Imagine a dinner conversation between guests – one secular, 'spiritual but not religious,' sexually active, the other deeply religiously observant, possibly Christian, and celibate until marriage. How can we make them both nervous during our hypothetical discussion? Talk about yoga. That may sound extreme; after all, in describing modern transnational yoga, scholars cite universalism as a core feature. There are physical practices for all abilities and meditative techniques for the masses. Yoga's effects are verified by science, and it's practiced by people of all faiths. It would be inconceivable to envision being asked at a yoga studio, if we were religious, or even more taboo, if we were sexually active! Yet when we examine yoga's history, we see that it existed alongside religion, and had distinct opinions on sexuality.

Back to our dinner discussion: is yoga religious? The secular guest practices modern postural yoga and is suspicious of religion. For her, yoga is secular. The religious guest also practices but worries it conflicts with her beliefs: she has heard yoga is its own religion. To examine these claims and yoga's modern secular universalism we'll explore yoga's history and pre-modern religiosity, starting with Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*, the influential early common era compendium, first highlighting two of the *Sūtra's* "overlooked ethics."

The text outlines an eight-limbed path – *aṣṭaṅgayoga* – restraints, observances, posture, breathing, inwardness, concentration, meditation, and total absorption. The system's ultimate insight is the liberatory realization of the eternal Self as distinct from the material world of suffering. The first limb, ethical restraints, offers tenets like non-violence and truth, as well as celibacy, *brahmacarya*. Patañjali's path leads to liberation from suffering caused by attachment,

like to sex. Here, sexuality is acknowledged as powerful. Celibacy allowed practitioners to redirect that power.

The second limb, observances, offers precepts like contentment and discipline, but also devotion to a lord, *īśvarapraṇiḍhāna*,. This proof of yoga's historic theism is complicated. Though the Hindu tradition considers this text part of its corpus, scholars have noted its Buddhist and Jain influences. Further, *Īśvara* is not a specific Hindu deity but a non-sectarian lord and special soul, *puruṣa-viṣeśa*, free from the suffering of human life. In leaving this element open to interpretation, Patañjali showcases yoga's historical fluidity. Here, devotion is to one's chosen deity, *iṣṭa-devata*.

Yoga was part of the Brahmanical Hindu religious culture *and* specific sectarian movements within it like Vaiṣṇavism, evidenced in the yoga of devotion of the *Bhagavadgītā*, and Śaivism which credits Śiva as the the original yoga teacher *Ādinātha*. In these contexts, devotion to God always signified a specific deity, and although these traditions counted numerous celibate ascetics, householders practiced as well. Yoga advocated devotion and control of sexuality, but how that was imagined varied greatly depending on the audience.

Yoga was also part of the Śramaṇical religions Buddhism and Jainism. While celibacy was integral for monks and nuns, neither recognizes an ultimate god, so yoga here does not demonstrate theism. This malleability reveals yoga's complex origins: it was consistently reinterpreted and repackaged, so it's difficult to attribute ownership to one single religion. While

our modern religious guest may be right in proclaiming yoga's religiosity, its adaptability was perhaps a more pronounced feature.

Medieval *Haṭhayoga* saw the development of physical techniques that partially anticipated modern forms of postural yoga. Practitioners sought to preserve *bindu*, the nectar of immortality, said to drip from inside the skull and be lost through ejaculation. The redirection of energy through the retention of sexual fluids led to power and liberation, including through techniques like *vajrolīmudrā*, that involved drawing liquids back inside the body instead of ejaculating. Yet, many of the same texts suggest that householders could also practice, indicating yoga's shift to inclusivity for the non-ascetic. Ethnographic research on modern Indian sadhus reveals that although most practice celibacy for spiritual progress, they agree that non-renunciates may practice postural yoga for wellbeing. While our secular guest may be surprised to learn of yoga's historical interactions with religion, *haṭhayoga* specifically shows yoga's capacity to be streamlined for lay audiences.

So, should our religious guest release her misgivings after learning of yoga's adaptability and occasional emphasis on chastity and devotion to God? Should our secular guest, having learned how closely yoga was associated with religions and celibacy stop practicing? These questions of yoga, religion, and secularity arose in a lawsuit brought by parents against the Encinitas school district, who sued to stop yoga from being taught in public schools. Though the courts ultimately sided with yoga, finding the program in question not to be religious, Professor Candy Gunther Brown concluded that modern yoga is often both secular *and* religious and advocated an opt-in model of informed consent.

Studying history is the process of gaining that information. Divorcing yoga from its religious ties may make it more palatable for a modern audience nervous about practicing something at odds with their beliefs or those who eschew religion. But glossing over yoga's historical context robs contemporary practitioners of the opportunity to consider questions of divinity, spirituality, and sexuality in a nuanced way within the non-sectarian and non-judgmental space of yoga.

To fully understand yoga's relationship with religion, sex, and spirituality and who can and should practice, we need to invite a diverse group to the dinner conversation, perspectives both historical *and* modern: a pre-modern celibate renunciate ascetic committed to full-time religious practice. A bhakti yogini practicing yoga as a theistic devotional tradition, a Jain nun or Buddhist monk whose perspectives show the impact of sexual restraint, though not devotion to God. Or someone like French Benedictine monk Jean-Marie Dechanet, who considered yoga to be a spiritual tradition worthy of use alongside Christianity. Perhaps even Swami Kuvalayananda, whose work was integral in bringing yoga and modern scientific research together, assisting in moving it towards the secular space it now occupies. Today one need not be specifically religious, secular, or celibate to practice, but it's only through understanding yoga's historical fluidity and multiplicity around religion that we may inform ourselves, realize yoga's capacity to elicit transformation, and remove the taboo from our dinner conversation.