreaking and award-winning Charter for Compassion.⁴

In the charter and the book that gave rise to it, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*,⁵ Armstrong points out that common moral emphases, as well as a yearning for union with the divine—with divine wisdom—are found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. I met and spent the day with Karen Armstrong in 2005, several years before her work on the charter. She was in Ketchum, Idaho, to share a stage with the Dalai Lama, and it was the first exposure to interfaith dialogue I'd had.

I had been assigned to take Ms. Armstrong to lunch and drive her afterward wherever she wished to go. I had been warned that she would probably not want to visit and chat, preferring to retire to her room to rest and prepare. I was surprised and delighted when she proved this advice wrong, lingering over lunch for hours. After the better part of a day, we said our farewells. Our conversation had been exhilarating, but toward the end I had run through every original thought in my brain. I had scraped the bottom of my barrel and had nothing intelligent left to say. As for Armstrong, I suspect she was just getting warmed up. The encounter taught me how sheltered I'd been and how much I had to learn about my brothers and sisters in different faith traditions. My Episcopal upbringing had been snug—even smug: Why reach out to other religions—even other denominations—when you were taught that your own had it all?

Even though I came late to the interfaith party, I was first introduced to yoga around 1970, through my much older half-brother. Richard was about thirty and I just twelve when he came to Maine to visit our shared father. In that Woodstock era Richard was encountering lots of new age folks for whom doing yoga was very hip. Richard didn't study with a guru but picked up enough hatha yoga and kundalini yoga from the people he met to form his own practice, and he even led a class for a time. I have a snapshot memory of our encounter, the image clear as a cloudless sky: Richard teaching me the lotus pose and a shoulder stand. I remember doing both at once, to our father's delight. The only other bit I recall was Richard's insistence that our father adopt a macrobiotic diet and chew each mouthful of brown rice fifty times. For our father it was a short-lived prescription, but the seed of curiosity about yoga that Richard planted in me would lay dormant for many decades before it began to germinate.

4. Charter for Compassion, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://charterforcompassion.org/>.

5. Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

Emerson and Thoreau: America's First Yogis

The yoga my hip half-brother Richard discovered for himself had lain slumbering in quiet corners of American life for over a century. In the 1840s at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau read the classic Hindu religious text the Bhagavad Gita and practiced some of the elements of yoga.⁶ He was inspired by his good friend and contemporary, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Trained as a Unitarian minister, Emerson served only briefly before becoming disenchanted with religious institutions. He felt Christian preaching had so downplayed the doctrine of God-within-us that it effectively buried the capacity of humans to manifest divine presence and creativity. In such preaching God was far away, and revelation was “something delivered once for all in the distant past [instead of] an immanent possibility.”⁷ What Emerson found lacking was the God-at-hand; the God who could be experienced alike by philosopher, laborer, and prisoner; the God of inspiration who pointed us to that better version of ourselves—the version God sees so clearly but that we often struggle to make out.

Emerson became a leader of transcendentalism, a philosophical movement that found unity in all creation, advocated for the intrinsic goodness of the human person, and gave weight to the validity of insight for discerning truth. Foundational to Emerson’s teachings “was a vision of how every human being is, at depth, connected with the transcendental reality that infuses our universe with Law, Beauty, and Joy.” He taught that God was radically immanent, universally available to the “properly attuned mind,” and that “the only thing separating us from complete harmony with God’s spiritual presence is a self-imposed, psychological barrier.”⁸

Especially important was Emerson’s assertion that Christian scriptures were not the sole repositories of truth and that some Eastern philosophies, such as Hinduism, set forth ideas that were superior to and filled in the gaps left by Western theology: “He championed Eastern religious ideas as a means of supplementing or complementing what our Western traditions offer, not as their antithesis.”⁹ Emerson brought ideas and language from Hindu mysticism into

6. Barbara Stoler Miller, “Why Did Thoreau Take the Bhagavad Gita to Walden Pond?” *Yoga International*, <https://yogainternational.com/article/view/why-did-thoreau-take-the-bhagavad-gita-to-walden-pond>, accessed September 29, 2021. For more information on Emerson and Thoreau as early yogis, see Stefani Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2010).

7. Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 28.

8. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, 28.

9. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, 78.

mainstream in America. He died in 1882, and less than a decade later, the first Indian swami (monastic) would arrive in the United States.

Yoga Begins to Set Down Roots

Swami Vivekananda came from India in 1893 to speak at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, where he introduced the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta to a national audience. Arising as early as the sixth century BCE, Vedanta is the fertile ground from which yoga grew. Like Karen Armstrong would infer over a century later, Vivekananda proposed that the world's religions "are but various phases of one eternal religion."¹⁰ They were paths, he declared, all leading to the same goal—union with the divine—and he made a compelling case that the similarities between religions far outnumbered their differences. His talk was enthusiastically received, as were the lectures he gave on a tour that followed the parliament.

Vivekananda spoke of "India's most sacred teaching: the divinity of man, his innate and eternal perfection; that this perfection is not a growth nor a gradual attainment, but a present reality. *That thou art.* You are that now. . . . We are not the helpless limited beings which we think ourselves to be, but birthless, deathless, glorious children of immortal bliss."¹¹ His teaching amplifies the words of Jesus: "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). Note the absence of any conditional language: not you *could be* or *will be* the light of the world, but you *are* the light of the world. You *are* a child of God. You *are* made in the divine image. To an audience likely taught that as descendants of Adam they came into the world stained by original sin and should thus scramble to avoid the wrath of a distant and angry God, Vivekananda's words had to be a comfort and a relief.

The next ambassador from India to make an impact was Paramahansa Yogananda, who traveled to Boston in 1920 as his country's delegate to the International Conference of Religious Liberals. Yogananda had founded a school in India to teach boys how to live.¹² His unique method combined academic teaching with yoga training and spiritual instruction. Yogananda spoke at the conference and was so warmly received that he spent the next fifteen years lecturing

10. Holly Hammond, "The Timeline and History of Yoga in America," *Yoga Journal*, August 28, 2007, <https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/yogas-trip-america>.

11. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, 81.

12. Self-Realization Fellowship, accessed October 14, 2021, https://www.yogananda-srf.org/tmp/py.aspx?id=46&ekmensex=568fab5c_6_13_45_1.