

VATICAN WARNS AGAINST PRACTICING EASTERN MEDITATION

By Victor L. Simpson

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VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican has cautioned Roman Catholics that Eastern meditation practices such as Zen and yoga can "degenerate into a cult of the body" that debases Christian prayer. "The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be 'mastered' by any method or technique," said a document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The 23-page document, signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, approved by Pope John Paul II and addressed to bishops, said attempts to combine Christian meditation with Eastern techniques are fraught with danger although they can have positive uses. Cardinal Ratzinger, the head of the West German congregation, told a news conference this week that the document does not condemn Eastern meditation practices, but elaborates on guidelines for proper Christian prayer. By Eastern methods, the document said, it was referring to practices inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism such as Zen, Transcendental Meditation and yoga, which involve prescribed postures and controlled breathing. Some Christians, "caught up in the movement toward openness and exchanges between various religions and cultures, are of the opinion that their prayer has much to gain from these methods," the document said. But, it said, such practices "can degenerate into a cult of the body and can lead surreptitiously to considering all bodily sensations as spiritual experiences." The document defined Christian prayer as a "personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God." Such prayer "flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in a spiritual privatism." Attempts to combine Christian and non-Christian mediation are "not free from dangers and errors," the document said. It expressed particular concern over misconceptions about body postures in meditation: "Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. "Giving them a symbolic significance typical of the mystical experience, when the moral condition of the person concerned does not correspond to such an experience, would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations." The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is the Vatican's watchdog body for doctrinal orthodoxy. The document did not name any particular individuals, groups or religious movements that have strayed in the use of Eastern meditation practices but the congregation often acts in response to complaints.

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