

Article

A Preliminary Genealogy of Yoga in Italy: Between Religion and Contemporary Spirituality

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Abstract: In this article, we design a preliminary genealogy of yoga in Italy, showing its positioning within the growing field of “contemporary spiritualities”, their premodern, esoteric and theosophical roots and Catholicism. Our main claim is that yoga and contemporary spiritualities as practiced in XXI-century Italy are neither entirely new nor are they clearly an alternative to more established religions. We rely on the methods and tools of a “discursive study of religion” approach to unpack the intricacies, genealogical roots and definitional boundaries that yoga, contemporary spiritualities and religion in Italy share. More specifically, we question the novelty of contemporary spiritualities in Italy, unveiling some of their esoteric, theosophical and anthroposophical roots, presenting, in turn, a preliminary genealogy of yoga in Italy, discussing its positioning amid Catholicism and contemporary spiritualities. We conclude by reflecting on the creation, use and limits of sociocultural theorizing about interpreting and understanding the spiritual and religious field, with a specific emphasis on the overlapping and porous boundaries between the concepts of religion, contemporary spiritualities, Western esotericism and modern yoga.

Keywords: religion; spirituality; contemporary spiritualities; modern yoga; crossing boundaries; yoga in Italy



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1. Introduction

In this article, we craft a preliminary genealogy of yoga in Italy,¹ a largely unexplored case study, showing its positioning within the growing field of “contemporary spiritualities” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020), their premodern, esoteric and theosophical roots and Catholicism. Our main claim is that yoga and contemporary spiritualities as practiced in XXI-century Italy are neither entirely new nor are they clearly an alternative to more established religions. As we shall clarify, yoga in Italy is first, an ideal-typical example of those processes of continuity and transformation between past and present, or tradition and the ‘new’ (Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Foxen 2020; Singleton 2010) that animate the continuous redefinition of the internal logic of practice of the spiritual and religious field in Italy; and second, it exemplifies the porous boundaries between both established and emergent sociological categories such as religion, spirituality, Western esotericism and modern yoga as addressing, simultaneously, distinct yet partly overlapping social phenomena (Di Placido 2021; Granholm 2011; Palmisano and Pannofino 2020; Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022). In this respect, the case study of yoga in Italy contributes, simultaneously, to the debate over the ‘crises’ of religiosity and spirituality in contemporary societies as well as the questioning of conceptual boundaries between distinct yet potentially overlapping sociological categories.

Although the implications of our argument extend beyond the Italian context, we agree with McGuire (2008, p. 12) that the social practices and the discourses of religion and contemporary spiritualities are “lived in a particular time and cultural setting” (McGuire 2008, p. 12) and that “religion [as well as spirituality] exists in a social context, is shaped by that social context, and, in turn, often influences it” (McGuire 1997, p. xiii). The same holds true also for yoga, as Geoffrey Samuel (2008, p. 186) aptly clarifies:

“To make sense of such a historical complex and varied phenomenon as yoga, it is, however, essential to retain as much awareness as possible of the social environment and historical specificity of each specific context within which it was adopted and transformed. In this way, we can begin to give meaning to each of these various forms of yoga, and to understand them within the life and culture of those who created them and shaped them”.

Delving deeper into such a contextual dimension is particularly important when approaching the study of religion, contemporary spiritualities and yoga in Italy, a country until recently portrayed as almost monolithically Catholic (Pace 2003, 2021) and in which “Catholicism [. . .] pervades many sectors of social life and maintains its influence over common values” (Cipriani 1993, p. 91). However, Italy has always had a history of different beliefs and social practices, including esotericism and occultism, a plethora of New Age and New Religious Movements (NRMs) and a fascination with Asian religions, attracting commentators to inquire into Italy’s surprisingly favorable environment for religious minorities (Introvigne 2001).

Today, the Italian religious and spiritual field is characterized by an increasingly religious pluralism and the progressive legitimization of new forms of spirituality, both as religious expressions and as scholarly objects of analysis (Di Placido 2022a; Garelli 2020; Palmisano 2010; Palmisano and Pannofino 2020, 2021). As correctly argued by Roussou (2021, p. 5), “the presence of alternative spirituality in countries like Italy, Spain and Greece has become apparent, claiming an important role within the religious landscape of European countries that have been directly linked to Christian belief”.

In this article, we rely on the methods and tools of a “discursive study of religion” approach (von Stuckrad 2003, 2010, 2013) and on our expertise in the study of yoga and contemporary spiritualities in Italy. We unpack the intricacies, genealogical roots and definitional boundaries that yoga, contemporary spiritualities and religion in Italy share. More specifically, Section 2 presents our methodological and theoretical arsenal; Section 3 zooms onto the discussion of contemporary spiritualities in Italy, questioning their novelty and unpacking some of their esoteric, theosophical and anthroposophical roots; Section 4 presents a preliminary genealogy of yoga in Italy, discussing its positioning amid Catholicism (Section 4.1) and contemporary spiritualities (Section 4.2); Section 5 concludes the article by reflecting on the creation, use and limits of sociocultural theorizing about interpreting and understanding the spiritual and religious field, with specific emphasis on the overlapping and porous boundaries between the concepts of religion, contemporary spiritualities, Western esotericism and modern yoga.

2. The Genealogical Approach and the Discursive Study of Religion

Genealogy, in the social and human sciences, is the attempt to reconstruct a “history of the present” (Foucault 1977, p. 3), unveiling how at the roots of our understanding of, let us say, religion, contemporary spiritualities and/or yoga, are not immutable truths but specific sociocultural contexts that contribute to the crystallization, in time, of a specific vision of the social world (Asad 1993; Dubuisson 2003; McCutcheon 1997). A genealogical research method applied to religious and spiritual phenomena is, thus, intrinsically deconstructive as it attempts to demystify ahistorical and “essentialized” understandings of the spiritual and religious field, challenging monolithic representations of its object of study. This is an important task as it allows sociologists to put on hold the explanatory power of their analytical categories and appreciate their socially constructed character.

As correctly argued by Horii (2019, p. 25) in his discussion of the relationship between the birth and development of the sociology of religion in post-Enlightenment France and in Imperial Germany, “whereas ‘religion’ is a [W]estern folk category whose equivalent cannot be found in many parts of the world, the category was historically imposed upon these places by [W]estern colonial powers”. Similarly, Taira (2013, p. 26) underlines that religion is “an empty signifier in the sense that it is historically, socially and culturally constructed and negotiated in various situations”². Naturally, similar reflections are still valuable in

relation to less established concepts such as spirituality (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022), Western esotericism (Granholm 2011) and modern yoga (Di Placido 2021), which, similarly to the concept of religion, have their roots in Western *dispositifs* of knowledge production and their orientaling gaze.

The second and most important aspect of a genealogical approach is that it shows the interdependence between concepts and categories (the labeling and objectifying power of language) and the social phenomena they address. In other words, the genealogical method acknowledges the productive power of language and discourse to create that of which they speak (Hjelm 2020; Moberg 2013; von Stuckrad 2013; Taira 2013, 2016). As Granholm (2011, 787) correctly notes, building on Hanegraaff's seminal work on esotericism:

"A researcher interested in doing sociological studies on esotericism [or on contemporary spiritualities and yoga for that matter] does well to bear in mind that the esotericism of academic research is a scholarly construct; in Hanegraaff's words, it is 'not "discovered" but produced' (Hanegraaff 1998, p. 16). The researcher should not make the mistake of searching for 'the true essence' of esotericism; there simply is not one. It is the choices and delineations of the researcher that construe the field, not the other way around (Hanegraaff 1998, pp. 13–18; 2004, pp. 489–91). This is, of course, the nature of all scholarly definitions".

As a consequence, it is important to bear in mind that the preliminary genealogy of yoga in Italy that we trace in this article is in itself the result of an interpretative and largely social constructionist effort. In fact, as Moberg (2013, p. 12) correctly remarks, "it is also worth noting that it is quite possible for different researchers to identify different recurring key elements, different discourses, and different relationships between discourses, in any particular body of material." In other words, what we trace in the following is only one among a plethora of possible genealogies of the development, diffusion and adaptation of yoga in Italy, one that emphasizes its relationships with theosophy and anthroposophy, Catholicism and the landscape of "contemporary spiritualities" (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020).

Genealogy is also one of the pillars of the "discursive study of religion approach", "a growing—although still marginalised—perspective within religious studies and the sociology of religion" (Di Placido 2022b, p. 61). This approach, in the interpretation offered by one of its leading proponents (von Stuckrad 2003, 2010, 2013), develops at the intersection of the sociology of knowledge and Foucault's historical analysis of discourse as a "hermeneutical discipline that scrutinizes and historicizes the societal organization of knowledge about religion" (von Stuckrad 2010, p. 5). Here, a genealogy of yoga in Italy implies specific attention to those defining discourses that traveled, were reinterpreted and adapted to continuously changing doctrinal, social and cultural contexts, especially in light of yoga's positioning within the growing field of "contemporary spiritualities", their premodern, esoteric and New Age roots, as well as the dominant religious paradigm of the country, Catholicism.

Following these genealogical sketches, we frame, contrary to the mainstream approach in the sociology of religion to date, "the individualized practice[s] of contemporary spirituality as a form of practising religiosity that has always existed in the context of both alternative forms of spirituality and institutionalized religions" (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 9). Similarly, as we shall show in the following, the presence of yoga in Italy is not so much a novelty of the XXI century but rather the result of complex processes of readaptation, development and acculturation of themes, practices and philosophical word-views already inherent, at least in part, in premodern, esoteric and New Age spiritualities from which modern yoga emerged (Di Placido 2021). The point, in our view, is not so much the innovation of new or alternative forms of spirituality or yoga as discrete social phenomena per se, but their only recent acceptance as legitimate objects of study worthy of sociological scrutiny alongside traditional forms of religiosity.

The empirical material discussed in this article and subjected to our genealogical gaze, largely constituted by online sources and yoga teachers' biographies, is coupled with four years of ethnographic research on the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga conducted by the

first author and the longstanding engagement within the field of contemporary spiritualities of the second author. These immersive, often participative, fieldwork experiences allowed us to contextualize the largely discursive focus of this article within a “practice approach” (Ammerman 2020), which in turn helps to show how social actors’ “lived religion” eschews neat matching with scholarly categories, unveiling instead, as we shall argue in Section 5, their porous boundaries and potential overlaps.

In the following section, we explore in more detail what contemporary spiritualities in Italy look similar to, questioning their new or alternative status *vis-à-vis* earlier religious and spiritual formations in the country.

3. Contemporary Spiritualities in Italy: How ‘New’ Is the ‘New’?

The study of contemporary spiritualities in Italy is a particularly intriguing field because it allows the exploration of the trajectory of development, evolution and hybridization of contemporary spiritualities, yoga included, in a cultural context that is still marked by a strong Roman Catholic heritage and yet is also profoundly changing (Garelli 2007; Berzano 2023; Palmisano 2010). As Palmisano and Pannofino (2020) underline, for instance, in the Italian context, many “spiritual but not religious” (Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014) individuals who understand their spirituality as being distinct from traditional religion rely on the lexicon, values and symbols of Catholicism, “which they transpose to the new spiritual universes with which they are experimenting” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020, p. 82). As we shall argue in Section 4.2, this is also the case with the practice of yoga in Italy, which is often intertwined with and not perceived as being in contrast with one’s own Catholic heritage and sometimes even promoted by Catholic groups as a means to reach the heart of Christ’s message. In the Italian case, “the construction of spiritual identity, even for those who distance themselves most from the traditional Catholic system of beliefs and practices, is not detached from, but is rather built in relationship with, Catholicism” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020, p. 78)³. These reflections, as we shall expand in Section 5, suggest that “[r]eligion and spirituality, however, do not seem to us to be understood as terms in alternative, and therefore with a zero-sum relationship; rather, they should be placed in the perspective of distinction, rather than separation” (Giordan 2004, 114), especially when dealing with the Italian case and its specificities.

The multifaceted nature of the Italian spiritual and religious field to date is not only due to recent changes (secularization, pluralism, the emergence of new and alternative spiritualities) but is also the heritage of its obscured esoteric, occultist and spiritualist past (Mapril and Blanes 2013, p. 4). As Melton (1987, pp. 47–48) correctly argues “the blossoming of the alternative religions in the 1970s is not so much a new event in Western culture as the continuation of the flowering of occult mysticism and Eastern thought that began in the nineteenth century”. The example of the diffusion, development and pervasive cultural influence of esoteric movements such as the Theosophical Society and the Anthroposophical Society in Italy (both closely linked to the reception of yoga in Italy and elsewhere) is a poignant case in point. As correctly argued by Pasi, “[t]heir impact on the world of new spirituality in Italy went far deeper than their membership numbers would suggest, and both movements had a marked influence on various intellectual, literary, artistic, and political milieus” (Pasi 2012, p. 81).

3.1. Theosophy and Anthroposophy

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by esotericists of the caliber of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and William Quan Judge (1851–1896), among others, with the purpose of establishing a “universal brotherhood” based on the hidden teachings and practices of all major religious traditions, among which Hinduism, Buddhism and yoga featured prominently⁴. Through its largely positive reception among the upper and middle classes of an emerging transnational network of supporters (scholars, practitioners and curious alike), by the early XX century, the Theosophical Society had established itself internationally and flourished in

a plethora of local lodges. As Pasi underlines, “there were Italians in contact with the Theosophical Society [already] during its first years of existence, but it was not until the 1890s that conditions were ripe for an organized presence of the Society on Italian soil” (Pasi 2012, p. 86). By 1902, “there were enough lodges and members to obtain permission from the international leadership to found an autonomous Italian Section with headquarters in Rome” and centers began to open “in many Italian cities including Florence, Milan, Naples, Bologna, Turin, Pisa, and Genoa” (Pasi 2012, p. 88), with many others in the following years. As Singleton discusses (2010, pp. 32, 45), theosophical explanations of *nāḍis*, *cakras* and *prāṇa* (key components of the subtle-body model of *Hatha Yoga* and later inherited by a multitude of New Age practices) as well as the early translations of *Hatha Yoga* texts published by the Theosophical Society, highlight the gatekeeping role that the movement had in the popularization of yoga practices and literature for both Eastern and Western audiences interested in world religion, esotericism and spirituality.

Shortly afterwards, deeply influenced by the Theosophical Society itself, the Anthroposophical Society was founded in Cologne (Germany) in 1912 by the Austrian occultist and social reformer Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), who, in 1902, had already acted as general secretary of the Theosophical Society. The purpose of the Anthroposophical Society was, and still is, to support individuals’ spiritual growth and development. Originally, Anthroposophy attracted people who had been previously attached to the theosophical movement but who gradually, and for a variety of reasons, became dissatisfied with it. “Steiner’s lecturing tours in various European countries often included Italy, and this certainly helped in spreading the Steinerian movement in the country in its early stages” (Pasi 2012, p. 97)⁵, although the eruption of WWI greatly impacted the diffusion of anthroposophy in Italy.

However, the esoteric and occultist milieu at the beginning of the XX century in Italy was not merely influenced by these “imported” movements, but “the emergence of an Italian ‘way’ to esotericism . . . is in fact also connected to the concept of a Hermetic-Italic school that took shape during these years in Giuliano Kremmerz’s (pseudonym of Ciro Formisano, 1861–1930) circle, and to that of a Pythagorean-Italic tradition that was later elaborated by Reghini and his associates” (Pasi 2012, p. 89). Moreover, “the wish to rediscover an esoteric tradition that was specifically Italian led some members of the Italian Section [of the Theosophical Society] . . . to study the Neoplatonic and Hermetic flowering of the Italian Renaissance” (Pasi 2012, p. 89), that is, according to Anya Foxen’s (2020) research, integral parts of what she names Western Harmonialism, a line of thought that from ancient Greece, through Hellenism and the Renaissance, to our days, concerns itself with the attempt to harmonize the microcosm of an individual’s life (read as body, mind, and spirit) with the macrocosm of nature or of the cosmos itself.

Consequently, both the Theosophical Society and Anthroposophy Society found fertile ground in Italy for their adoption, adaptation and circulation thanks to the presence on Italian soil of subcultural enclaves and esoteric movements with deeper historical roots. More specifically, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism and Harmonialism, among other movements, as embraced and magnified during the Italian Renaissance, exposed the Italian artistic *avant-garde* to concepts, ideas and imaginaries that were in turn repropounded by the Theosophical Society and Anthroposophy themselves in the following centuries. In other words, these earlier movements of the esoteric matrix can be aptly described as accounting for Karl Baier’s (2016) analysis of “welcoming structures”, that is, favorable elements that facilitated the development, spread and evolution of theosophy and anthroposophy in Italy.

Most notably, as Antonio Girardi, current general secretary of the Italian Theosophical Society and director of the Italian Journal of Theosophy, argues:

“Probably certain characteristics of the Theosophical Society, such as its culture of hospitality, intellectual curiosity, and ever-sensitive attitude to build bridges between East and West, have fostered this process . . . should be kept in mind that in the theosophical journals we find ample trace of the theme of Yoga”. (Personal communication, 23 May 2023)

However, theosophy's early notorious enmity with the Roman Catholic Church, despite its admiration for the figure of Jesus Christ, signified that its impact hardly went beyond the sociocultural elites of the time. In 1919, theosophy was officially banned by the Pope as a heresy (Guénon [2003] 2004), although, as Robert Ellwood underlines (Ellwood 2012), in theosophy there was also a pro-Catholic stance next to Blavatsky's anticlericalism. This more positive reception of Christian thought is epitomized by texts such as Anna Kingsford's (1846–1888) and Edward Maitland's (1824–1897) *The Perfect Way, or the Finding of Christ* (1882) (Kingsford and Maitland [1882] 2017) and Annie Besant's (1847–1933) *Esoteric Christianity: Or the Lesser Mysteries* (1901) (Besant [1901] 1902), where theosophical interpretations of Christianity, often in line with Christian mysticism, were advanced, thus showing the ambivalent standing of theosophy towards the Church, its doctrines and its less institutionalized forms.

3.2. Enchanted Worlds of Nature, Wellbeing and Mystery

This brief sketch of the esoteric and spiritualist past of *fin de siècle* Italy coincides with and reinforces Palmisano and Pannofino's understanding of spirituality. They argue that:

“Spirituality is only partly new, given that it amply rediscovers traditional themes from Gnosticism, Occultism and Hermeticism; and only partly alternative because its history is interwoven with that of institutional religion, of which it represents the mystical aspect, and because it establishes exchanges and assimilation with mainstream culture”. (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020, p. 4)

From a sociological perspective, the concept as well as the lived aspects of spirituality blur the boundaries between the spiritual and the corporeal and the spiritual and the material, granting “new” or “alternative” ways to experience the sacred that are not necessarily mediated by sacred texts, religious authorities or codified rituals steeped in traditional religions. These processes of decentring from traditional religion were already inherent in movements such as Theosophy and Anthroposophy and earlier esoteric, occultist and spiritualist movements, not to mention Christian mysticism itself, thus showing the deeper historical roots of today's contemporary spiritualities in Italy. Following Palmisano and Pannofino (2020), however, some of these new ideal-typical manifestations of contemporary spiritualities in Italy are the *enchanted worlds of nature, wellbeing and of mystery*.

The enchanted worlds of nature, represented by the development of ecovillages, green spiritualities, neo-Pagan movements and contemporary shamanism, postulate the sacredness of nature as the privileged *locus* for and means to the access of immanent or transcendental relationships with the divine. The spiritualities of well-being, exemplified by the explosive diffusion of practices such as yoga and mindfulness meditation, among a plethora of other holistic mind-body practices, aim “at the development of human potential and reaching a condition of health and salvation for the body, the mind and the soul” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020, p. 112) of the practitioners. The spiritualities of mystery, in turn, focus on the search for and the “tremendous” facets of the sacred. Practices such as mediumship, ghost haunting, astrology, fortune telling, chiromancy, radiesthesia, hypnosis for past-life recall and alchemy make of “inexplicable events, miracles, monsters and legendary places” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020, p. 134) with the *locus* of spiritual endeavors on the border of this world with its laws and the heart of mystery itself. Similarly to the ways in which earlier esoteric movements pivotal to the Italian Renaissance functioned as welcoming structures for the development, adaptation and adoption of theosophy and anthroposophy in Italy, the latter also acted as mediators and facilitators of the emergence of the New Age and, in turn, contemporary spiritualities on Italian soil. As a consequence, it is possible to preliminary answer the provocative question of how ‘new’ is the ‘new’, suggesting that in the case of contemporary spiritualities in Italy we are facing new elaborations, representations and forms of practice of older themes and practical-discursive repertoires that have characterized, since centuries and in some cases millennia, the largely untold story of non-Catholic forms of spirituality in premodern, modern and contemporary Italy.

In the following section, we will provide a brief genealogy of yoga in Italy, discussing how yoga relates, conceptually and in practice, with the dominant religion of the country and each one of the types of emergent spiritualities discussed by [Palmisano and Pannofino \(2020\)](#).

4. Yoga in Italy: A Preliminary Genealogy

Amid these forms of contemporary spiritualities, we focus upon the rise of “modern postural yoga” ([De Michelis 2004](#)) in Italy, “a form of yoga based on the reiterated performance of a series of postures often synchronized with the breath” ([Di Placido et al. 2022](#), p. 2). The study of yoga in Western countries, and more specifically in Italy, where the Catholic religion is still dominant despite signs of transformation, is eloquent of those processes of reinvention, change and adaptation of tradition where elements from Western Harmonialism, esotericism and varied physical cultures intermingle with practical-discursive elements of Asian forms of knowledge and Western science and medicine ([Alter 2004](#); [De Michelis 2004](#); [Foxen 2020](#); [Singleton 2010](#); [Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop 2021](#)). In Italy, although data on the number of practitioners are unreliable, it is possible to see a gradual increase in interest, with about 2 million practitioners (30 percent of whom are men), 20,000 centers throughout the country (especially in the center-north, with an increase of more than 100% since 2010) and a generated income of nearly 200 million euros.⁶

As our preceding analyses testify, the spread of yoga in Italy found fertile soil in those social, cultural and professional milieus that were already familiar with and inspired by the teachings of Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Important figures such as Maria Montessori (1870–1952) and Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974) are perfect examples of how these movements encouraged the exploration of yogic philosophies and practices in disparate contexts such as education and psychiatry. Montessori, for instance, spent WWII in Adyar, India, at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society. As Lucetta [Scaraffia \(2002, p. 84\)](#) correctly underlines, “This was not a superficial adherence: Montessori’s pedagogical thought, her philosophical-feminist writings bear considerable traces of theosophical influence” and, we would add, of yogic concepts and practices. It is telling that yoga and Montessori pedagogy are still to date substantially equated, as both are framed as a “process of discovery”⁷. Here, “Yoga teaches people to breathe, relax, and become more flexible. The Montessori Method helps children refine their fine motor and social skills. Combined, yoga and the Montessori method are extremely beneficial for children”⁸. Assagioli, in turn, was a Freemason and wrote a preface to Patanjali’s *Yogasutras* (regarded as one of the foundational texts of modern forms of yoga by scholars and practitioners alike) and his approach, known as psychosynthesis, was imbued with references to yogic philosophy as filtered through the influence of the British esotericist and theosophist Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949), with whom he shared discipleship under the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul, also known as Master D.K. ([Bailey 1971](#)).

Beside the impact of yoga concepts and philosophy as filtered through theosophical teachings, among the pioneers of yoga in a stricter sense, influential teachers and popularizers such as Carlo Patrian (1930–2005) and the Belgian André Van Lysebeth (1919–2004) merit a special mention. The former, similarly to many of his generation, was attracted early on by the writings of Yogi Ramacharaka, (pseudonym of William Walker Atkinson, 1862–1832) and began to devote his life to the study of esotericism and yoga following the teachings of Swami Sivananda’s (1887–1963) Divine Life Society ([Strauss 2005](#)). Already in 1949, Patrian published his first book on hypnosis and, in 1954, founded one of the first yoga centers in Italy. In 1965, he funded the Yoga Institute (Milan), where he hosted several Swamis from overseas, promoted a neo-Vedantic reading of yoga and simultaneously stressed its therapeutic and medical potentials ([Patrian 1965](#)). For example, in 1975, the Institute hosted a course entitled ‘Yoga and Medicine’, which focused on anatomy, physiology and dietary regimes in *Haṭha Yoga*. As one anecdotal source puts it, Patrian claimed that many high-profile doctors would send patients to his Institute for integrative care and that the Institute, in turn, shared its progress in medical yoga with “all the doctors in Milan” ([Mannarelli 2019](#)). Patrian traveled extensively to India between 1968 and

1973, where he studied yoga and Hinduism and had a very prolific publishing career. He published *Yoga* in 1965 for the Sperling and Kupfer publishing house and other books on esotericism: *Nostradamus: the Prophecies* (Patrian 1978), *Hypnotism, Magnetism and Suggestion* (Patrian 1988) and *Nostradamus: Prophecies for the year 2000* (Patrian 1995), thus showing the persistent link between his interest in yoga and esotericism.

André Van Lysebeth (1919–2004), in turn, studied yoga with some of the most influential teachers of the XX century, such as the abovementioned Swami Sivananda from, whom he had received epistolary teaching since 1949, and later K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009), considered the father of what today is known as *Ashtanga-Vinyasa Yoga*. Later in his life, Van Lysebeth turned to tantric teaching, becoming one of the first voices to circulate tantric ideas on Italian soil. Van Lysebeth's literary production was prolific, and his yoga manuals, translated into many languages, greatly contributed to the diffusion of yoga in Italy. As Antonietta Rozzi (2016), Honorary President of the Federazione Italiana Yoga (FIY), underlines, Van Lysebeth's books such as *Learning Yoga* (Van Lysebeth 1975) and *Perfecting Yoga* (Van Lysebeth 1978) became "actual best-sellers" and an increasing number of students started following the Belgian teacher during the summer courses and seminars he hosted in Belgium, Switzerland, Spain and Italy. Moreover, upon the invitation of Swami Sivananda himself, Van Lysebeth launched one of the first European yoga magazine in 1963, tellingly entitled *Yoga*⁹.

Some of Patrian's and Van Lysebeth's students, such as the already mentioned Antonietta Rozzi, Antonio Nuzzo and Walter Ruta, are among the most recognized Italian yoga teachers, in Italy as well as abroad. Antonietta Rozzi, supervising teacher at the Training School for Yoga Teachers, teaches yoga pedagogies at the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Universities of Bologna and Bolzano. She is a member of the International Commission of international experts on the promotion of global health programs through the practice of yoga and she was also the first Western yoga teacher to receive from the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi the 'Prime Minister Awards for Outstanding Contribution of Promotion and Development of Yoga 2019' (Nuzzo 2019). She is also the founder and current president of Sarva Yoga International (founded in 2005), the first non-Indian association accredited by the Indian Government as a leading yoga institution authorized to offer yoga teacher training (TT) certificates recognized by the Indian government itself¹⁰.

Antonio Nuzzo, born in Cairo (Egypt) to a Lebanese mother and an Italian father, started practicing yoga very young (age fifteen) and in 1969 was already initiated into "traditional meditation" by Mataji Hiridayananda, disciple of Swami Sivananda. One year later Nuzzo, met the largely influential Van Lysebeth, whom he followed for the next fifteen years, delving deeper into the traditions of *Hatha* and *tantra* yoga as thought and transmitted by his teacher. From 1977 onwards, Nuzzo dedicated himself mainly to teaching and training yoga teachers both in Italy and abroad, among other honorific titles and roles, such as being the only Italian observer at the first constitutive assembly of the European Union of the National Federations of Yoga (UEFNY) and one of the main actors in the founding of the Federazione Italiana di Yoga (FIY), of which he acted as president from 1977 to 1987. It was during this period that he also opened the first yoga school specifically dedicated to the training of yoga teachers, the Istituto Superiore per la Formazione di Insegnanti Yoga. In 2019, he published *The Gifts of Yoga to Practice a Full Life*, where biographical remarks, hagiographical elements and yoga philosophy and techniques are masterfully interwoven into a captivating narrative of yoga and its transformative potential.

Walter Thirak Ruta, in turn, studied under the tutelage of Carlo Patrian and, later on, also Claudio Conte. He is still delving deeper into the study of yoga practice and texts together with the Italian teachers Paolo Magnone, Stefano Piano, Marilia Albanese, Giuliano Boccali and abroad with Pandit Lav Kumar Sharma and Tara Michael. As it is possible to read in his biography, Walter Ruta is "devoted" to the teachings of Sri Satchidananda Yogi (1914–2022) and travels regularly to India to the Sri Vasavi Yogashram of Madras and the Sri Yoga Ashram of Vizag. Besides teaching regularly at the Scuola Yoga Pramiti (Ventimiglia),

he conducts seminars in Italy, France, Portugal, Switzerland, Germany and Morocco and can boast quite an extensive bibliography, composed of both yoga manuals and articles where he shares his religious, esoteric and physical expertise and vision of yoga¹¹.

Additionally, other teachers and institutes played a central role in the development, diffusion and interpretation of yoga in Italy, among which it is important to mention the Centro Yoga, funded by Gianni Bovini in Liguria in 1962; Centro Yoga Florence, founded by Antonio Naim in 1964; Academia Yoga, founded in Rome in 1969 by Giorgio Furlan; the Federazione Italian Yoga, founded in 1974 in Milan; the Centro Studi Yoga, founded by Barbara Woheler in Rome in 1981; and the YANI-Yoga Associazione Nazionale Insegnanti, founded by Claudio Conte, Ornella Rizzo, Gabriella Sojan and Luisa Calvino in 1999 in Milan. These centers represent, to this day, the beating heart of the birth and development of yoga teaching and practice in Italy, next to the plethora of centers, schools and teacher training protocols that developed incessantly in the following decades.

4.1. Yoga and Catholicism

Given the specific religious features of the country, an important aspect of how yoga is adopted, adapted and hybridized with religions other than Hinduism in the Italian context stems from its inclusion within the practices of Catholic groups and individuals. Key actors and groups are, in this regard, Father Gentili, Father Gian Vittorio Cappelletto (1928–2009) and the famous Benedictine Monastery of Camaldoli, among a plurality of other actors and experiences. These, as we shall now briefly discuss, built their understanding of the encounter between yoga, Hinduism and Catholicism on the experiences of earlier pioneers and spiritual entrepreneurs such as Father Jules Monchanin (1895–1957), Father Bede Griffiths (also known as Swami Dayananda, 1906–1993), Father Henry Le Saux (also known as Abhishiktananda, 1910–1973), Father Thomas Merton (1915–1968), Father Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010) and Father Anthony de Mello (1931–1987), who greatly influenced the *mélange between Catholicism, yoga and Hinduism across geographical contexts, Italy included*.

Father Antonio Gentili is a Barnabite and resides at the Casa per Ritiri Spirituali di Eupilio (Como), where, next to the religious liturgy and ritual structure of the Barnabite order, he teaches and practices both meditation and *āsana*. Next to this, Father Gentili regularly supports the yoga teachers Mari Colombo and Alessandro Cravera with the teaching of meditation, substituting them when they are not available for the transmission of postural practice. He has published several books on yoga and meditation, among them *The Reasons of the Body. Life Energy Centers in Christian Experience* (Gentili 2007) and *Seek the Silence. You will find yourself and God* (Gentili 2019) testifying to the readaptation of the theory of *cakras* within a Christian vision of salvation as well as the aid that meditation is seen to offer to one's path towards God.

Father Gian Vittorio Cappelletto was a Jesuit, artist and founder of the Ricostruttori nella Preghiera (Palmisano 2012), a syncretic movement of Christian and Hindu inspiration that over the years was the object of repeated accusations, from plagiarism and unsupervised therapeutic practices that forced control over their members and a paedophilia scandal associated with a high-ranking affiliate of the group (Radoani 2015). As the story goes, Father Cappelletto encountered the practice of yoga and meditation through a monk belonging to the contested international movement Ananda Marga, which offers a synthesis of Vedantic and tantric teaching and has its Italian headquarters in Verona, a city in the region where Cappelletto was deployed during the time of their serendipitous meeting. As his biography underlines:

Cappelletto goes through a period of great travail that is not a new aspiration toward recollection and prayer makes its way. It is a fact that in the Venetian city [Mestre, near Venice], the Jesuit meets an Indian monk who introduces him to the practice of deep prayer, and from this encounter, a new course of life, foreign to the world of art, begins for him. For three years, Father Cappelletto attended monthly conferences and retreats organized by the Indian monks; in the summer of 1977, he went to India and the monks he met there invited him to spread

meditation among Western Christians and to rewrite the Gospel with his own life. The following years saw him engaged in realizing the delivery he had received¹².

The Ricostruttori adopted and adapted the practices taught by Ananada Marga, structured around personalized *āsana* practice, tantric meditations based on mantra chanting and visualisations and *kirtan*, that is, singing and dancing to the guru, or in Christian terms, God. In so doing, the Ricostruttori reframed these practices in the light of the tradition of hesychasm structured around “the invocation of the Name of Jesus, or other short mantric-type formulas taken from the Holy Scriptures, the ability to gather the mind around itself, to unify it and to usher it inward”¹³. At the moment, Father Guido Alberto Bormolini is leading the movement, continuing to consider the “heritage of the disciplines and practices of the Far East [. . .] a reliable support in the journey in the direction of the treasures found in the Christian tradition”¹⁴.

The Benedictine Monastery of Camaldoli is one of the most productive and well-known instances of the meeting between yoga and meditation and Christian thought and seekership. According to the vision promoted by the monastery “the rich spiritual tradition that comes from Oriental religions” is a valuable aid to the processes of meeting Christ within and encountering the radical otherness of the divine:

Yoga, understood as a method that helps the practitioner in this process of emptying and surrender that leads from the whirling of our thoughts around ourselves to a calmness of mind, open to encountering the Other, is a valuable tool for deepening our religious experience, our prayer and our understanding of ourselves¹⁵.

The yoga offer provided by the monastery is largely in the hands of Father Axel Bayer, a Camaldoli monk, long-term yoga and meditation practitioner and Himalayana Yoga Institute (HYI) yoga and meditation teacher. Father Bayer teaches open weekly *Hatha Yoga* classes and organizes residential courses (from two to four days) in Introduction to Silent Meditation, Silent Meditation—Level II and Silent Meditation—Level III, dedicated to the transmission of both the theory and practice of meditation¹⁶. We could synthesize his approach in the words of Bede Griffiths (Swami Dayananda) regarding the importance of merging Hinduism and Catholicism:

“What is called into question today is not a particular form of religion; but religion itself, and only the ecumenical movement among religions and the effort of each to accept and appreciate the truth and holiness found in other religions can meet modern man’s need for religiosity”. (Griffiths 2003, p. 30)

We have tried to enrol in the Introduction to Silent Meditation course, but we were informed that the Monastery’s yoga and meditation offer is fully sold-out for many months ahead, testifying to the success of Father Bayer’s teachings.

Preoccupation about the meeting between Catholicism and yoga also comes from the Roman Catholic Church. Father Gabriele Amorth (1925–2016) for instance, Catholic priest, exorcist and founder of the International Association of Exorcists, provided one of the most radical critiques so far. He denounced that “even seemingly harmless Eastern practices like yoga are sneaky and dangerous” as “you think you are doing it for relaxing purposes, but it leads to Hinduism”. Father Amorth considers this very problematic as “all Eastern religions are based on the false belief of reincarnation”, that is, they are false religions. More spectacularly, Father Amorth has provocatively argued that yoga—as much as Harry Potter’s books and movies—is indeed Satanic, generating critical pushbacks from the broader Italian yoga community¹⁷. Nevertheless, despite Father Amorth’s radicalism, the position of the Roman Catholic Church is best represented by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *The Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* (1989) signed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, by then head of this body and not yet Pope Benedict XVI. In the introduction, Ratzinger provides a rationale for the rising interest in “forms of meditation connected with certain Eastern religions and their peculiar ways of prayer [. . .] also among Christians” as a “sign of such a need for spiritual

recollection and deep contact with the divine mystery"¹⁸. According to Ratzinger, "With the current spread of Eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in church communities, we face an acute renewal of the attempt, not without risk and error, to merge Christian meditation with non-Christian meditation"¹⁹ Without indulging in the theological arguments used to show the differences between Eastern and Christian forms of prayers and meditation advanced in the letter, what emerges from the document is an ambivalent stance: on the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church cautions that "These proposals or other similar ones for harmonizing Christian meditation and Eastern techniques will have to be continually screened with careful discernment of content and method to avoid falling into a pernicious syncretism"; while on the other hand, it also recognises that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in those religions" (18), one should not prejudicially despise these indications as non-Christian"²⁰. Concluding, we can then argue that despite the unavoidable doctrinal, theological and cultural idiosyncrasies between the Roman Catholic church and yoga, the average Italian, practicing Catholic or not, is rather free to experiment with yoga without any strong cultural or religious sanction, as even the organs of the Roman Catholic Church seem to maintain an open stance towards what they rightly perceive as growing socio-cultural phenomena such as yoga, mindfulness and/or Buddhist meditation(s)²¹.

4.2. Yoga and Contemporary Spiritualities

This genealogical reconstruction, although partial and preliminary, is sufficient to draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the role of yoga within the landscape of contemporary spiritualities in Italy. From what has been discussed so far, the association between yoga and the *enchanted worlds of nature* is rather weak although it is possible to complement this picture by appreciating yoga's New Age inspired understanding of nature where yoga activity leads practitioners closer to it. For instance, as an online article entitled '*Yoga Outdoor, a Return to Nature*' underlines:

Creating the figure of a tree with the body or imitating the graceful wingspan of a bird by breathing to the rhythm of the tidal cycles or following the motion of the waves evokes a sense of harmony, timelessness and connection with the universe. Yoga is usually practiced indoors, but when practiced outdoors it gives a feeling of union with nature. Breath after breath one feels that inner peace that has long been missing²².

Many yoga postures have names derived from an animal or in general from nature²³. These postures aim at practitioners' embodiment of the qualities associated with the animal and/or elements of nature mimicked by their bodies. This specific feature of *āsana* practice is skilfully exploited by some yoga teachers as they masterfully mobilise these practical-discursive elements to portray what they teach as substantially in line with nature, its rhythms and ontological constitution. According to this analysis, nature functions as "meta-narrative", or as Antonio Camorrino (2018) puts it, as "a contemporary myth" that inspires not only practitioners' *āsana* practice but also their healthy and balanced lifestyle, rejoicing in transnational communities of conscious consumers and ecological sensitivity (e.g., Strauss 2005; Strauss and Mandelbaum 2013). Thus yoga, similarly to the enchanted worlds of nature studied by Palmisano and Pannofino (2020), seems to foster "the cultivation of green consciousness, and a portrait of nature as the privileged dimension where the self can access the sacred in its immanent manifestations" (Di Placido and Pedrini 2022, p. 177).

The spiritualities of well-being, in turn, are the ideal-typical conceptual and practical reference where it is possible to place the flourishing of yoga practice in today's Italy. This is already evident through the numerous references to yoga and health in the work of its pioneers discussed in Section 4. To provide further evidence of this overlap we introduce the "health imaginaries" (Hauser 2021) that the Federazione Italiana Yoga (FIY), "the first and oldest Italian Association of Yoga teachers and practitioners" and the Yoga Associazione Nazionale Insegnanti (YANI) foster:

FIY advocates the overall harmony of man, understood as an inseparable whole of body-mind-spirit. The use of yogic techniques also proves invaluable in approaching various types of social distress. A multitude of scientific studies highlight how the practice of yoga and meditation beneficially influence the health of the body and harmony of the mind²⁴.

Similarly, also the Yoga Associazione Nazionale Insegnanti (YANI), underlines that: Yoga is an ethical, philosophical and bodily based practical discipline of a global and experiential nature, which finds its foundations in different cultural traditions of India and has evolved over time in multiple cultural and geographical contexts, aimed at promoting the awareness of individuals and groups, to develop personal and collective well-being.

According to these imaginaries, yoga has as its goal the development of the individual, his or her awareness and well-being which neatly matches with the current expansive notion of “health” provided by the WHO as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease”²⁵. Yoga in Italy is, therefore, also employed in therapeutic settings as a complementary resource, as we have seen in the exemplary case of Patrian’s Yoga Institute already back in the 1970s.

As Palmisano and Pannofino argue (2020, p. 113), “wellbeing, holism, personal growth and human potential have become key words in the vocabulary of contemporary spirituality”. These key words, “outline the orientations of the variegated holistic-milieu world where new specialists such as spiritual counsellors, life coaches, mental coaches, holistic operators and soul readers operate” (ibidem). It is not hazardous, given the context, to claim that the yoga teacher is, in Italy as well as elsewhere (Newcombe 2019), progressively discursively and socially constructed as a *health expert* focused on supporting practitioners’ well-being and self-actualization processes.

Although in a more subtle and marginalized manner than in the two previous types of contemporary spiritualities discussed, yoga in Italy is also partly akin to the spiritualities of mystery explored by Palmisano and Pannofino (2020). The starting point of this overlap can be found in the history of premodern yoga itself, often associated with the acquisition of supernatural powers (*siddhis*) such as mind-control and possession (White 2009). Additionally, its premodern associations with occult powers, also in the last two centuries and chiefly through the bridging role of Theosophy, occultism, esotericism and yoga have been subsumed under the same practical-discursive rubric. Zooming into the Italian landscape, the abovementioned interests of Patrian, one of the founding fathers of the discipline in Italy, in esotericism, hypnosis and prophecies is telling.

Two further examples should suffice to strengthen the link between yoga and the spiritualities of mystery in today’s Italy. The transnational yoga school Atman Yoga offers courses in what it calls “esoteric yoga” in several Italian cities from north to south. Their “Esoteric Yoga Course”, in line with the teachings of tantra yoga, “allows for the gradual deepening of subtle perceptions, in relation to innate personal inclinations, the intensity of individual practice and the progressive refinement of consciousness, leading to deeper and deeper levels of understanding”²⁶. This type of yoga:

“... is guided by the teacher who pays attention to the specific energy flows of each individual posture (asana), and thanks to the in-depth theoretical study that accompanies the physical practice, it becomes possible to perceive the energies flowing within us and to grasp the differences in states of mind that are awakening in relation to the chakra(s) we are working on”²⁷.

Another example is what is called, *Stadhagaldr*, Runic *Stadh* or Runic Yoga, that is, the performance of physical postures (runic gestures assimilated to the *chakra* system) associated with runic visualization and breath control. The main objective of this style of esoteric yoga is “personal transmutation” through hosting within one’s body the chosen rune so as to allow it to channel its properties in the physical and energetic body of the practitioner. In other words, “in this model, the one who uses the runic positions

makes himself a channel for receiving and transmitting the energy patterns present in the universe"²⁸. Finally, to testify to the partial, although present, overlapping between the spiritualities of mystery and yoga practice, it is useful to mention how Italian esoteric festivals such as the Esoterica Festival, the Festival of Mystery, and Mondì Magici, offer also meditation and yoga classes and that many visitors to these festivals are thus able to familiarize themselves with yogic texts and practices as well as magico-esoteric texts and practices.

There are certainly far deeper affinities between the practical-discursive logics of yoga in Italy today and the roots of contemporary spiritualities in earlier forms of mysticism, esotericism and New Age spirituality, where nature, health and mystery play a defining role. One such example is the famous Eranos group that used to meet annually in Moscia (Lago Maggiore), the Collegio di Santa Maria della Misericordia in Ascona (Switzerland) and on the Monte Verità, also in Ascona (Switzerland), since 1933, and whose conferences resulted in a prolific publication series where yoga and meditation were often discussed. The group, close to the spiritualist and theosophical milieu of the time, was dedicated to explorations of humanistic, religious studies and natural sciences themes and saw the involvement of figures of the caliber of Mircea Eliade (1897–1986), Carl Gustav Jung (1975–1961) and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), among others (Wasserstrom 1999). Unpacking in more detail the literary production and the influence of this group on the reception of yoga and the development of contemporary spiritualities in Italy is surely a fruitful endeavor that we set ourselves to explore in future work. Similarly, also the discussion of the development of bidirectional transnational political-religious-esoteric axes, from India to European countries such as Italy, Germany and Greece as well as the influence of leading figures active during the Bengali Renaissance up to WWII, such as Swami Vivekananda (born Narendranath Dutta, 1863–1902), Sri Aurobindo (1972–1950), Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945) and Savitri Devi Mukherji (born Maximiani Julia Portas 1905–1982) among others, on Mussolini's Italy (and afterwards) deserve special attention. This type of analysis might, in fact, also contribute to unveiling some of the lines of continuity, reciprocal influences and "emerging axis of cooperation and unity" (Nanda 2005, p. 14) between past and present Indian nationalism (*Hindutva*), European New Right movements and neo-Pagan groups, a theme that deserves a full paper in its own right.

5. Conclusions

In this article, thanks to a genealogical method and reliance on a "discursive study of religion" approach, we have provided a preliminary genealogy of yoga in Italy, focusing on its relationship with both Catholicism and "contemporary spiritualities" (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020). In so doing, we have also contributed to enlarging the geographical scope of *Yoga Studies*, largely concerned with the analysis of the transnational diffusion of yoga in Britain and North America²⁹.

Our main claim, as we shall further substantiate in the conclusion, is that yoga and contemporary spiritualities as practiced in XXI century Italy are neither entirely new nor clearly alternatives to more established religions. As a consequence, they should not merely be equated with "new" or "alternative" forms of spirituality, either in Italy or elsewhere. Naturally, the genealogy traced in this article is only one among several possible tales that can be told about yoga's diffusion in Italy, but hopefully it can function as a fruitful starting point for future and more in-depth studies focused on specific figures, traditions and processes that here, due to a lack of space, we've discussed only in passing or ignored altogether. Nevertheless, we affirmed that the case study of yoga in Italy grants an understanding of the processes of 'crises', that is, change, transformation and adaptation in the spiritual and religious fields, as well as a useful empirical entry into the questioning of conceptual boundaries between distinct yet potentially overlapping sociological categories.

Based on our analysis, in this concluding section, we provide some reflections on the creation, use and limits of sociocultural theorizing in the sociology of religion. As our

genealogical reconstructions show, a rigid juxtaposition between the concepts of religion and spirituality obscures their existing overlaps in describing, interpreting and explaining the case study of yoga in Italy as well as the broader spiritual and religious fields. How to frame, for instance, the yoga practiced and nested within the Catholic religion of contemporary Fathers such as Gentili, Cappelletto and Bayer? Is it yoga in service of the Catholic path or is it a form of Easternization of Catholicism? Similar questions regarding the porous boundaries and overlapping among concepts and categories central to our analysis, such as contemporary spiritualities, Western esotericism and modern yoga might emerge from the complex, multilayered reconstruction of the history of yoga in Italy provided in these pages. For instance, how ought scholars study outdoor yoga? Is it a form of spirituality in nature, a neo-pagan ritual or is it yoga practice? And again, is a yoga practice tailored to cultivate practitioners' health first and foremost a form of spirituality of health or should scholars account for it by relying on the explanatory power of the "modern yoga" label? Finally, how should we account for theosophical and anthroposophical interpretations of yoga? Are these forms of Western esotericism or are they more organic expressions of what we practice and call yoga to date in Italy as elsewhere?

We suggest that this is primarily a definitional issue, that is, different scholars may study very similar phenomena, e.g., yoga in Italy, having recourse to different concepts such as religion, spirituality, the New Age, modern yoga, neo-Hinduism and New Religious Movements (NRMs), to name just a few. To complicate the picture, the opposite is also true: different scholars may study very different practical-discursive universes while framing them within the same conceptual and analytical boundaries. Examples abound in the literature. How then, as sociologists, should we approach this intriguing and unavoidable challenge that promises to threaten the credibility of our analytical arsenal and jeopardize our sociological acumen? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. However, a useful starting point is to recognize that:

“ . . . as much as we should not—or actually cannot—avoid using categories, recalling Weber's analysis of the ideal type, we should also never fail to recognize their utopic character, and in so doing prevent giving our scholarly categories a life, an autonomy, and an explanatory power they hardly have, even when these categories allow for the curving of our specific niche in the field”. (Di Placido 2021, p. 522)

In light of this complex scenario, we find Guhin's suggestion to approach "religion as a site" to be particularly fruitful. As he argues, "I therefore suggest that we use religion as a site, by which I mean a location at which we can observe social life, rather than as a category, by which I mean a term that provides definitive analytical distinctions between what is religious and what is not" (Guhin 2014, p. 580). We contend that a similar methodological strategy can be adopted in the study of yoga in Italy, showing that it is important to explore yoga as practiced in specific contexts (e.g., the institutes and schools founded by yoga pioneers, churches and monasteries, urban yoga studios) rather than ascribing it specific labels beforehand (see also Newcombe 2018). This strategy, close to Ammerman's advocacy for a "practice approach" (Ammerman 2020) concerned with social actors' "lived religion" and thus capable of unveiling scholarly categories' porous boundaries and potential overlaps in practice, seems to us particularly promising for future inquiries.

According to this perspective, sociologists ought to approach their objects of analysis as mainly empirical sites where social actors productively engage in social practices, momentarily bracketing the labeling power of concepts and categories while allowing themselves to enter into dialogue with the field so as to "discover" the most appropriate terminology to discuss what they are studying. In other words, the issue of the creation, use and limits of scholarly categories in the sociology of religion cannot rely on a "one solution fits all" strategy but requires sociologists' serious self-reflexive practices, empirical work and theoretical acumen. As discussed by Panagiotopoulos and Roussou (2022, p. 3), "we are continuously confronted with a transgressiveness of borders which defy any strict delimitations that the institutionalised and secularising processes have sought to establish"

(Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 3), and the beauty and complexity of the sociological trade is to make sense of what happens in the interstices of these borders in a manner that is intelligible to both social actors and fellow scholars. In doing so, as suggested by a plethora of authoritative voices (Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1997, 2015; Palmisano and Pannofino 2020), and in line with a genealogical sensitivity, sociologists ought to historicize not only the categories that they use but also the very empirical sites and practices that they explore. This, we contend, promises to unveil the multilayered, trans-religious and plural *ethos* of most spiritual and religious sites, groups and contemporary religious and spiritual expressions, as we have attempted to do in relation to the case study of yoga in Italy and its links with Catholicism and contemporary spiritualities.

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Notes

- 1 For a few notable exceptions we refer to Bertolo (2013), Bertolo and Giordan (2016), Di Placido (2020, 2022a), Mangiarotti (2022) and Squarcini and Mori (2008).
- 2 For similar claims see Spickard (2017) and Payne (2021).
- 3 See also Baroni (2011) for similar reflections regarding the merging of esotericism, New Age and Christian mysticism in the spiritualist group Cerchio Firenze 77, particularly active between the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in Florence around the figure of the Italian medium Roberto Setti (1930–1984).
- 4 It is pivotal to notice, in order to understand its Orientalist leaning, that the headquarters of the Theosophical Society moved from New York to Adyar (Chennai, India) in 1878.
- 5 As argued by Pasi (2012, p. 98), “[b]etween 1919 and 1932 Laterza published no less than seven works by Steiner, plus eight books by Edouard Schuré (1841–1929), the famous author of the Great Initiates who had become Steiner’s friend and disciple”.
- 6 Yoga: trend e numeri di un fenomeno in crescita—Manageritalia accessed 21 February 2023.
- 7 How Yoga and Montessori benefit the whole child—The Montessori Family accessed 21 May 2023.
- 8 Mindfulness and Yoga Practices in Montessori—Montessori for Today accessed 21 May 2023.
- 9 Van Lysebeth, in addition to the Yoga Society of Belgium (1965) founded together with Gérard Blitz (the originator of Club Méditerranée), the European Yoga Union—a branch of the International Yoga Federation—in 1972.
- 10 Dr.ssa Antonietta Rozzi—sarvayogauniversity.com accessed 18 May 2023.
- 11 Walter Thirak Ruta | Scuola Yoga Pramiti accessed 18 May 2023.
- 12 Padre Gian Vittorio Cappelletto—I Ricostruttori nella preghiera accessed 18 May 2023.
- 13 La meditazione—I Ricostruttori nella preghiera accessed 18 May 2023.
- 14 La meditazione—I Ricostruttori nella preghiera accessed 18 May 2023.
- 15 YOGA E MEDITAZIONE—SACRO EREMO—Comunità di Camaldoli accessed 18 May 2023.
- 16 See Note 15.
- 17 Il diavolo “pratica” lo yoga?—La Stampa accessed 18 May 2023.
- 18 Lettera su alcuni aspetti della meditazione cristiana (vatican.va) accessed 9 June 2023.
- 19 See Note 18.
- 20 See Note 18.
- 21 See Note 18.
- 22 Yoga all’aperto, un ritorno alla natura—LifeGate accessed 21 February 2023.
- 23 Some examples are *Bhujangasana* (cobra posture), *Kapotasana* (pigeon posture) and *Vrksasana* (tree pose).
- 24 Chi siamo—Federazione Italiana Yoga (yogaitalia.org) accessed 21 February 2023.
- 25 Constitution of the World Health Organization (who.int) accessed 18 May 2023.
- 26 Yoga Integrale Esoterico (atmanitalia.yoga) accessed 21 February 2023.
- 27 See Note 26.

- ²⁸ Antico yoga runico: Stadthagaldr (thinkific.com) accessed 21 February 2023. For an in depth discussion of this type of yoga please see Yoga Runico tra magia, esoterismo e neopaganesimo—Yoga Magazine (yoga-magazine.it).
- ²⁹ For some exceptions regarding the development and diffusion of yoga in Germany, France, Brazil, Mexico and Turkey see respectively Fuchs (1990), Ceccomori (2001), Altglas (2005), Simões (2018, 2022), Muñoz (2020) and Erkmen (2021).

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