Podcast Transcript

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Evangelical Yoga: Cultural Appropriation and Translation in American Religions

Podcast with **Candy Gunther-Brown** (19 June 2017).

Interviewed by **Daniel Gorman Jr**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/ evangelical-yoga-cultural-appropriation-and-translation-in-american-religions/

Daniel Gorman (**DG**) : *Dr Candy Gunther-Brown, welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

Candy Brown (**CB**): Thank you.

DG: *So, I'm calling you from up-state New York – you're in Indiana, and I'm told the weather is equally miserable in both places.*

CB: That seems to be about right.

DG: *OK. So, today we're going to be talking about your research into new religious movements, particularly: how people who are not Hindu wind up practising yoga.*

CB: Sure.

DG: *So to begin, why don't you tell our listeners how you got interested in new religious movements or, in this case , old religious practices being done in a new way?*

CB: Sure. Well, my research trajectory really started with looking at Evangelicals in the 19th century and at print culture. And then, as I wanted to move forward in time to look at later 19th century, into the 20th century and into the 21st century, I realised that it was really a much bigger story than just

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what was going on in the United States with the Evangelicals. And so I needed to start looking at global moments and much more interconnection. And I also realised that a big part of the story was Pentecostal charismatic Christianity. So that took my research, then, into the directions of looking at, particularly, Pentecostal practices of prayer for healing and deliverance from evil spirits. And so I did a lot of interview work in the field, worked with various Pentecostals and asked them about their healing experiences. And so this led to me to start asking questions that were, in a sense, more of an empirical nature of what happens when people pray for healing. So then I was looking at some science and religion kinds of questions. But I also got some very interesting responses from my Pentecostal respondents. Because, when I started asking them about prayer for healing, they also started to volunteer that they *loved* their chiropractors.

DG: *Really?*

CB: And this was a somewhat surprising response to me, given what I knew about Chiropractics: that it's roots were in mesmerism and spiritualism, and the founders and developers of the tradition saw themselves as doing something very different from Christianity. And the Christian informants that I was talking to, not only did they love their chiropractors but they also insisted that they were Christian. They didn't bother telling me that their medical doctors were Christian, but they really wanted me to know that their chiropractors were. Again this was very interesting because if you look at survey research that's been done on chiropractors you see that around 80% or so will say that they're Christians, and around 80% or so share vitalistic, metaphysical beliefs, very much in line with the founders of chiropractics. So you've got a really interesting kind-of blending of worldviews and frameworks and interpretations of the world. And I realised that this was really just the tip of the iceberg. And so, from looking at chiropractic I began to look at other kinds of complementary and alternative medicine, including various kinds of meditation – transcendental meditation, mindfulness meditation, but also Reiki, therapeutic touch, acupuncture, homeothapy, aromatherapy – and realised that some of the most engaged practitioners were actually Evangelical Christians. And particularly the ones who were interested in charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity, who had a kind of worldview where there's some kind of spiritual force that's interacting with the world. So a lot of the reasoning process that these Evangelicals used was: if there's a spirit and it's having beneficial effects on health, then there must be a kind of an analogy between the Holy Spirit and the spiritual properties that are at

work in these other practices. And thus, I landed on yoga and mindfulness practised by Evangelicals, as well as by a lot of other Americans who engage in these practices, for various reasons – related to spirituality as much as health and wellness.

DG: *That's a lot! Let me . . . . I'll take one thread and we'll work through this. Some listeners, especially outside the United States, may not be familiar with some of the traditions you mentioned, some of the 19th century occult things: mesmerism, and chiropractic. Could you talk a little bit more about how these alternative viewpoints to Christianity . . . where they came from?*

CB: Sure. Well around the middle of the 19th century there was a lot of dissatisfaction among certain Americans who were dealing with both a medical orthodoxy and a religious orthodoxy. (**5:00**) And the medical orthodoxy was heroic medicine – and by today's standard, [it was] not very effective and very aggressive. So, things like vomiting with mercury derivatives and bleeding people. And it was the patient who was the hero as they were subjected to all kinds of very strenuous treatments by doctors.

DG: *Torture.*

CB: Yes. I mean, for many patients that was their perspective. But then a lot of the Calvinist theologians, who were in the dominant mainstream, basically gave the advice that patients should submit to their doctors as a way of resigning to God's will for sickness. And the reason was that spiritual sanctification required a kind of physical kind of submission and sickness. And so this dominant theology, that sanctification is produced through suffering in the body, aligned well with heroic medicine. But there was also a lot of resistance. And so this is where you start getting the emergence of nature-cure kinds of medical alternatives. But then you also start to get the development of divine healing movements where the interest is in a focus on prayer for healing. So, whether it is a nature-cure looking to water and spiritual forces and kind-of the alignment of the planets, or whether it's a prayer to God the Father through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, there is a widespread search for something else – some alternative to the mainstream offerings.

DG*: That's very interesting because I recently read, for my graduate school lists, Catherine Albanese's* A Republic of Mind and Spirit*. And she talks, in that book, about how osteopathy emerged as sort-of this quasi-religious movement: the idea that you can align the energy forces in your body by*

manipulating bones.

CB: Yes. And actually the founder of chiropractic, D.D. Palmer, was accused by Still, the founder of osteopathy, of basically stealing his ideas. The ideas are so close. And they both emerge out of a vitalistic metaphysical framework. And what's interesting is that osteopathy was much more embraced by the medical mainstream. So that, today, there's really a kind of a sense of equivalence, almost, between an osteopathic medical degree and an MD. Whereas chiropractic is still much more on the fringes, even though it's become a lot more mainstream. And it's not necessarily that osteopathy has actually renounced the metaphysical framework, but they've been a lot more intentional and effective in terms of gaining mainstream medical legitimacy.

DG: *Well, that's one thing I've wondered about – I mean, as just someone looking at medical treatments – you know, chiropractors don't receive the same training in anatomy and physiology that a doctor or a modern osteopath receives. . .*

CB: That's true. And it's not just a matter of difference in training, but it's really a difference in philosophy. An idea that Palmer articulated . . . . So Palmer, the founder of chiropractic, basically said that all disease is a matter of a failure of alignment with innate intelligence – that's universal intelligence, so "innate" was short for this. And so you may ask the question, what are chiropractors adjusting? And it's actually, they're adjusting the spine for the sake of having a free flow of innate. It's not just a physical kind of adjustment. So that was the rationale for how chiropractic could affect all kinds of other conditions, whether it's having earaches, or infections, or whether it's turning a breach baby – I mean there's all kinds of different claims that, even today, are made for chiropractic. And they stem from the idea that, really, the key to health is the innate intelligence. And so it's that philosophy that's really at the core, and why there's still so much tension with modern medicine.

DG: *I do want to move onto the yoga connection. But there's one question I'll pose to you as somebody who researches these kinds of movements: so to some, let's say an atheist medical practitioner, what you're describing is pseudo-science. But that doesn't seem that way to people who practise it and believe that it helps them. How do you navigate that balance between judging and understanding?*

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CB: Well, I think this is where it's important to really look at a multiplicity of perspectives and to try and explain: well, who are the developers of various practices? But not only what are the roots of these practices, what are today's philosophies? And this is why for chiropractic, for instance, it's important that there's survey research that's been done by chiropractors, that basically confirm that the beliefs that are held by many chiropractors today are actually very much in alignment with those that were articulated by the Palmers. (**10:00**) Now that doesn't mean that the chiropractors always communicate that with their patients. In fact, that often is not the case. And so, one of the things that it's important for scholars to do is to actually look at the variety of narratives that are articulated by practitioners as well as patients, depending on who their audiences are. And this is something that we'll see with yoga, as well – that explanation of what practices do, why they're practices, what they mean – you may not always get the same explanation if you're looking at different audiences, and different purposes for giving that account of what the practice is.

DG: *So now, this is where I think chiropractic and yoga tie together. This concept of energy in the body – well, to someone who knows anything about Hinduism, this sounds a lot like the idea of chakras and energy flows in the body. So, in the 19th century, when people like Palmer and others were starting their work, what understanding in America was there of Indian religions?*

CB: Sure. Well, there was a combination of Western metaphysical traditions – something like homeothapy or aromatherapy would be rooted in that kind of tradition – and there was often quite a bit of exchange, though, with Asian religious traditions as well. So a lot of the people who were developing these Western metaphysical ideas, they actually were reading texts that they got from India and other parts of Asia. They were interacting with ideas of say Prana or qi, or chakras and meridians, as you mentioned. And so there's often a real, kind of, exchange and consonance in these ideas. And a lot of the practitioners of chiropractic or yoga will say, yes, there's a lot that there actually is in common between the Western and Eastern traditions.

DG: *Yes. I was thinking of the Theosophist, people like Madam Blavatsky, who think you can control the spirits with your mind – and then she goes and lives in India for a decade!*

CB: Well exactly! And then she actually formally converted to Buddhism, and she drew extensively

on Hinduism and a variety of Western traditions and Freemasonry. So, that kind of eclectic interest in various forms of spiritually – sometimes framed as science themselves . . . . A lot of the pioneers in the kinds of movements that are popular today were very interested in exploring a variety of practices and traditions.

DG: *So, as far as yoga goes, when did that begin to be introduced to the American market? I'm thinking, for instance, in the 1920s there were the immigration restrictions, so how was this material – about philosophy and exercise – how as that making the crossing to America?*

CB: Sure, well even as early as the 19th century you've got the transcendental folks, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who are reading as many translated Hindu and Buddhist texts as they're able to. And you got Thoreau who's doing his best to practice yoga. So even in the 19th century you can see some of the beginnings of practices coming into America. The World Parliament of Religion, in 1893, was a really important event. Because there you've got Vivekananda – actually, several of those Hindu and Buddhist spokespersons – who are starting to frame practices in a language of science, to basically argue that Hinduism and Buddhism (as they're starting to be named and understood by Westerners) are, actually, more compatible with modern science than Christianity is. And so you start to have a stream of popularisers and, even with immigration restrictions, you've got enough who are either coming into the United States themselves or whose books and publications are crossing over, that the influence, again, begins to be disseminated. Yogananda is another one of these hugely influential figures who sets up a base in California and continues to be popular even into the present day with his Self-Realisation Fellowship. And so now his followers are continuing to disseminate the traditions. And so there've been a variety of health and beauty promotions, exercise promotions, the use of television – so really an increase over the course of the 20th century, but accelerating with: the lifting of immigration restrictions in the 1960s; the interest of the Beat generation; the counter-culture. But then, even more recently in the 1990s and beyond, you start to see this increasing mainstream status – even to the point of putting yoga and mindfulness practices into public schools. And that really is just within the last couple of decades.

DG: (**15:00**) *Well it was interesting when you mentioned Yogananda in the 1930s, because he was somebody who preached that Jesus was another incarnation of the other Hindu deities, an avatar.*

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CB: And that's been a very common strategy. A very common strategy by a lot of the promoters of Yoga is to argue for consonance, for complementarity. And that's actually been one of the things that's been motivating for Evangelical Christians even, who feel that there's something missing in their own tradition. And so they're trying to fill in and supplement by borrowing from other kinds of traditions.

DG: *So Evangelical Christians in the present day: how are they accessing yoga? What kinds of facilities, for instance?*

CB: Well, a lot of times there's the YMCA, there's health clubs, sometimes more traditional yoga studios. So some Christians will find their way either into the health club version or into the studio version. But then also there's a proliferation of explicitly Christian versions of yoga or alternatives to yoga. And so you start to get movements like: Christo-yoga, holy yoga, fully fit, Yahweh yoga, praise moves. . . . And some of them keep yoga somewhere in the title, some of them try to remove yoga from the title. And there's a kind of Evangelical sense that religion, really, is fundamentally reducible to language. It's about what you believe and what you say that you believe. And so if you change the language, and you say you're no longer doing "sun salutations" – salutes to the sun – but you say you're doing "son salutations" – s-o-n, instead of s-u-n – you've now repurposed the practice and dedicated it to Jesus. You're no longer doing pranayana but you're breathing in the Holy Spirit. So by re-labelling either individual poses or larger practices, many Evangelicals are convinced that they've basically emptied the contents . . . . They've removed the Hindu contents from the container of neutral yoga practices, and they've poured in Bible verses and prayers. Now with a different framework of religion where it's about practices, not necessarily just beliefs, then that may seem a rather strange or unworkable kind of approach. So some Hindu critics of the Christianisation of yoga will basically say, the prayers are actually the bodily practices. Doing the sun salutation with your body is a form of devotion to Surya the sun god. And so there are actually some warnings by Hindu spokespersons, saying that ultimately Evangelicals are going to find their faith corrupted, by their own standards, and they're going to be led into the true way of enlightenment. And it may not be so easy just to re-label practices and make them Evangelical.

DG*: Do you think – building on this theme of Hindu response – are there Hindu groups that are*

offended that anyone's just using this tradition, without any sense of where it comes from?

CB: Oh there are definitely critiques of cultural appropriation. And the Hindu American Foundation launched a Take back Yoga campaign in 2008. And some of their spokespersons have been critical of Christian appropriation. But you find this, similarly, with Buddhists who complain about appropriation of mindfulness practices and claim that they've been secularised or, in some cases, they claim that they've been Christianised. So that's definitely a critique that's present.

DG: *Now, I'm curious in the way you go about researching these things. Do you travel to Christian yoga studios? And when you go there, what do you do? Are you a participant or are you just observing?*

CB: I've done observing. I've relied a lot on just the proliferation of online sources and video presentations, and [I've] also been present in meditation settings. And I've observed – I don't participate. I think that there are ethical issues that come into play with that, so my stance is that of an observer. I do a lot of interview work with participants and with teachers. And I also do empirical work and look at the studies that have been done. And this is an interesting aspect, is to ask, "Well, what happens when people participate in either secularised or Christianised versions of something like yoga or mindfulness meditation?" And what's interesting is that there is sociological work that suggests that there are, actually, some profound changes in spiritual and religious experiences that result – even, sometimes, from very short term involvement. But that, basically, the longer people tend to be involved in these practices, the more likely what started off as just an exercise class has turned into a spiritual pursuit. And the content of religious practices does tend to shift towards practices that would be more aligned with, say, Hinduism than with Christianity. And this is, actually, very much parallel to the kinds of claims that are made by yoga teachers and mindfulness teachers, who are very confident that the practices themselves are transformative.(**20:00**) And so, here, you get both proponents of yoga and mindfulness, and some of the Christian critics, who are essentially arguing that there is something inherent about theses practices themselves that transform people, regardless of what their intentions are going into the practices. Intentions, it seems, can actually change through the experiences of practices. And that claim does, to some degree, seem to be borne out by the sociological research that's been done.

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DG: *Do you see any regional differences, in the United States, about the Christian reception of yoga?*

CB: Well, it seems that – predictably in some ways – the coasts have a lot more yoga and a lot more Christian yoga. And also, some of the controversies over this . . . . You see more Christian yoga on the coast, you also see just more yoga programmes. But it's not coincidental that where the most high profile law suit over yoga in public schools took place – it was in Encinita, San Diego County, California. And it was actually right next door to Yogananda's Self-Realisation Fellowship.

DG: *That's interesting.*

CB: This is also the birthplace of Ashtanga yoga in the United States, which was brought over by Pattabhi Jois, and that was the particular form of yoga that was being practised in the public schools where there was a lawsuit. So, a place like Encinita is interesting because something like 45% of the population practices yoga, compared with – as of 2012, which was when that 45% came out – it was about 9%, nationally. Now it's about 15%, nationally. About 40% of the population is Christian, but that compares to about 70% of the total US population that's Christian. So you have fewer Christian and more religious diversity in a place like Ansonita. But you still have a lot of Christians who are practising – and it was a minority of those Christians who protested against yoga. The large majority seemed to actually be pretty interested in practising it themselves.

DG: *We're closing in on the end our session, but I want to try to connect this practice of yoga to some of the other things you've mentioned, particularly transcendental meditation. It's billed as TM now, it's sort-of this exercise, but there's no real sense of where that comes from. Do you think Christians are also participating in TM movements?*

CB: I think that they are in one of the main places where TM has really got in its foothold: in what's now called "quiet-time programmes" in public schools. So transcendental meditation more comes out of Hindu meditation traditions. And this is, actually, one of the places where . . . . Really, one of the only law suits where there was a judicial decision defining religion was a case of Malnak v. Yogi, in 1979, which found that transcendental meditation was a religion. And one of the lines in the concurring opinion by Arlin Adams, he said, "Well, if a Catholic can't practice in schools, then neither should a transcendental meditator be allowed to do so." Even so, TM programmes and quiet-time

programmes have proliferated in public schools even until the present day, alongside mindfulness programmes. So I think that, a lot of the time, Christians and others – atheists as well – really don't know where practices are coming from, and they don't know how connected to the originating traditions those practices remain. So it's not just a matter of, " a long time ago there were ancient religious roots". But, if you look at how practices are being framed when not being marketed to the public, you actually find that there are still a lot of the same claims that this is, for instance, a "Vedic victory" when yoga gets into public schools, or this is "stealth Buddhism", when mindfulness gets into the schools. So those are the kinds of claims that are made when talking to Hindu or Buddhist sympathiser audiences. But a lot of the people who are interested in doing practices for health or wellness, they really don't know where these practices come from and they really haven't thought that much about how intentions may change through their participation in these practices.

DG: *If anything, the future of religion in this country is going to be very interesting, because we're going to see . . . .*

CB: (Laughs) I think so too!

DG: *Well I'm thinking, if the country is growing more secular, the question is: if these practices endure, then do we need to rethink the idea of secularisation?*

CB: Well, I think we absolutely do. And this is where my working title for the book I'm working on now, on yoga and mindfulness in public schools, is "Secular and Religious". And I think that practices actually can be both at the same time. (**25:00**) And that by presenting practices as secular that this can actually be a more effective way of advancing new forms of religion and spirituality.

DG: *Thank you for your time, Dr Gunther-Brown.*

CB: Thank you very much.

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