

**READING PATANJALI'S *YOGA SUTRA* LIKE THE BIBLE IN SUNDAY SCHOOL:  
About Orientalist and Western Protestant Hermeneutical Assumptions in Contemporary  
English Translations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra***

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The role played by religion can only be comprehended by viewing it in terms of time and place,  
and in terms of its function within an historical context.  
Kenneth W. Jones (1989)

The current habit of reading, studying, and chanting Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* in contemporary Western yoga studios is orientalist. It ought to be understood as part of a neo-colonial mystification process that does not so much illuminate the Sutras but contribute to the neoliberal appropriation of historically non-Western literary-religious traditions by dominantly white and mostly female yoga practitioners who are taught and supported by mostly male teachers of Indian and Western origins. Although a sizable number of Western and Indian yoga teachers tend to criticize the almost exclusively physical aspects of Western yoga practice by insisting on its spiritual nature, many books on the *Yoga Sutra* and other "Indian wisdom traditions" give evidence of the cultural and intellectual-spiritual annexation and colonization currently under way.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Western yogi/ni/s refer to the literary-religious history of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* with hermeneutical naiveté, methodological literalism, and epistemological ignorance. In fact, many yogi/ni/s are considerably indifferent about the implications of their hermeneutical assumptions in their readings of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Ignorance is experienced as innocent and blissful while willful ignorance closes out historical, cultural, political, and religious responsibilities for appropriating an ancient literary tradition. The problem is compounded by the strong desire to escape culpability for racist, sexist, heterosexist, classist, caste systemic, and neo-colonial systems of oppression in the past and the present. Shefali Chandra observes poignantly the problem in her analysis of Hollywood films about white middle-class U.S.-American women travelling to India when she states: "Upper-caste Hinduism ushers the white woman across space and affective registers, reestablishing a transnational American entitlement to the globe."<sup>2</sup> This state of affairs also pertains to the thousands of yoga studios that are dominantly patronized by mostly white Western women and some men.

As Mark Singleton observes, the prominence of the *Yoga Sutra* in contemporary Western yoga communities "was made possible by the installation of Patanjali as the *logos* of yoga during

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<sup>1</sup> For a grassroots blog, see, e.g. Vikram Zutshi, "On the Bastardization of Yoga, like Indigenous Traditions by Low-Brow Pop Culture," *Rebelle Society* (April 1, 2014), available at <http://www.rebellecommunity.com/2014/04/01/on-the-bastardization-of-yoga/>. For a scholarly analysis of this process, see, e.g., Shefali Chandra, "'India Will Change You Forever': Hinduism, Islam, and Whiteness in the American Empire," *Signs* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 487-512. For a different take in the popular online press, see Michelle Goldberg, "'Where the Whole World Meets in a Single Nest': The history behind a misguided campus debate over yoga and 'cultural appropriation'," *slate.com* (November 23, 2015); available online: [http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2015/11/university\\_canceled\\_yoga\\_class\\_no\\_it\\_s\\_not\\_cultural\\_appropriation\\_to\\_practice.html?wpsrc=sh\\_all\\_tab\\_em\\_bot](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2015/11/university_canceled_yoga_class_no_it_s_not_cultural_appropriation_to_practice.html?wpsrc=sh_all_tab_em_bot).

<sup>2</sup> Chandara, "'India Will Change You Forever,'" 509.

the heyday of [nineteenth-century] European Orientalism.”<sup>3</sup> The difference is that mostly white Western yogi/ni/s have adopted Patanjali in the twenty-first century, and so they lead the way in perpetuating the orientalist outlook of what is called yoga today. The orientalist outlook imposes Western hermeneutical ways of dealing with an Indian text, as developed in the interpretation of the Bible. It singles out a text as authoritative for spiritual matters, disconnects the text from its socio-cultural and religious context, and endows it with a message about personal-individualistic salvation. In short, a Western Protestant hermeneutics of reading the Bible operates in many *Yoga Sutra* translations. This essay seeks to demystify and demythologize the hermeneutical assumptions that are grounded in Western orientalist and Protestant biblical approaches.<sup>4</sup>

The essay proceeds in three steps to give evidence for the orientalist and Western Protestant hermeneutical assumptions as they appear in contemporary English *Yoga Sutra* translations. A first section explores the status of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* as a bible in Western yoga communities. A second section presents how various translations of the *Yoga Sutra* rely on Western Protestant hermeneutical principles in order to make their readings of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* meaningful and authoritative to Western readers. A third section discusses II.46, one of three sutras on asana, to illustrate the orientalist and Western Protestant hermeneutical argumentation structure in various English translations as they mimic “biblical” authority. A conclusion reminds us of the considerable commercial appetite for popular *Yoga Sutra* translations that presuppose orientalist and Western Protestant hermeneutical assumptions to present Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* as a legitimate and authoritative text for Western yogi/ni/s.

### **The Function, Status, and Power of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* as a “Bible” in Western Yoga Communities**

Among Western yoga practitioners and especially among Western yoga teachers, the historically marginal and almost forgotten *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali has gained soaring visibility since the end of the twentieth century CE. Religious studies scholar, David Gordon White, wonders about this new attention given to the *Yoga Sutra* when he asks: “[W]hy [is it]—when the ‘*Yoga Sutra* definition’ of yoga is not a particularly early or important one, and when the contents of the *Yoga Sutra* are nearly devoid of discussion of postures, stretching, and breathing whereas dozens of other Sanskrit works with ‘yoga’ in their titles are devoted to those very practices—that instructions in the *Yoga Sutra* should be compulsory for modern-day yoga instructors?”<sup>5</sup>

Seeking an explanation for the popularity of the *Yoga Sutra* among Western yoga practitioners, White traces the history of the *Yoga Sutra* during the last two thousand years. He elaborates on the Indian philosophy and commentary tradition, which he classifies as a “rather tricky”<sup>6</sup> moment in time because “Indian texts are notoriously difficult to date.”<sup>7</sup> He recounts

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), 92.

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, then, my essay resonates with the work of a contemporary Indologist who seeks to demystify and demythologize “yoga in order to bring it into conversation with contemporary inquiries concerning the nature of mind and consciousness;” see Gerald James Larson, “Materialism, Dualism, and the Philosophy of Yoga,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 17, no. 2 (August 2013): 182.

<sup>5</sup> David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

the emergent popularity of the *Yoga Sutra* in the British colonial encounter with India. Many British male scholars, among them William Jones, Charles Wilkins Henry, and Thomas Colebrook, were involved in the early discoveries and translations of myriad Sanskrit texts at the end of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century CE. White explains that “orientalists” or “Indologists,” such as Rajendrahal Mitra in 1883, Romesh Chunder Dutt in 1889, or Max Müller in 1899, sharply separated Yoga philosophy from the *Yoga Sutra*. They rejected “Patanjali’s doctrine” as fanatical, delusional, degenerated, and pathological because, in their opinion, it affirms belief in magic, rites, and superstitions. These scholars and other “orientalists” did not limit this assessment to the *Yoga Sutra*, but they also classified “its modern-day proponents, the ‘modern yogins or Mahatmans’ as ‘frauds’.”<sup>8</sup>

White follows this lead and addresses the depiction of eighteenth and nineteenth-century yogis as “evil villains” not only in British colonial discourse but also in Tantric texts in which yogis appear as threatening and child-eating mendicant bands of men roaming around in temples and the countryside, sometimes even as armed warriors. White explains that, by 1780, yogis had become “the dominant moneylenders, property owners, and pillars of the merchant communities of Allahabad, Varanasi, and Mirzapur, the principle trading centers of the rich Gangetic plain.”<sup>9</sup> It was only after Vivekananda’s visit to the United States and his address at the World Parliament of Religion in 1893 that new interest in Yoga philosophy began to take off. It stood in sharp contrast to Indian philosophy’s abandonment of Patanjali’s yoga system by the sixteenth or seventeenth century CE. White sums up the early history of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* in this comment: “[A]fter the late sixteenth century virtually no one was copying the *Yoga Sutra* because no one was commissioning *Yoga Sutra* manuscripts, and no one was commissioning *Yoga Sutra* manuscripts because no one was interested in reading the *Yoga Sutra*.”<sup>10</sup> The *Yoga Sutra* had “become a moribund tradition, an object of universal indifference,” a “lost” tradition “until Colebrooke found it”<sup>11</sup> in 1823. The rest of White’s book recounts the revival efforts of Patanjali’s tradition among German philosophers such as George W.F. Hegel, the Theosophical Society, Vivekananda, Islam, and Krishnamacharya.

This last name is significant because Krishnamacharya is the father of modern posture practice. White observes that “the *Yoga Sutra* is conspicuous by its absence from Krishnamacharya’s early works.”<sup>12</sup> Surprisingly, then, the father of modern posture practice who taught the three most influential yoga teachers in the West—Pathabi Jois, B.K.S. Iyengar, and his son T.K.V. Desikachar—taught yoga without the *Yoga Sutra*. White explains that Desikachar, the son of Krishnamacharya, mentions that the *Yoga Sutra* were important to his father, but this comment appears in a book published in 1998 when the son himself had already become an influential yoga teacher.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the son had considerable interest in characterizing the *Yoga Sutra* as a central book for contemporary yoga practice. White states scathingly: “[T]hese authors [Jois, Iyengar, and Desikachar] have been tailoring their message to the sensibilities of their Western audience, and so have preferred to present their guru as a genius and a healer rather than as a true yogi as defined by the *Yoga Sutra*.”<sup>14</sup> Yet we also have to wonder what “these authors” noticed in their Western audience that encouraged them to

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 201. Tirumalai Krishnamacharya died in 1989; he was born in 1888.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 218.

emphasize the *Yoga Sutra* more than their teacher ever did. Ultimately, White does not explain why the *Yoga Sutra* held such seductive power over their Western audience. Indeed it has been so powerful that nowadays the 195 cryptic aphorisms are available in more than 40 languages and enjoy a readership far beyond the intellectual elite. They are read by “anyone with what is called ‘a yoga practice’.”<sup>15</sup>

There is, however, an obvious answer for the *Yoga Sutra*’s popularity among Western yoga practitioners. It relates to the literary-religious predisposition of the Western Bible-reading culture that invites speedy acceptance of and even need for Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* in Western yoga communities. Western yogi/ni/s have grown up in societies in which the significance of a sacred text has been experienced for centuries. Many wars have been fought over it, and although those wars are long forgotten, the intuitive sensibilities for a sacred text are still there. Reverence for a sacred text still makes inherent sense to Western people, whether or not they practice yoga, and thus Western yogi/ni/s expect an authoritative text. It should be unsurprising that some commentators acknowledge that their students asked them for their interpretations of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. For instance, B.K.S. Iyengar explains: “For a number of years, my pupils and friends have been asking me to express the profound depths of each sutra of Patañjali’s yoga with a simple and lucid translation, together with my explanatory comments, to help people understand and follow the path of evolution.” Similarly, Georg Feuerstein states: “As with my *Textbook of Yoga*, the present volume was also written in direct response to the request of a number of students of Yoga.”<sup>16</sup>

Many interpreters of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* legitimize the appropriation of a practice perceived to be from the deep Indian past in a way they intuitively know works best: they ground physical posture practice in the authority of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*, turning the latter into a “bible.” In his foreword to B.K.S. Iyengar’s *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (1993 edition), Godfrey Devereux<sup>17</sup> states this fact bluntly: “Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtras are the bible of yoga.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in his “Preface” to *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Sri Swami Satchidananda (1914-2002) mentions that “[f]or many years these *Yoga Sutras* have been like a Bible to me.”<sup>19</sup> Sometimes a direct reference to a biblical text appears in the explanations. For instance, Marshall Govindan observes in a discussion on II.47: “When a posture (*āsana*) is done correctly, not only will it be steady and comfortable, but also all tension (*prayatna*), both physical and mental, will subside.... The Psalmist’s words remind us of the ultimate purpose of a *Yoga āsana* correctly performed: ‘Be Still, and Know That I am God.’”<sup>20</sup> In sum, contemporary translators re-authorize, sanction, and justify the performative dimension of asana practice with a religious text because they understand that a Western audience knows, consciously or unconsciously, its tacit power. They sense that a sacred text legitimizes religious-political customs, also in the case of yoga.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>16</sup> Iyengar, *Light on Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras*, p. xvii; Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1979, 1989), p. viii.

<sup>17</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.dynamicsyoga.com/godfridev.php>.

<sup>18</sup> Godfrey Devereux, “Foreword,” in B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali* (London: Thorsons, 1993), viii.

<sup>19</sup> Sri Swami Satchidananda, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: Translation and Commentary* (16<sup>th</sup> printing; Yogaville, VA: Integral Yoga Publications, 2011), v. For more information on Swami Satchidananda, visit [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satchidananda\\_Saraswati](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satchidananda_Saraswati).

<sup>20</sup> Marshall Govindan, *Kriya Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Siddhas: Translation, Commentary and Practice* (St. Etienne de Bolton, Quebec, Canada: Kriya Yoga Publications, 2000), 115.

In a nutshell, then, the cultural swiftness with which Western yogi/ni/s have accepted the authority of the *Yoga Sutra* indicates the “Protestantization”<sup>21</sup> of contemporary Western yoga practice. The *Yoga Sutra* perform as “bible” because Western yoga practitioners are comfortable to give this text such implicit importance.<sup>22</sup> Western yogi/ni/s expect, seek, and find instructions about “true” yoga practice in a text, which they endow with canonical power, although this very text mentions asana practice only thrice in II.46, 47, and 48. Scholars, observing this contradiction, even assert that “there is ‘no evidence’ for an ‘ancient tradition’ of āsana practice.”<sup>23</sup> The popularity of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* thus exemplifies what Benjamin Richard Smith identifies as “a complex series of historical continuities and changes and an ongoing syncretic interplay between ‘Indian yoga’ and the ‘West’.”<sup>24</sup> Western yoga practitioners read the *Yoga Sutra* like a bible because as Westerners they believe that only a bible can authorize as a spiritual path a practice that looks and feels like physical exercise.

In short, the desire for an authoritative text that endows physical exercise as a “spiritually” legitimate, necessary, and valuable activity flourishes in the West even when its readers consider themselves post-Christian, post-Jewish, secular, or perhaps even Hindu. Accordingly, the impetus of seeking out and accepting the authority of the *Yoga Sutra* reflects the subtle but nevertheless ongoing cultural function, status, and power of the Bible in Western yoga communities.

### **The Hermeneutics of *Sola Scriptura* in Western *Yoga Sutra* Translations**

The idea that the Western appropriation of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* relies on hermeneutical assumptions as they have been popular in Western Bible interpretation appears in many English translations.<sup>25</sup> Among those assumptions is the emphasis on a translation’s literal, word-by-word approach. Some translators also stress that their work needs to be grounded in the original text and that they can deliberately ignore traditional commentaries. Some translators classify their

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<sup>21</sup> For the idea of a “Protestantization” among neo-Hindu groups, see, e.g., Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (The New Cambridge History of India, III 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, reprinted 1997, 2003, 2006), 213-214; quoted in Gerald James Larson, *India: Agony over Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1995), 134-135, where he comments on p. 135: “Whether or not one wishes to refer to these Neo-Hindu groups in terms of ‘protestantization,’ it is nevertheless true that the present-day existence of India as a modern nation-state is inconceivable apart from the important contributions that these New-Hindu reformist and nationalist groups provided.”

<sup>22</sup> For an interesting discussion on this phenomenon in art, see the blog entry by Michael J. Altman entitled “Religion, Secularism, and Book Art” that is available at <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2013/07/religion-secularism-and-book-art-or.html> [visited on March 30, 2015]. For an online discussion on “Protestant Buddhism,” visit <https://meaningness.wordpress.com/2011/06/24/protestant-buddhism/> [accessed March 30, 2015]. See also David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga,” p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Richard Smith, “‘With Heat Even Iron Will Bend’: Discipline and Authority in Ashtanga Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), 148.

<sup>25</sup> Although it could be argued that the scholarly impetus to produce critical editions of the Yoga Sutras is also related to the long tradition in biblical studies to produce critical Bible editions, my analysis does not include scholarly editions of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*, such as Philipp André Maas, *Samādhipāda: Das erste Kapitel des Pātañjalayogaśāstra zum ersten Mal kritisch ediert/The First Chapter of the Pātañjalayogaśāstra for the First Time Critically Edited* (Aachen, Shaker Verlag, 2006); Gerald James Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, *Yoga: India’s Philosophy of Meditation* (Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, vol. 12; New Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publisher, 2011).

approach as “scientific” while they also mention “experience” as an important component for understanding the text itself. These highly modern and Protestant hermeneutical principles ensure that a Western audience recognizes the authority of the text and the translations as their own. As renowned translation theorist, Lawrence Venuti, put it, these translations domesticate the source text into the target language’s context, and so they participate in geo-political, economic, and cultural inequalities that force less powerful participants to submit to hegemonic cultures.<sup>26</sup>

Some translations and commentaries are more explicit about their hermeneutical assumptions than others. One of the most transparent works comes from Barbara Stoler Miller who, in 1998, published *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom: The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali*.<sup>27</sup> The book contains a translation of the *Yoga Sutra* with Miller’s commentary. In the preface Miller talks about some of her hermeneutical premises. She explains that, to her, “[t]he text is neither a sacred scripture nor a historical artifact, but a set of philosophical analyses that probe timeless dilemmas of cognition and obstacles to spiritual tranquility.”<sup>28</sup> She distances the *Yoga Sutra* from the status of being “sacred scripture” and instead posits that it has “a self-referential clarity that is independent of knowledge outside the text.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, to Miller, the text says what it says and is not in need of external information. It is both “simple” and “aphoristic” with qualities that stand in contrast to “the rhetorical complexity of the commentaries.”<sup>30</sup> Miller disregards the latter because “they often obscure Patanjali’s elegant critique of the mental attitudes that bind us to suffering the vagaries of material existence.”<sup>31</sup> Not wanting to “argue with the scholastics,” Miller aims “to clarify the meaning of each aphorism from within the text.”<sup>32</sup> She assumes a direct approach that reads “within the text” and is independent from the classical interpretation history. Her goal is to make accessible the philosophy of the *Yoga Sutra* “to anyone intent on pondering the ideas of this ancient teaching.”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Miller emphasizes that the *Yoga Sutra* is not territory of specialized scholarship, and the interpretation does not require special authorization from religious authorities. In predictable “Protestant” fashion that affirms the “priesthood of all believers,” Miller regards the *Yoga Sutra* as available to anyone who reads the text itself and seeks spiritual guidance. A literalist-literary hermeneutics promises individualistic, personal, and universal spiritual truth.

Without explicit acknowledgment, then, Miller adheres to the central Protestant hermeneutics of *sola scriptura*. There are many other indicators for the validity of this observation about Miller’s approach. For instance, she asserts that the *Yoga Sutra* offers “the state of spiritual freedom,” which she defines as “an absolute claim beyond the realm of language and everyday experience.”<sup>34</sup> It is grasped through yoga’s “logical series of meditative practices and hyperconscious thought experiments.”<sup>35</sup> Miller warns readers to avoid getting entangled in the centuries-long debates over the meaning of the *Yoga Sutra*. She urges to

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<sup>26</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Stoler Miller, *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom: The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

remember that the *Yoga Sutra* teaches about spiritual freedom, and so yoga “can only be fully apprehended experientially, through long, continuous practice.”<sup>36</sup> The goal “is realized in contemplative practice” that lays “bare our true human identity.”<sup>37</sup> In the opinion of Miller, then, the ancient text holds salvific promise when it is practiced. In practicing yoga as a meditative practice, yogi/ni/s will understand that past or present external authorities are superfluous. Only one’s “pondering of this ancient teaching”<sup>38</sup> is required. In short, Miller’s translation represents a text-focused, internalized, and privatized hermeneutics that cuts itself off from the text’s interpretation history, as it promises individualized salvation to contemporary yogi/ni/s.

Another translation of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* illustrates how this text is appropriated in a cultural, literary, and religious context fermented by the Bible. This one comes from Pandit Usharbudh Arya who published one volume on the Samadhi-pada in 1986. With an indirect reference to the Bible’s Ten Commandments, he asserts: “Yoga science does not lay down commandments, but it requires commitments.”<sup>39</sup> In this statement about what “yoga science”<sup>40</sup> is not, Arya elaborates on what “Yoga science” is. He clarifies that it is “not just a philosophy but, most importantly, a specific method to practice.”<sup>41</sup> This comment is significant because of its terminology. It is not philosophy, the content of the *Yoga Sutra* as such, that characterizes yoga as a “science” but its method. This highly modernist recognition of “method” as the key to knowledge, as established in Descartes’ initial articulation of the scientific method, indicates that Arya’s hermeneutics plays to its audience. Having used a master key to claim intellectual credibility, Arya moves into amorphous territory as he maintains that the *Yoga Sutra* outlines “the path from the gross self to the subtlest Self.” He further states that the *Yoga Sutra* teaches how “gradually to work with the body, breath, and the conscious and unconscious mind.”<sup>42</sup> He classifies the *Yoga Sutra* as a “manual of the yoga practice,” an idea central to his interpretation. He exclaims: “If all the vast traditions of India’s philosophies and literatures were to vanish and the Yoga-sūtras of Patañjali *alone* were to be saved, each of those philosophies and literatures could in time be created again” (emphasis added).<sup>43</sup>

To Arya, the Sutras are “the seed” or the essential key for yogic practice and insight because they link what he calls “science and philosophy.”<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, he does not fully isolate the *Yoga Sutra* from the interpretation history but recognizes a famous medieval commentator, Vyāsa, as equally important when he states: “Patañjali and Vyāsa are regarded by the traditions as *ṛṣihis* [i.e. revealed knowledge], their words are equally authentic.”<sup>45</sup> He summarizes the approximately fifteen Sanskrit commentary versions (pp. 9-12) and acknowledges the interpretation history of the *Yoga Sutra* in Indian literary history. Nevertheless, he also adheres to a literalist-literary hermeneutics when he characterizes the *ṛṣihis* as self-authoritative, self-evident, and requiring no other authority for approval. He emphasizes

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>39</sup> Pandit Usharbudh Arya, *Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali with the Exposition of Vyasa: A Translation and Commentary (Volume 1: Samādhi-pāda)* (Honesdale, PA: The Himalayan International Institute, 1986), xii.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 5.

that they are “not measurable by any yardstick external to divine revelation, but serving as the measure for others.”<sup>46</sup> Overall, Arya considers Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* as the foundation of yoga practice and their self-sufficiency. They form a single text and when they are read as such, questions about dates and authorship are obsolete.<sup>47</sup>

His anti-intellectual stance fits into the Western discourse of religion as it often rejects scholarship as significant in the spiritual quest. For instance, Arya dismisses repeatedly and decisively the manifold “academic speculations that are merely interested in ‘study’ and not in ‘practice’.”<sup>48</sup> He thus contends: “Many scholars fail to comprehend the inner connections among the sutras, as well as their relationship with the steps of a guided practice.”<sup>49</sup> He places “eastern thought” against “an ethnocentric rationalizing mentality which inclines to project everywhere its own need for abstract and absolute logic.”<sup>50</sup> Polemicizing against the West and uplifting the East in this binary fashion, Arya describes his own hermeneutical approach as “accepting the text on its own authority as a complete whole”<sup>51</sup> and as grasping “[a]ll the meanings of different levels of the word...as a single comprehensive whole.”<sup>52</sup> Similar to Miller’s translation, then, the principle of *sola scriptura* shines through his comments. His Western yoga audience will take it for granted, as they implicitly relate to the hermeneutics of *sola scriptura* while they seek spiritual meaning in their lives.

The hermeneutical principle of *sola scriptura* appears throughout his interpretation. For instance, he elaborates on the “traditional” requirements that were applied to writing commentaries on classical Indian texts. Arya’s list includes the “literal translation” of words, “separating original words of the texts where they are combined to form euphony and compounds,” “parsing (explaining the grammatical and syntactical form and function) where relevant or helpful,” “rephrasing and exposition,” and “answering challenges, refuting opposing opinions, and eradicating doubts.”<sup>53</sup> Arya also contends that classical commentaries intended to preserve, enhance, and defend the “truth” of the *Yoga Sutra*. As he aligns himself with these classical requirements. He promises a direct reading experience to those who can relate to his hermeneutical approach from within their Western reading traditions but look to the *Yoga Sutra* for reliable instructions about living spiritually meaningful lives. Interestingly, Arya correlates his reading of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* with the Bhagavad-gita (e.g. p. 24), promising “intuitive” (p. 24) and practical commentary. He aims for usefulness” and “practicality,” and he gives instructions about spiritual enlightenment. This is an irresistible offer to many Western readers who feel disillusioned about their inherited religious traditions and often turn to yoga for spiritual authenticity, depth, and substance.

Many other English translations exhibit similar hermeneutical tendencies and characteristics. For instance, B.K.S. Iyengar offers his literal-personal commentary on Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* stating: “I am neither a learned pundit nor a scholarly academician. To help yoga practitioners with less knowledge than myself, I have introduced several dictionary

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. See also his comment on p. 27: “It [i.e. the philosophy of the Bhagavad-gita] is understood by many illiterate wise men and women, yet not understood by those hundreds who have gained their doctoral degrees by writing voluminous tomes about it.”

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 20.



definitions for each word contained in the sutras. I have selected those which carry conviction for me, in the light of my own firm practice and experience.”<sup>54</sup> A reference to the dictionary seeks to establish intellectual credibility, and mention of his extensive yoga background legitimizes “this manual.”<sup>55</sup> A nod of recognition to Iyengar’s status as “a Brahmin and participant in a genuine lineage of the yoga tradition” gives his translation and commentary “authority” and “authenticity.”<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Iyengar proclaims the meaning of the text itself without substantive references to its interpretative tradition.

Similarly, Georg Feuerstein offers “a word-by-word rendering of Patanjali’s aphorisms of Yoga.”<sup>57</sup> He augments his *sola-scriptura* hermeneutics by asserting that “it is impossible to practice Yoga authentically without first having grasped its metaphysics.”<sup>58</sup> To Feuerstein, the text is primary to the practice, as he promotes “letting the text speak for itself”<sup>59</sup> and grounds his interpretation in “extensive textual and semantic studies.”<sup>60</sup> At the same time, Feuerstein acknowledges that his “translation is willy-nilly an interpretation” because “*all* knowledge is interpretative” and “there are no *hard* facts, and *pure* objectivity is a myth.”<sup>61</sup> He stresses that “the reality which we perceive is always our reality,”<sup>62</sup> and so “our individual process of interpreting the world” is limited and stands in contrast to the “new conceptual world” of yoga knowledge.<sup>63</sup> This hodge-podge of claims about scientific knowledge, individual experience, and anti-intellectualism characterizes this and other English translations of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. It reappears in Jaganath Carrera’s *Inside the Yoga Sutra*, a “Comprehensive Sourcebook for the Study and Practice of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*,” which even includes a “Study Guide” on variously grouped sutras, a “Sutras-by-Subject Index” to facilitate “the focused exploration of a major topic covered by the *Yoga Sutra*...,” and a “Word-by-Word Sutra Dictionary.”<sup>64</sup> Other popular translations highlight their “literal” and “word-by-word” hermeneutics although sometimes they also include intricate and complicated references to the so-called “classic teachings.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras*, xviii. For a similar statement, see B.K.S. Iyengar, *Core of the Yoga Sutras: The Definitive Guide to the Philosophy of Yoga* (London: HarperThorsons, 2012), xxxiii: “I am neither a *Sanskṛta* scholar nor a philosopher. I am purely someone who has been an ardent student of yoga for nearly 80 years, totally involved in the *sādhanā*, exploring its depth to understand the beauty and majesty of this vast ocean of *yaugika* knowledge and its wisdom in tracing the core of the being of the spiritual heart—the soul.... I had a great master in yoga, Śrī Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, who was highly qualified in all the six *darśanas*. He initiated me into yoga at the age of 15.”

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Devereux, “Foreword,” in Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras*, viii.

<sup>57</sup> Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sutra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1979, 1989).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, ix. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>64</sup> Reverend Jaganath Carrera, *Inside the Yoga Sutras: A Comprehensive Sourcebook for the Study and Practice of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras* (Yogaville, VA: Integral Yoga Publications, 2006), 245-292, 293-362.

<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., the comparison between Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* and Siddha Tirumūlar’s Tirumandiram made by Govindan, *Kriya Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Siddhas*, esp. ix, xviii. For a comparison of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* with early forms of Buddhism, see, e.g., Chip Hartranft, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation with Commentary* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 83-88.

Then there are some treatments of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* in English that come from authors who present a sutra-by-sutra commentary without explicitly disclosing their translation principles. Yet even in those translations some of the vocabulary caters to modern Western sensibilities, such as references to the scientific nature of Yoga, its philosophical systems and techniques offered to the "serious student," and the depth of the experiences and experiments going back to "an unbroken line of mystics, occultists, and sages who have realized and borne witness to them throughout the ages."<sup>66</sup> Still others, especially early twentieth-century translations that were republished during the contemporary Western yoga hype acknowledge not only the difficulties of comprehending Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* but also the difficulties of finding equivalents from Sanskrit into English.<sup>67</sup> Still others do not remark sufficiently on their translation principles but refer to yoga masters, such as Krishnamacharya, to acknowledge "oral transmission" as their guide.<sup>68</sup> In general, many English translations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* are based on an orientalist-Protestant hermeneutics that caters to a Western audience familiar with biblical reading assumptions, even if unconsciously.

### **A Comfortable Seat and Other Orientalist-Protestant Assumptions in Selected English Translations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra***

Assumptions of an orientalist-Protestant hermeneutics also exist in individual sutra treatments, as commentators advance their direct, immediate, and presumably unencumbered meanings of the text. Their lack of disclosing their reading strategies and rationale for reading the way they do seems natural to anybody familiar with the hermeneutics of lay Bible study. Presumably contextless, universal, and matter-of-factly interpretations of sacred texts are a hallmark of the modern Western and Protestant biblical hermeneutics. It is also the standard for English-writing commentators on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*.

One of the sutras that is particularly pertinent for contemporary posture practice is found in II.46, one of only three references to asana practice. The small number is remarkable because asana practice is identified with what in contemporary Western terminology is called yoga. The question is how contemporary translators and commentators reconcile this apparent contradiction within their mainly literalist, decontextualized, and universalizing hermeneutical agenda.

As to be expected, they rely on various strategies. Often, they reject connections between asana practice and contemporary "schools of *Yoga*." For instance, Govindan exclaims: "In contemporary schools of *Yoga*, this emphasis on relaxation, comfort and steadiness is often lost, as *Yoga* becomes combined with such things as aerobics and dance, and the emphasis shifts to performance of ever more difficult postures. When divorced from its purpose, postures (*āsanas*) serve the values of contemporary culture: looking good, competition and individualism."<sup>69</sup> To Govindan, this sutra advises to remain immobile in a pose and to be comfortable and relaxed in it for a long time. He also suggests that this basic idea, articulated by Patanjali, was further

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<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., I.K. Taimni, *The Science of Yoga* (Wheaton, Ill, USA/Madras, India/London, England: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1961), vii. I also place the following translations into this category: Satchidananda, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*; Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga: Conquering the Internal Nature: Also Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms with Commentary* (Delhi, India: Bharatiya Kala Prakshan, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., James Haughton Woods, *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1927, 2003), esp. ix-xi.

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., Bernard Bouanchaud, *The Essence of Yoga: Reflections on the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali* (trans. from the French by Rosemary Desneux; Portland, OR: Rudra Press, 1997), xiii.

<sup>69</sup> Govindan, *Kriya Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Siddhas*, 115. Emphasis in original.

developed in Hatha yoga during the twelfth century C.E., elaborating on how “to gain mastery over physical and subtle energetic process.”<sup>70</sup> In his commentary on II.46 Govindan also includes the following practical instruction:

Practice *Babaji's Kriyā Hatha Yoga* in stages and pairs, with relaxation periods in between.<sup>71</sup>

To this commentator, then, asana is meditation, and he places his yoga practice into a particular tradition of meditative practice. Other commentators are even more succinct when they interpret II.46. One of them is Feuerstein who declares bluntly:

For Patañjali, however, āsana is exclusively a meditational aid. By contrast, the majority of postural exercises, developed in Hathayoga, serve an entirely different purpose, namely that of gaining mastery over the physiological processes. Even in the case of those postures which are meant as meditational seats, the physiological side-effects have been carefully noted in the scriptures. In Kriyā-Yoga, posture has to meet two basic requirements only; it must be suitable for immobilizing the body and it must be comfortable so as not to interfere with the ongoing mental concentration.<sup>72</sup>

In Feuerstein's reading of the *Yoga Sutra*, asana is a “steady and comfortable” seat during which the body does not move. Asana facilitates meditation, the goal of yoga, and so Feuerstein distinguishes yoga from posture practice. The latter is the purpose of Hatha yoga, not to be confused with Patanjali's references to asana.

This understanding of II.46 also appears in a “practical” translation and commentary whose authors acknowledge interpreting from “a Vendantist viewpoint.”<sup>73</sup> The authors, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, interpret II.46 in the following way: “Posture (asana) is to be seated in a position which is firm but relaxed.” Then they elaborate:

Asana means two things: the place on which the yogi sits, and the manner in which he sits there.... All that really matters, however, is to take up a position in which one can sit absolutely still and erect, holding the chest, neck and head in a straight line; but without strain, so that one can forget the body altogether.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly, then, these and other commentators elaborate on the two (sometimes represented as three) Sanskrit words in II.46, stressing the definition of asana as sitting in an immobile position. Commenting on II.46 in 1927, but with a republished edition in 2003, James Haughton Woods affirms that “[s]table means motionless,”<sup>75</sup> and then he explains: “The word āsana means either that whereon a man sits [that is, a seat] or the manner in which he sits [that is, a posture]. The lotus-posture is well known.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. For additional information on this kind of yoga, see <http://www.babajiskriyayoga.net/>.

<sup>72</sup> Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali*, 90.

<sup>73</sup> Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali: Translated with a Commentary* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press), 10.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>75</sup> Woods, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 191.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. This last point is repeated in Miller, *Yoga*, 57.

A similar explanation appears in the commentary of I.K. Taimni who focuses on the difference between asana and “physical exercise” when he writes: “In fact, many people who do not know anything about *Yoga* confuse it with these physical exercises.”<sup>77</sup> He suggests that in contrast to Rāja-Yoga, Hatha-Yoga describes asanas in great detail because “[t]he first step in contacting the deeper levels of consciousness is...to make the physical body perfectly healthy and fit for the influx and manipulation of these [subtler] forces.”<sup>78</sup> In his view, Pantanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* goes far beyond this initial stage, which is obvious in its condensed treatment of asana practice in three sutras only. The correctly chosen asana can be practiced in “the right way,” that is the physical body is “fixed in one particular posture and it is found that when it can be kept like this for a long time it ceases to be a source of disturbance to the mind. The posture can then be held “indefinitely” and the body is forgotten “altogether.”<sup>79</sup> It might be up to “four hours and twenty minutes” although the length is insignificant “and gives merely an approximate idea of the length of time for which practice may be undertaken for gaining mastery.”<sup>80</sup> A practitioner sits in asana without movement and the purpose is “essentially on the control of the mind by the Will and the gradual suppression of the *Citta-Vṛttis*.”<sup>81</sup>

Another famous commentator, Vivekananda confirms this view when he writes about II.46:

Now comes Āsana, posture. Until you can get a firm seat you cannot practice the breathing and other exercises. The seat being firm means that you do not feel the body at all; then alone it has become firm.... When you have succeeded in conquering the body and keeping it firm, your practice will remain firm, but while you are disturbed by the body your nerves become disturbed and you cannot concentrate the mind. We can make the seat firm by thinking of the infinite.<sup>82</sup>

Over and over again, asana practice in II.46 is authoritatively defined as a position of the body that facilitates the concentration of the mind in meditation, thus relating not only to the physical seat but also to the mind as firm and steady. In short, many English-writing commentators stress that the quality of asana consists of physical stillness when they discuss II.46: *sthīrasukham āsanam*.

Interestingly and importantly, one translator and commentator differs drastically from this dominant interpretation of II.46. Iyengar, the famous yoga instructor from Pune, India, translates the three Sanskrit words in this way: “Āsana is perfect firmness of body, steadiness of intelligence and benevolence of spirit.”<sup>83</sup> He contends that asana does not include “any comfortable posture” but requires “the perfected āsana” and “the highest quality of attention to

<sup>77</sup> I.K. Taimni, *the science of yoga: The yoga-sutras of Patanjali in Sanskrit with transliteration in Roman, translation in English and commentary* (Madras, India/London, England: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1961), 252.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 252-253.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>82</sup> Swāmi Vivekānanda, *Rāja Yoga (Conquering the Internal Nature; also Patañjali’s Yoga Aphorisms with Commentaries* (Delhi, India: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2010), 139-140. See also Surendranath Dasgupta, *A Study of Patañjali* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1989), 128.

<sup>83</sup> Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*, 157.

perfection.”<sup>84</sup> Most importantly, Iyengar does not accept the notion that asana refers exclusively to sitting poses used in meditation. In his view, “in any āsana the body has to be toned and the mind tuned so that one can stay longer with a firm body and a serene mind.”<sup>85</sup> To Iyengar, this sutra is most important. Accordingly, he offers extensive and elaborate details on the purpose, function, and effect of posture practice, without including further evidence or rationale for his perhaps “even shockingly”<sup>86</sup> unorthodox position.

It requires the analysis of a religious studies scholar, Elizabeth De Michelis, to explain what to do with Iyengar’s interpretation that “seems to bypass innumerable testimonials, beliefs, folk tales and statements scattered throughout the lore of these traditions, all of which insist on the efficacy, worthiness and power of the meditative enterprise.”<sup>87</sup> In her view, Iyengar’s emphasis on “postural orthoperformance” goes back to his Śrīvaisnava roots that make him attempt “to assimilate the Samādhi Model more fully into his Neo-*Hathayoga* system.” His focus on asana practice, as well as on pranayama, fosters a “Neo-Viśistādvaita synthesis.”<sup>88</sup> In this synthesis, so De Michelis, “devotional dedication and concentration (*dhyāna*) on one’s orthoperformative practice substitutes the classical, *samādhi*-oriented sitting meditation.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, Iyengar emphasizes devotionalism in his commentary on the *Yoga Sutra* because “the Iyengar method rests upon a foundation of Neo-Viśistādvaita devotionalism.”<sup>90</sup> This background information remains, of course, unsaid in Iyengar’s commentary, and so most readers will never know the historical, cultural, and religious connections that inform this famous yoga teacher’s interpretation of II.46. Yet it is exactly this lack of background information that allows Western yogi/ni/s to believe in truth outside of culture, politics, economics, and history, as they are seeking to escape their socio-cultural, political, and historical responsibilities of their time and place. I argue that the ease with which a Western audience accepts this lack of hermeneutical accountability has been facilitated, nurtured, and even made mandatory in modern Western teachings about the Bible.

### **Reading Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* as a Cultural Construct: Concluding Comments**

It seems clear that an impressive market for books on Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* exists in Western English-speaking countries. In societies in which institutional religions have lost spiritual credibility, status, and power in the post-Holocaust and post-Civil Rights era, many Western secularized white women and some men of middle-class standing look East in their spiritual quest. Many of them have come to find it in physical posture practice.<sup>91</sup> Individualized, privatized, and body-oriented practices such as “yoga” make it appear “natural” to consult the *Yoga Sutra* because Western practitioners come from Bible-reading cultures in which sacred-text

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* (London/New York: Continuum, 2005), 242.

<sup>87</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 242.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 236, 242.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>91</sup> How much this trend of physical exercise as religion is part of the contemporary Western gym culture in general is an interesting topic that goes beyond this discussion, but see, e.g., Mark Oppenheimer, “When Some Turn to Church, Others Go to CrossFit,” *New York Times* (November 27, 2015), available online: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/28/us/some-turn-to-church-others-to-crossfit.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/28/us/some-turn-to-church-others-to-crossfit.html?_r=0).

study has played a dominant role.<sup>92</sup> Predictably, self-authorizing references in many English commentaries classify Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* as a sacred text endowed with newfound canonicity and authority for contemporary versions of yoga practice that this text is said to have established. In Western Bible-based cultures this argumentation structure that grounds a physical practice in a sacred text convinces ever since Vivekananda and British orientalist applied it to Indian literature in the nineteenth century.

It is interesting to observe the rhetorical struggle over the interpretation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Should this text be read in this or that translation and with whose commentary? Should the classic Indian interpretation history not better be consulted, as, for instance, proposed by Edwin Bryant in his commentary, endorsed even by B.K.S. Iyengar?<sup>93</sup> In fact, Bryant's work could be characterized as a "neo-Catholic" response that embraces the "classical tradition" over against the *sola-scriptura* hermeneutics found in many other translations, as outlined above.<sup>94</sup> Currently, some scholars are trying to bring intellectual integrity back to *Yoga Sutra* translations by providing text-critical editions.<sup>95</sup> It is, however, doubtful that this kind of detailed and cumbersome work will reap the enthusiasm of Western or Eastern yoga communities, if the scholarly interpretation efforts in biblical studies and their impact on Bible-reading religious communities are a guide.

How sincere is this neo-*Yoga Sutra* interest then? One of my yoga teachers asserts, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, that most yoga practitioners do not know anything about the *Yoga Sutra* and that many fast-paced yoga-teacher training programs do not introduce this text. Yet somebody must be buying all of those translations! The personalized, privatized, and universalized hermeneutics prevailing in English translation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* is popular, surely resembling Bible-reading practices in many Christian Sunday schools. The questions are focused on what the text means for my life, how I will get saved, and how I can improve myself as a spiritual person. These are questions that Western readers bring to the Bible and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. That these texts could also be examined in terms of their historical, cultural, and hermeneutical function, status, and power within various geopolitical contexts seems "unnatural" to people socialized into this kind of hermeneutics.

In this sense, then, contemporary Western translations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* stabilize, normalize, and coopt people's sincere quest for spiritual meaning into neoliberal and neo-colonial structures of domination. They make it almost impossible to relate the spiritual quest to the socio-political, cultural, economic, and religious forces shaping their lives. In this sense,

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<sup>92</sup> For a brief discussion on this issue, see, e.g., Melissa M. Wilcox, "Tilting at Windmills: Defining and Predicting Religion," chap. in *Religion in Today's World: Global Issues, Sociological Perspectives* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 1-16 (esp. 3-5).

<sup>93</sup> Edwin Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary with Insights from Traditional Commentators* (New York: North Point Press, 2009).

<sup>94</sup> For instance, Bryant explains: "One must stress, therefore, that our understanding of Patañjali's text is completely dependent on the interpretations of later commentators; it is incomprehensible, in places, in its own terms." He also states: "[T]he task we have set for ourselves in the present work is not to engage extensively in textual criticism but to attempt to represent something of the premodern history of interpretations associated with the school of Yoga as it has been transmitted for, at the very least, fifteen hundred years, and as it has been accepted by both scholastics and practitioners over this period.... One thus has grounds to speak of a tradition, and it is this Yoga tradition that the present commentary sets out to represent through some of its primary expressions prior to the modern explosion of interest in yoga in the West." See Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*. xxxviii, xxxix.

<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., Maas, *Samādhipāda*; Gerald James Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies (Volume XII): Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2008), esp. 161-183.

contemporary interest in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* reinforces longstanding and dangerous mystification processes about people's lives in this world. The question is what to do about it when so many Western people feel a strong desire for spiritual nourishment that insists on a privatized, personalized, sentimentalized, and literalist hermeneutics. It seems more obvious why Indian-Hindu readers would want to restore, refashion, and elevate the *Yoga Sutra* for nationalist aspirations and cultural regeneration within post-colonial India, although a response to these developments is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to reiterate here that contemporary English-speaking translators interpret Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* in a way their readers understand best: they present it as a sacred text that has to be read in isolation from socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious structures of domination as well as apart from its socio-cultural, historical-political interpretation history. They identify in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* a salvific message about spiritual truth and meaning that turns it into a bible for contemporary Western yoga practitioners. This rhetorical-cultural and religious development is not necessarily "good" or harmless as it affirms neoliberal and neocolonial forces of the hegemonic status quo. As similarly witnessed in the interpretation history of the Bible, then, the various English translations and commentaries of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* are part of a cultural construct, a kind of "neo-yogic philosophy,"<sup>96</sup> that helps some people to believe to have found spiritual meaning in their individual lives that is disconnected from the material conditions of the world, and so these interpretations ensure that what people think they have found resembles very much where they have been coming from. But do they want to know?

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<sup>96</sup> Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 217.