

Building bridges between yoga and Catholicism

Father Joe Pereira promotes the view that 'accessing the wisdom of the body' fits in with the teachings of Jesus

Douglas Todd

Vancouver Sun

Saturday, October 13, 2007

With its elegant, aging cathedrals spread out across the countryside, Roman Catholicism is Canada's largest official religion.

But with hundreds of stylish new studios opening up across Canadian cities, sometimes it seems as if Catholicism's strongest new "competitor" is yoga.

Tension simmers between these traditions of the East and West, with polls suggesting each draws the support or interest of roughly 40 per cent of the Canadian population.

Yoga practitioners often dismiss Catholicism as a doctrinaire, uptight, hierarchical religion. Catholics often write off yoga as self-indulgent exercise -- and, at worst, a heretical form of Hindu spirituality that could open practitioners to satanic forces.

Not well-known in Canada, but famous in India, the brave man who has spent much of his life trying to ease suspicion and build bridges between these two traditions is Catholic Father Joe Pereira.

The remarkable 65-year-old priest from India says the most influential figures in his life -- the teachers who represent "the yin and yang" of his spiritual education -- have been Mother Teresa of Calcutta and India's P.K.S. Iyengar, arguably the world's most influential living yoga master.

Father Joe, as he's called, was in Vancouver in late September to teach a weekend yoga workshop, speak about Christian mediation and seek support for his Indian organization's work with people who are addicted or diseased.

Admirably comfortable in multiple spiritual and cultural spheres, this veteran celibate priest in black shirt and white clerical collar makes quite a sight leading an audience in chanting "Hari Ommmm."

Pereira talked about Jesus as the "Supreme Yogi" in an interview. Only a yogi could say, "I and the Father are One," Pereira said. To the Catholic priest, yoga is ultimately a route to total surrender to, or unity, with God.

Like a yogi, Pereira says, Jesus spent much time in private contemplation and prayer -- to free himself from bondage to fear and "illusion," such as addictive thoughts and desires.



CREDIT: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun Files

Father Joe Pereira conducts a yoga workshop during a September visit to Vancouver.

Despite his long friendship with Mother Teresa, Pereira remembers decades ago how she became a little concerned and asked him, "Father Joe: What is this yoga you are teaching my nuns?"

Pereira had offered yoga to the nuns because they were falling asleep during their prayers. Yoga was a way for religious people to stop their ceaseless "babbling" in prayer, liturgy and conversation. Yoga, he said, allows religious people to heed God's plea in the Bible to open their body and heart to the "indwelling spirit of God."

In the early 1980s, receiving Mother Teresa's staunch support for the therapeutic powers of yoga, Pereira founded what is now India's largest non-governmental charitable health organization, Kripa (www.kripafoundation.org).

Kripa has grown to 50 institutes throughout India. They are devoted to bringing yoga, spirituality, psychology and other practices to the healing of addicts and the treatment of those struggling with HIV-AIDS.

Kripa boasts a recovery rate for addicts of 65 per cent in the first year, 38 per cent over subsequent years -- figures Pereira says are much higher than those obtained through western treatment programs.

"Yoga is all about accessing the wisdom of the body," Pereira says. Since Jesus taught that the human body "is a temple of God," the priest says Kripa's goal is to help the suffering realize they have "damaged their temple" and need to "love it back to health."

Since he began to learn yoga almost 40 years ago when he was a young priest undergoing a spiritual crisis and fighting his own addictive tendencies, Pereira describes himself as a "sexual celibate" who's learned through yoga not to deny his sexual energy.

Disowning the sex drive, he says, leads to priestly pedophilia and other dangerous "explosions."

Instead, endlessly energetic Pereira says yoga teaches him to "sublimate" his sexual energy and "use it for healthy living."

Despite his bold beliefs and actions, Pereira has managed to maintain strong backing for his work from key Catholic leaders in India, including Mumbai's Cardinal Ivan Dias, who was in 2006 appointed prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of People.

The Catholic church has generally blessed Pereira's yoga work as an example of "inculturation," a Vatican-endorsed practice that encourages priests to adapt regional customs and religious rituals into Catholicism. About two per cent of India's 1.1-billion population is Christian.

Regardless of his success at convincing most fellow Catholics to keep open minds about the spiritual and health benefits of yoga, Pereira says many "fundamentalists" and "charismatics" in the Catholic and Protestant churches in India remain appalled by his close ties with Iyengar and yoga.

"There are still many barking dogs."

Not content with challenging traditional Christians to open to yoga, however, Father Joe also has a message for the secular West -- which he thinks is dominated by overly rationalistic, technical, left-brain-thinking people.

"I don't want to judge people, but I think if you do yoga without spiritual language and perspective, it just turns into gymnastics, into body work."

Louie Ettling, owner of The Yoga Space, where Pereira led a three-day workshop for 55 people, has also studied in India with Iyengar and appreciates the way Father Joe was careful not to use Christian language in a way that might alienate his Vancouver students.

Since B.C. yoga practitioners come from a variety of spiritual and secular backgrounds, Ettling said, "Father Joe asked them to focus on that which would help them connect with their own understanding of the absolute."

Calling yoga a "spiritual practice" rather than a religion, Pereira believes it dovetails with Christianity and other faiths because it aims to access the spirit of God that resides in all people.

Hindus might call this spirit the Self, or atman, Pereira says. Like Christians who believe God is incarnate in people, Hindus similarly believe the Self is, at the mystical level, the same as God, or Brahman.

The priest says it's only through deep relaxation, which comes through yoga, meditation and related spiritual practices, that humans can calm their anxious minds and open to the presence of God. His message seems perfectly suited for many Canadians, especially those on the spiritually eclectic West Coast.

Near the end of an evening lecture in Vancouver on Christian meditation, organized by Catholic lay person Colleen Donald, Father Joe was asked to offer some Biblical verses that could help meditators and yoga practitioners "open their bodies to God."

He answered by raising up some of what he called the Bible's "yogic verses," which focus on the paradoxical need to forget your ego to find your true Self. One of them was from Psalm 46:

"Be still and know that I am God."

dtodd@png.canwest.com