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Discernment as an Apostolic Preference: Ignatius, Patanjali, and the Fostering of Interior Freedom

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Abstract

For the next ten years, the Society of Jesus will immerse themselves in what they have identified as their Universal Apostolic Preferences. In this paper, I will focus on the first of these preferences, “Promoting Discernment and the Spiritual Exercises.” I propose that Saint Ignatius’ teaching on discernment intersects with and can be complemented by teachings on the same subject (*viveka*) by Sri Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*. Both of these masterful works offer a practical and experiential path to liberating ourselves from the obstacles that impede us from knowing our True Selves as beings who dwell in the heart of God. I suggest that the popularity of yoga in the United States, specifically as presented by Integral Yoga, provides the Society with an opportunity for engaged outreach to the many young people in educational institutions practicing yoga—whether they are rooted in a religious tradition or not—who have found that it has awakened in them something they might vaguely define as “spiritual.” Introducing these students to Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* in conjunction with Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* has the potential to engage them in ways that the Exercises alone may not.

The Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus

In 2019, after a nearly two-year process of discernment with his brother Jesuits, Arturo Sosa, S. J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, announced Four Universal Apostolic Preferences that will guide the lives and ministry of the Society for the next decade. The Preferences are considered vital areas of focus for the Jesuits, and it is hoped that their concentrated efforts will capture the ardor and imagination of not only the Society but its associates and friends as well. The first of these preferences is “to show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment.”¹

Elaborating on the first preference in a letter addressed “To the Whole Society,” Father Sosa writes that the Jesuits “resolve to offer the Spiritual Exercises in as many ways as possible” so that more people can experience them as a means of growing in intimacy with Christ. He specifically mentions the young as the population who he hopes can be attracted to the Exercises. In his communicate, Father General refers to the opportunity that secular society presents at this moment for the Jesuits, along with the Church, to

read the “sign of the times” in order to “renew their presence in the heart of human history.” Finally, “promotion of discernment as a regular habit for those who choose to follow Christ” is highlighted as a priority and seen as a way of opening up to the Holy Spirit in order to better know the will of God.²

Yoga as a “Sign of the Times”

The popularity of yoga in the United States continues to rise exponentially. Classes can be found everywhere—in studios, health clubs, community centers, hospitals, schools, and universities. From children to senior citizens, from hot yoga to chair yoga, there seems to be something for everyone. On our nation’s campuses, students “de-stress” by “doing yoga.” They bend, stretch, sweat and fold their hands in *namaste* at the end of class. These practices are all good, they are all healthy and they do de-stress, but there is so much more that is being left unsaid.

With so many Americans practicing yoga, or at least rolling out their mat on occasion, it is clear the practice speaks to contemporary hearts. For many, it is their primary spiritual path. As the bedrock of Ignatian Spirituality, the Exercises

have also increased in popularity over the years, becoming a revered retreat experience now available in a variety of formats. Ignatian Spirituality and Yoga is a retreat ministry sponsored by the Midwest Province of the Society of Jesus that integrates the philosophy of yoga (Patanjali's Sutras) with Ignatian Spirituality. Since its inception in 2014, it has been met with an enthusiastic response, a reflection of how yoga, in all its dimensions, speaks to an ever-growing number of Christians. More academic in nature is the Yoga Studies Program at Loyola Marymount University. Hosted by the University's Center for Religion and Spirituality, the program offers students an intensive program of study which includes not only the physical practice of yoga (Hatha Yoga), but an investigation into the other branches of yoga as well.³ Students of Ignatian Spirituality and Yoga and the Yoga Studies Program come from a variety of religious backgrounds and spiritual orientations. Some of the participants have a firmly established Christian identity, but others are on the margins of the Church, struggling to stay connected to the Christian tradition. There are also many participants who have moved on entirely from any religious identity tied to a particular denomination. Generally speaking, organized religion has failed to capture the hearts or imaginations of the college age population; for many, yoga has been able to do so.

But despite the proliferation of yoga in the United States and its growing appeal to large numbers of Christians, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, known as Raja Yoga, remain yoga's best kept secret. While the Sutras are a Hindu text dating back to antiquity, they are astonishingly relevant for our modern day. Compiled some 1,500 years before Ignatius's Exercises, the Sutras offer guidance to those interested in the yogic philosophy, psychology, and practices that support growth into the fullest expression of their personhood.

While finding someone to guide you through the Spiritual Exercises may take a bit longer than finding a yoga class, a spiritual director is easier to find than one might assume. Nearly 500 years old, the Exercises are the bedrock of Ignatian Spirituality. Like yoga, they have increased in popularity over the years, and are a revered directed retreat experience for growing numbers

of people, including faculty, students, and staff on college campuses. Both the Exercises and the Sutras offer time-proven wisdom to those who undertake them with an experienced teacher or spiritual director. With fervor and compassion, Sri Patanjali, Saint Ignatius, and Father Sosa invite us to accompany one another and discern "the way to God" together.

Christians Practicing Yoga

With the steady popularization of yoga in the United States, it was perhaps inevitable that Christians would recognize not only its physical benefits, but also the potential yoga holds for spiritual growth. It is not an uncommon experience for Christians who delve deeper into the teachings of yoga to discover—or rediscover—an interest in their own faith tradition. Yoga often provides its practitioners with a new lens, allowing them to see the religion of their upbringing with a greater appreciation.⁴

As a result of this deeper engagement with yoga, there has been an ongoing conversation among Christians about how to put into language the integration of yogic teachings and practices with their Christian commitment. Some have embraced the word "yoga", while others have tried to keep it at a distance. Yahweh Yoga, Christ-Centered Yoga, and Holy Yoga are three Protestant-founded yoga studios that teach hatha yoga from a Christian orientation, often creating prayer sequences and using Christian language as they move through postures. Others, such as PraiseMoves, promote themselves as a "Christian alternative to yoga," and post content on their website about why they believe Christianity and yoga don't mix.⁵

In 2001, Fr. Thomas Ryan, a Paulist priest and certified yoga instructor, co-founded Christians Practicing Yoga, an organization that has become an important gathering place for Christians of all denominations who are interested in studying, practicing, and teaching yoga in a way that is "rooted in the soil of their own faith."⁶ Father Ryan has put much time and thought into the naming of this organization, with him and his colleagues staying mindful that they don't co-opt yoga or "Christianize" it. The name Christians Practicing Yoga was settled upon with an

acknowledgment that it is not quite perfect, and that the proper language for Christians who find yoga enriching to their faith life still remains elusive. Nevertheless, the organization provides a space for Christians to collectively discern and reflect on how the practices of yoga can help them delve deeper into their faith—especially through prayer, service to others, and participation in the liturgical life of the Church.⁷

Critics of “Christian Yoga”

While Christians may be flocking to yoga studios, their involvement with yoga is not without its critics. In 1989—recognizing the authentic desire of Christians for a deeper and more meaningful experience of prayer—the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church, with the aim of helping them counsel the faithful on various prayer and meditation practices within the “general Tradition of the Church.” Noting the rising interest in Eastern religions and practices among Catholics, the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation” sought to clarify doctrinal teachings. Signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, the letter encourages Catholics interested in meditation to study Christian traditions of prayer and cautions against “fusing Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian.”⁸ Essentially, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reminds Catholics that the structure of Christian prayer is Trinitarian in nature, grounded in the Incarnation of Christ, and rooted in Gospel asceticism.⁹

Hindus have also protested the popularization of yoga in American culture, with some demanding that yoga be recognized as fundamentally Hindu. In 2010, the Hindu American Foundation began a “Take Back Yoga” campaign in an attempt to educate Americans about yoga’s Hindu origins. Aseem Shukla, a co-founder of the Hindu American Foundation, has argued that Hinduism is a “victim of overt intellectual property theft,” and specifically cites Patanjali’s *Sutras* as being a seminal Hindu text.¹⁰

Ignatius, Discernment, and the Spiritual Exercises

The spiritual journey of Saint Ignatius Loyola is well documented. Born in 1491 to a well-to-do family in the Basque region of Spain, Ignatius longed to be a knight and pursued that path until he was injured in a battle with the French when Pamplona was attacked in 1521. During the long months of convalescing, in what might be considered a rudimentary process of discernment, Ignatius felt called to explore religious life. Upon regaining his health, he set off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Stopping at a Benedictine shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Montserrat, Ignatius prayed to the Black Madonna, left his sword at the feet of Our Lady, and set off for the small village of Manresa. In Manresa, he spent long hours in prayer and meditation, experienced mystical visions and was inundated with desires and resistances, interior movement that he would later come to call “*motions of the soul*.” By reflecting on the spiritual insights that came into his awareness, Ignatius began to shape the Spiritual Exercises. As he moved deeper and deeper into his religious vocation, Ignatius eventually established the Society of Jesus and guided them in their apostolates from his seat in Rome. While tending to his nascent religious order, Ignatius edited and refined the Exercises, making them not only the essence of a Jesuit’s spiritual formation, but also promulgating them widely to the laity.¹¹ Central to these Exercises, and thus to Ignatian Spirituality, is the practice of discernment.

Since the time of his conversion, Ignatius aspired to “find God in all things” and to assist others in doing the same. The Exercises were his way of providing a framework for others to orient their lives to God so they could listen for what God might be asking of them amidst the busyness of their lives. The process of discernment, Ignatius teaches, takes place in prayer where one is seriously engaged in trying to know God’s will and to respond “faithfully and generously” to the circumstances in which they find themselves.¹²

Sri Patanjali and The Yoga Sutras

While we know a good deal about Ignatius’ life and the time frame in which he wrote the Spiritual Exercises, we know virtually nothing about the

person of Patanjali. It is generally thought that he was born in India sometime between 5000 BCE and 300 CE. And though he is most often referred to as male, there is really no evidence to confirm even that. Perhaps most likely is that Patanjali was an assortment of gurus all rolled into one, whose body of teachings were first shared with disciples orally, and then later coalesced into what we know today as the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.¹³

In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali offers teachings and practices for discovering the peace that lies within us as our True Nature. Composed of 196 pithy aphorisms, the Sutras serve as a portal to this peace, a handbook to knowing and quieting the mind and thus freeing it from the ignorance that limits our ability to transcend suffering, sorrow, fear, and delusion. Patanjali, too, spoke about discernment, encouraging us to develop a dedicated yoga practice so we can cultivate the wisdom necessary to sharpen our discriminative capacity.¹⁴

Spiritual masters that they were, Ignatius and Patanjali devoted their lives to the support of others searching for peace and fulfillment, inner states that human beings so often find elusive. The Exercises and Sutras are their *magnum opus*, a blueprint for those seeking this peace and pondering the spiritual path that is uniquely theirs to walk. This pondering—this mulling over of the nature of life and the choices before us—is part of the discernment process that Ignatius and Patanjali dedicated much of their teaching to. Patanjali tells us that as we investigate the ways of life, we find that suffering, sorrow, and a persistent feeling of precariousness are intimately interwoven into our experience. For Patanjali, we practice discernment in order to cultivate and refine our capacity for intuitive insight, thereby fostering the vision needed to see life as it really is. To the extent that we can do that, we will transcend our suffering. Ignatius, on the other hand, begins his inquiry into the cause of suffering and internal unease by looking at sin, our turning away from God. Through the Exercises, we come to discover that we bring suffering upon ourselves when our actions and thoughts are out of alignment with Divine intention and our True Nature. Ignatius teaches that discernment is necessary to distinguish between interior movements likely to keep our relationship with

God properly aligned and those more inclined to obstruct it.

Swami Satchidananda and Integral Yoga

A direct disciple of Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887-1963), Swami Satchidananda arrived in the United States from India in 1966, and in a short time was embraced by the counterculture movement that was beginning to emerge in American cities. He founded what he called “Integral Yoga,” an approach to yoga that “synthesizes its various branches into a comprehensive lifestyle system,” presenting it as a combination of physical, mental, and spiritual practices that can be integrated into all aspects of one’s life. Swami Satchidananda became a world-renowned spiritual teacher, meeting over the years with heads of state and religious leaders around the globe, including Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II. There are now over thirty Integral Yoga Centers and Institutes on six continents around the world. An international headquarters and a much-loved ashram are located in the state of Virginia, and includes the Light of Truth Universal Shrine (LOTUS), a meditation hall dedicated to interfaith prayer and understanding.¹⁵

As its many still-active centers attest to, Integral Yoga has been quite successful in introducing yoga to large numbers of people. While its teaching of the yogic tradition is presented in a way that resonates in the West, it has always reached back to the same body of wisdom that Indian rishis have been teaching for millennia. One could say that Swami Satchidananda translated the teachings into the vernacular of American culture, first with young people in the 1960s, and continuing as Integral Yoga grew in popularity, eventually reaching into the American mainstream. He essentially taught by saying “this is how I did it,” believing his followers could adjust the practices to their particular life circumstances, and find the same inner peace and joy that he found—the peace and joy that yoga promises—if they were faithful to the teachings. When asked to define Integral Yoga, Swami Satchidananda said that it was a path that led to an “easeful body, peaceful mind, and a useful life.”¹⁶ This simple and holistic approach to yoga, and its respect for all religious traditions, has attracted many thousands of people to Integral Yoga over

the years. It is an approach that I believe shows considerable congruence with the goal of Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises.

Ishvara & the Question of God

While Swami Satchidananda's teaching of the Yoga Sutras is oriented towards a devotional theism, it is important to note that there are different opinions in the Raja Yoga tradition on whether the question of God is even addressed in the Sutras. Patanjali does introduce the term *ishvara*, or "Lord," in Sutra 1:23, though commentators on the text don't always describe the word "Lord" in a way that a Christian would recognize as the God of their religious understanding. There is nothing in the Sutras that describes God as being the Creator of all, or personified as loving, compassionate, and merciful, as a Christian would believe.¹⁷ Rather than a transcendent Creator, the word *ishvara* is defined by some as a "purusha," or pure consciousness. Patanjali expounds on devotion to *ishvara* in several Sutras (1:23-1:27), explaining that this self is unsurpassed in omniscience, a teacher (*guru*) to the most ancient teachers who is unrestricted by time, and the bearer of eternal wisdom. Represented by the sound OM, *Ishvara* is the humming of creation, and manifests to this primordial sound.¹⁸ *Ishvara*, then, can be said to have no name or form associated with it. But for teachers of Integral Yoga, *Ishvara* can be a Divine being that one can project any name or symbol onto. It is "where all ideas associated with God are concentrated." *Ishvara* is any form that possesses the Divine qualities of love, peace, immortality, and justice. Thus, in these two ways of understanding *Ishvara*, we see a polytheistic view of yoga, one that highlights the multiple meanings that yoga can have for different communities of practitioners.¹⁹

Jesus as *Ishta Devata*: Surrendering to the Beloved

As stated above, Integral Yoga teaches a system of yoga that is theistic in its orientation. Its approach to the question of God can best be understood by looking at the word *ishta devata*, one's preferred or chosen deity. While there is no mention in the Sutras of a particular deity to whom one should direct personal devotion, in Hinduism, there is

one Absolute God with many deities manifesting this one Reality. Spiritual seekers are free to choose a deity they wish to venerate and worship. Following this tradition, Integral Yoga encourages their students to explore a relationship with a form of God that is meaningful to them and that they can devote themselves to. Obviously, for Christians, Jesus as God incarnate is where their devotion is focused. Jesus is their *ishta devata*—their Chosen Ideal, their beloved, and the one they choose to serve and try and surrender to. Jesus is the one they bow to, the one in which they "live, move, and exist."²⁰

Saving Souls and Ending Suffering — Starting from Different Places

While one can find many intersections between the Sutras and the Exercises, they are nevertheless fundamentally different texts with different purposes. As Ignatius tells us in the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises, its purpose is to "save souls," and we are saved through living lives that "praise, revere, and serve God."²¹ The Exercises serve as an aid to the nurturing of a person's inner freedom. They begin with cultivating a deep awareness of God's infinite love and mercy, and from there developing a sense of one purpose in life, a knowing of where meaning can be found, and how to contribute in some way to the common good. The freedom that Ignatius helps a person realize allows them to consider truthfully the questions presented periodically throughout the Exercises: *What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?*²² This new-found interior freedom, fueled by the Holy Spirit, moves us to be active participants in God's ongoing creation—co-creators so to speak—and provides an opportunity to draw closer to the Christ mystery through an incarnational view of the world. This yearning to move nearer to God, and the reorienting of one's life to do so, is what Ignatius hoped exercitants would experience as they go through the Exercises.

While Ignatius wrote the Exercises to "save souls," the Yoga Sutras were compiled to teach us how to identify the causes of our suffering, and then to ameliorate them by radically altering the way we perceive the world in which we live. For Patanjali, it is not the outside world that

necessarily causes our suffering, but our limited perception of how life works. The Sutras can be seen as a guidebook, one that offers insights into human nature, an understanding of how the mind works, and the reasons why we suffer. It shows us how to free the mind so that our decisions lead to healthier and happier lives, lives that reveal the beauty and power of our True Nature.

In the Integral Yoga tradition, surrendering to God—*Ishvara Pranidhana*—is presented as a devotee’s heartfelt desire to put themselves completely in the presence of their chosen deity and serve them. However, the term is meant differently in nontheistic interpretations of the Sutras. “Surrendering to the Lord” refers not to God in these interpretations, but to a meditation practice, the attempts to focus a wandering mind on a particular object. While a Christian would believe that benefit comes to the practitioner by the grace of a Divine source, nontheistic interpreters of the Sutras believe that the benefit is simply the result of focusing on *ishvara* as an object of meditation.²³ For a Christian, *Ishvara Pranidhana* would include the idea of total devotion and self-surrender, the dying to self that is necessary for self-transformation. Christians well-versed in scripture know the many different ways Jesus spoke about dying to self and surrendering to the Father. Near the end of the Exercises, Ignatius teaches us the *Suscipe Prayer*, helping us to verbalize our desire to more completely surrender our lives to the Lord.

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding
and my entire will—
all I have and all I possess.
You have given it to me; I return it, Lord
to You.
Everything is Yours; dispose of all
according to Your will.
Give me Your love and Your grace; for
me that is enough. (SE No. 234)²⁴

Saint Ignatius and the Discernment of Spirits

As stated above, in the beginning of the Exercises, Ignatius has us pay attention to the effects of sin, both personal and systemic, to understand how it creates a disharmony within us and separates us from others. He then guides exercitants through

the stories of the Gospels, highlighting how Jesus’ teachings lead to a more intimate encounter with God and inevitably to greater inner peace. We learn from Gospel narratives that we are unconditionally cherished by God and that we already possess the peace that Jesus spoke of; in fact, we are that peace. Praying through the Exercises serves to weaken the entrenched thought patterns that prevent us from believing this. As we move through the days of the Exercises, our hearts are cleansed and sanctified from any long-simmering emotional muck that obscures our knowing that we are receptacles of the indwelling Spirit of God. The Exercises are a path to remembering our true identity as one in union with the image and likeness of the Creator, and thus in union with all creation. As a nondual consciousness emerges, the freedom to love becomes infinitely greater, and an orientation towards the common good undoubtedly matures and broadens.

The process of discernment, the way we come to make decisions in our lives, occupies a place of paramount importance in the Exercises. From his autobiography, we learn that Ignatius’ insights into discernment began to germinate while he was recovering from battlefield injuries, a time in which he read voraciously about the lives of the saints. While reading, he noticed how his heart would stir and feel more spacious when he fantasized about emulating their great feats and devotion to God. He also noticed a feeling of apathy when his imagination had him once again wearing the armor of a knight. Writing in the third person, Ignatius states:

When he thought of worldly matters, he found much delight; but after growing weary and dismissing them, he found that he was dry and unhappy. But when he thought of...imitating the saints...he not only found consolation in these thoughts, but even after they had left him he remained happy and joyful.²⁵

Ignatius identified the spirits that were moving within him as either “good spirits” or “evil spirits.” He noticed that thoughts from “good spirits” left him feeling peaceful and satisfied, or what he called “*spiritual consolation*.” This experience left Ignatius with a zeal to glorify God and to love and

serve those around him. Contrarily, when “evil spirits” dominated his thinking, he was disquieted, and left wrestling with feelings of melancholy and discontent, or what he referred to as “*spiritual desolation*.” In this state, Ignatius felt isolated, withdrawn and separated from those around him. Ignatius saw the movements in our hearts as a battle between our desire to lead virtuous lives and our propensity to be lured in other directions. While his sixteenth century language of spirits and devils may sound anachronistic to our modern ears, we get the idea—the movements in our hearts are to be acknowledged and examined assiduously. We need to sharpen our insight into what it is we most truly yearn for: *what is it that we really want? What is God calling us to do? Who is God calling us to be?* In the Exercises, Ignatius introduces a process of self-inquiry to assist us in determining if we are moving toward God in the case of a benevolent spirit, or away from God by a spirit more perfidious in nature. The “discernment of spirits” is a means by which to reflect on and better understand the complex assortment of longings that stir so deeply in our hearts.²⁶

In writing the Exercises, Ignatius sought to help others experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit for themselves, and thus, live with a newfound spiritual freedom. For Ignatius, the Exercises are intended “to overcome oneself and to order one’s life, without reaching a decision through some disordered affection.”²⁷ From his personal experience, Ignatius observed disordered affections within himself, and named them as anything that gets in the way of our interior freedom and ability to act from a place of authenticity. Thus, to order one’s life requires self-knowledge, an appreciation for who we truly are, and an understanding of how our actions either draw us closer to union with God or create a feeling of distance for us. This distance, recognized by a feeling of spiritual desolation, is the cause of our suffering.

Through his teachings on discernment, Saint Ignatius shows us how to listen for the movement of the Spirit in our daily experience. Whether our daily routine is extraordinary, mundane, or somewhere in between, Ignatius encourages us to pay attention to how God might be speaking to us through the people and events in our lives. An important part of the discernment process is

recognizing our attachments, including our attachments to life unfolding in a certain way for us. Discernment is also necessary so that our attachment to personal desires and preferences are not mistaken for being the same as what God desires. The Exercises are designed to free us from these attachments, or what Ignatius called “unhealthy attachments,” so that we can discern how to “praise, revere and serve God” wholeheartedly.²⁸ Patanjali, too, cautions that our attachments can interfere with our ability to discern effectively. To enter a process of discernment without being properly unattached from personal predilections can lead to decisions based on the desires of the ego rather than Spirit. Being free from attachments, or *vairagya*, allows our decision-making process to be unhampered by any selfish desires of the ego.²⁹ The more selfless we become, Ignatius and Patanjali assure us, the more skillful our discernment becomes.

Patanjali and *Viveka*

Patanjali’s exploration of painful experiences as the nature of life, as well as his insights into the cause of our suffering, lay the foundation for his thoughts on discernment. Because a practice of discernment allows for Truth to be recognized and for an understanding of the impermanent nature of all objects and circumstances, it will change the way we proceed through life. A practice of “uninterrupted critical discernment” is crucial if we are to move towards lives that are peaceful and fulfilling.³⁰

For Patanjali, ignorance is the reason we suffer, both on an individual and societal level. He defines ignorance by stating that its primary characteristic is “regarding the impermanent as permanent, the impure as pure, the painful as pleasant, and the non-Self as Self.” He tells us the Self is eternal, unchanging and omnipresent, and that it is the very substance of existence. Though all things reside in the Self, ignorance causes us to see them as being different objects.³¹ Thus, discernment is needed to probe the nature of ignorance as false identifications with our body and mind. Patanjali goes on to reveal how to disentangle ourselves from this fundamental misunderstanding of who we really are. As we unknot ourselves from this false identity, we

experience ourselves as divine spirit (Purusha), residing in the wholeness of the Absolute. Patanjali introduces his thoughts on discernment in the second section, or *pada*, of the Sutras (2.26). *Viveka* is the Sanskrit word for discriminative discernment, and Patanjali states we must be uninterruptedly engaged in it to remove ignorance (*avidya*). *Viveka* is our ability to “see” clearly.³² This is a vital component in overcoming the false perception of life that keeps us in ignorance and mired in suffering. The conception of ignorance as an obstacle to interior freedom is first explored in Sutra 2.3, where it is introduced as one of five so-called afflictions, or *kleshas*, that prevent us from realizing the peace and joy that is our True Nature (the others being: egoism, attachment, aversion to anything we perceive will bring discomfort, and clinging to life).³³

In other words, ignorance and the rest of the *kleshas* are the reason for our pain and suffering. With the *kleshas* blocking the recognition of our True Self, we begin to identify with the self of the body-mind, the false self. Therein lies our problem, for the false self convinces us that we are just an individual spirit separate from the Universal Spirit. To stay on the path to union with the Absolute God, we must learn to discriminate between the Real and the unreal, the permanent and the impermanent, and the Self and the non-Self. The good news is that the wisdom we need to do this is already within us—and we can help it emerge by working to remove the *kleshas*, our impurities, which block its availability to us. These impurities can be removed by practicing the eight limbs of yoga (Sutra 2:29) which in turn allows our innate wisdom to become more accessible. The wisdom that emerges from practicing yoga *leads* to *viveka*, and as a result augments our ability to remove the ignorance which keeps us from recognizing who we truly are.³⁴ As we chip away at ignorance, our suffering slowly diminishes, and space is created for interior freedom to establish its reign.

The Eight Limbs of Yoga as a Path to Discriminative Discernment

By the practice of the limbs of Yoga, the impurities dwindle away and there dawns the light of wisdom leading to discriminative discernment (Sutra 2:28)³⁵

Patanjali offers the eight-limbs of Yoga—a combination of ethical precepts, personal observances, meditative techniques and physical postures—as spiritual practices that cultivate a mind that is still and single-pointed (Sutra 2:29).³⁶ The peace and fulfillment we seek is achieved by nurturing this stillness and mental clarity (Sutra 1.2).³⁷ Our spiritual practices, our *sadhana*, serve to burn away the impurities that are the *kleshas*. No matter what our practices are, be they Christian, yogic, or from any other spiritual path, our commitment to them helps dismantle the false-Self. Spiritual practices are essential if we are to release the attachments and cravings we have for things and experiences that convince us true happiness lies outside ourselves. As is true for all *sadhana*, practicing the various limbs of yoga for “a long time, without break and with enthusiasm” will serve to loosen the chords that prevent us from transcending our egos and growing into our fullest potential (Sutra 1.14).³⁸ Our practices cultivate an understanding, a *knowing*, that although life is always changing, it is permeated with an essence, a basic Truth that is unchanging, constant and eternal. A practice of the Eight Limbs of Yoga serves to reinforce one’s ability to discern discriminatively.

Ignatius also recognized how critically important detachment is for growth in spiritual life. At the beginning of the Exercises, in what is called the Principle and Foundation, Ignatius guides retreatants in considering the immensity of God’s sustaining love, not only for them as individuals, but for creation in its entirety. It is here that Ignatius encourages prayer for a spirit of detachment, or what he called “indifference.” He tells us to pray not for things that serve our own interests and desires, but only for what contributes to a more intimate relationship with the God who created us in His own image. Thus, whether we experience health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a life of many years or few, we are to remain indifferent and unattached to it all. We should desire only to love more and serve God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.³⁹

While Patanjali’s Eight Limbs of Yoga provide time-honored practices for liberating ourselves from suffering, Ignatius did not propose specific spiritual practices upon completion of the

Exercises. However, exercitants do learn various forms of prayer and are encouraged to continue with the ones that resonate most deeply. Prayer and service to others also burn away the kleshas. The Ignatian *Examen*, for example, is a simple prayer designed to increase our awareness of God's presence in our daily experience. Cultivating an awareness of the Divine presence alone can begin to chip away at the suffering imposed by the kleshas. The *Examen* is particularly helpful in refining our discernment skills.

It is important to note, though, that whether we dedicate ourselves to the Eight Limbs of Yoga, the *Examen* or any other spiritual practice, our practices do not by themselves lead to progress on our spiritual paths. Our spiritual practices serve to purify us by *removing the obstacles* that prevent the uninhibited growth into our fullest and truest Self (Sutra 1:30). By polishing away our impurities, our innate wisdom is given a chance to emerge. Only then can discriminative discernment as a method to remove ignorance becomes possible.⁴⁰

Discernment & Right Relationship to Faith Traditions

In putting forth their Apostolic Preferences, the Society expresses its desire to “gain a deeper experience of the Exercises,” to offer them “in as many ways as possible” and to dialogue with other religions and cultures.⁴¹ Yoga, while not a religion, emerged alongside Hinduism and Indian culture, and is widely popular among North American Christians. These “Christian Yogis” provide a potential opportunity for the “spiritual conversation” that the preferences hope to establish. Just as Zen teachings have been integrated into the Exercises for retreatants interested in this approach, so too can the teachings of yoga, with Patanjali's Insights on discernment being particularly applicable.⁴² Expanding outreach to practitioners of yoga would allow the Society to offer their presence and lineage to those they are unlikely to meet through traditional church circles. Both Ignatian spirituality and the spirituality of yoga have shown that they appeal to a wide variety of affiliated, nonaffiliated, and disaffected Christians, many of whom are Catholic. These varied populations are without question a ubiquitous presence in yoga studios. They are also found in large numbers on

college and university campuses, and among those served by Jesuit apostolates and social ministries.

Because the physical postures of yoga balance the body and mind, open the heart, and enhance one's overall sense of well-being, new practitioners of yoga, whether they are religiously oriented or not, are often surprised to discover an awakening of their spirituality. For some, this awakening is the initial impetus to begin exploring other facets of yoga, such as meditation, sacred chant, or the study of classical texts, such as the Yoga Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita. For others, the spiritual opening created by a regular yoga practice serves to illuminate their own religious tradition, or perhaps one they left behind, in a fresh way. For example, they may notice both their mind and heart opening anew to the faith tradition they once struggled with, and a willingness to reconsider it, maybe even return to it, albeit with an added yogic perspective. Other yoga practitioners remain uncertain about just what to do with the stirring of their Spirit, and the questions that inevitably come with this feeling. Ignatius and Patanjali have much to offer these seekers as they consider how to integrate what they learn and experience on their yoga mats with the religion of their upbringing. Learning the process and skills of discernment would prove invaluable in determining how to be in right relationship to the faith tradition they were reared in, whether they return to practice it or not.

Two Traditions, One Mystery

To incorporate the teaching of viveka or any of the other yoga sutras into one's experience of the Spiritual Exercises is not to deny the real differences between the two traditions. Most obvious is the Christocentric nature of the Spiritual Exercises and the fact that they were designed specifically to nurture a greater intimacy of a retreatant's relationship to Christ. This orientation begins to take shape in the Second Week of the Exercises when exercitants imagine themselves accompanying Jesus as he preaches and ministers in the towns and villages of Galilee. As the retreatant's love for Jesus grows, so does their desire to serve him by working in some capacity to bring about the reign of God—a world built upon love, compassion, and justice.⁴³ It is the nurturing of this relationship with the person of

Jesus that moves the disciple to contemplatively consider a new way of living, a new way of *being*. But for Ignatius, both our desire for change and our ability to do so is always a result of God's grace, poured out through the Holy Trinity. The Exercises are designed to help us ask for this grace, to receive it open-heartedly, and then to surrender to it faithfully. Ultimately, it is through grace that we encounter the desire and muster the courage to undertake the journey which leads to a greater intimacy and union with God. We can know something of the Triune mystery, Ignatius teaches, by drawing close to the person of Jesus, and being attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit animating and permeating the entire creation.

Practicing the Teachings: Walking with Ignatius and Patanjali

Like so many other Christians who practice yoga, I find that despite fundamental differences between the two traditions, they can nevertheless complement each other. I am a practicing Catholic who completed the Ignatian Retreat in Daily Life (the 19th Annotation) several years ago. I am also a long-time student and practitioner of yoga. While I am mindful of syncretism, my personal experience is that Patanjali and the teachings of yoga have given me a much greater appreciation for my Christian faith, making it vastly richer and more meaningful. Ignatius has played a similar role in my life. For me, the Exercises were an intimate walk with Jesus and a deep encounter with his teachings. There is a personal nature to God, Ignatius counsels, embodied in the love and compassion of the historical Jesus, the Word incarnate. The retreat is heart-centered, leading to a deep sense of gratitude for the gifts of God, and a strong desire to respond in some fashion to the love and generosity that God constantly bestows. The Sutras, on the other hand, have helped me to better understand the nature of the world and the nature of the mind. They have provided me with practices to cultivate a greater harmony within myself and have served to reveal the limitations that dualistic thinking puts on my propensity to love.

In a four-part series written for *America Magazine*, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Parkman Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, reflected on a

seminar he taught on the Yoga Sutras that integrated insights from Saint Ignatius's Exercises. Clooney has us consider that throughout the Sutras, Patanjali is teaching how to develop a single-pointed concentration on an object of our attention in order to restrict the constant movements of the mind, *vrittis*, that lead to a false sense of identity (Sutras 1.2-1.4). Patanjali never identifies what the object should be, but encourages various practices such as meditation, detachment, and an ingrained routine designed to dissolve the ignorance that clouds the knowing of the true Self. (Sutra 1.12-1.16). It is this same refinement of attention, Clooney notes, that Ignatius is trying to foster in the Exercises, with Jesus himself being the object of meditation for retreatants.⁴⁴

Notwithstanding the fostering of attention emphasized in both the Exercises and Sutras, Clooney cautions us not to think that the two texts are the same in their worldview and goals. The Sutras are ambiguous about a Divine Source and present devotional practices as an *option*. The Exercises are designed around an incarnational faith and the Incarnation as being a central tenet of Christian belief and practice. But most importantly, I think, Clooney ends his reflection by looking at who a person might *become* as a result of their encounter with Ignatius or Patanjali. That person would be completely at peace, free from attachments and selfish expectations, and living completely for the other. When this "utter simplicity" (Clooney's translation of *kaivalya*—absolute freedom, independence, liberation; aloneness, separation of the true self from matter) and clarity of vision is reached, there is "nothing left but us seeing God and God seeing us."⁴⁵ It is to arrive in the luminosity of such a moment that I keep struggling to keep up my practices and refine my attention to be always fixed on Lord Jesus.

A Call to Conversion

*"The Universal Apostolic Preferences are a call to conversion. They are an invitation to rethink how we live, how we work, and how we relate to the people we serve."*⁴⁶

Just like the Universal Apostolic Preferences, the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius and the Yoga Sutras of Sri Patanjali are a call to conversion. They are an invitation to examine our lives, raise

our consciousness, and grow in love and service to others. Both works have indisputably proven that with the skillful guidance of a spiritual teacher, they can offer a path to greater peace, happiness, and fulfillment. Skillful discernment, as taught by Ignatius and Patanjali, is a key practice if we are to transform how we live, work, and make ourselves available to serve those around us.

Pedro Arrupe, S.J., the superior general of the Society of Jesus from 1965 until 1983, taught that there can be no true discernment without a radical conversion of our whole person. To be radically converted means to undergo a profound inner transformation, one in which we put away our “old self”—attitudes, habits, behavior, ways of thinking, and anything that prevents us from seeing life “steadily and whole”—and put on, as Saint Paul says, “the new person,” the fully committed disciple of Christ. Sounding like both Patanjali and his spiritual father, Saint Ignatius, Arrupe states that emerging as this new person necessarily involves letting go of personal desires, cravings and attachments, so that we acquire a fresh vision and begin to see the world “with the eyes of the Spirit.”⁴⁷ It is this new vision that will allow us to transcend our suffering and experience the interior freedom that Ignatius and Patanjali so very much want for us.

Conclusion

The Society’s Apostolic Preferences for 2019 through 2029 seek to make the Exercises available to a greater number of people, especially the young. The widespread popularity of yoga among young people and others provides an “in” for the Society to potentially reach new segments of the population. Ignatian Spirituality and Yoga has been applying the teachings of Saint Ignatius to yoga practice for several years now, and has laid the groundwork for the Exercises to continue to be introduced to those who experience with yoga has piqued their interest in spirituality. The Exercises and the Sutras complement each other and when offered together by trained teachers immersed in the traditions, can hold considerable appeal to those “who choose to follow Christ.”⁴⁸ Both present a practical path to personal transformation and each encourages continuous discernment as a means for growing in Self-awareness, making wise decisions and avoiding

suffering. A conversation among yoga practitioners and religious and laypersons rooted in Ignatian spirituality is already taking place, and there is ample evidence to suggest that growing numbers of people are interested in deepening the exchange. The theistic orientation of Integral Yoga makes this tradition especially suited to be part of the conversation.

The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are spiritual classics that have withstood the test of time. Innumerable seekers worldwide continue to turn to these texts to find meaning and purpose in their life. The wisdom of Ignatius and Patanjali, especially their teachings on discernment, offer us a paradigm shift in the way we perceive ourselves and the world in which we live. Their guidance supports us in the self-reflection that is so critical to wise discernment. By providing us with the means to better understand both ourselves and the nature of the universe, these two masters show us a path to the freedom and peace that is the aim of all our spiritual searching.

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Notes

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