

Translation (using Word and minor changes by Els Coenen) of the article in the Belgian weekly KNACK – January 10, 2024 – Brecht Castel – Seksueel misbruik in de yoga. 'Yogi Bhajan was een ziekelijk genie'.

Sexual abuse in yoga.

'Yogi Bhajan was a **pathological genius**.'

By Brecht Castel (translated by Els Coenen as mentioned above)

Kundalini Yoga came out of the teachings of Yogi Bhajan, an Indian emigrated to the US who sexually abused more than a hundred women. Flemish writer Els Coenen recently exposed his criminal organization in her book *Under the Yoga Mat*.

Do you start your day with an invigorating yoga session? Then don't choke on your yogi tea while reading this article. Because just like in the Catholic Church, sexual abuse in the yoga world was swept under the rug for decades. This was particularly the case in Yogi Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga. So says Els Coenen, herself president of the Belgian federation for ten years, in her staggering book *Under the Yoga Mat*. 'Practitioners of Kundalini Yoga worldwide have the right to know that Yogi Bhajan was a fraudulent cult leader.'

Who was this Yogi Bhajan?

Els Coenen: 'Yogi Bhajan, whose actual name was Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, was a customs officer in India. In 1968, when he was 39, he moved to the United States where he created his *Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization* (3HO) and profiled himself as a master of Kundalini Yoga. Eastern gurus were in high demand by young people at the time. Bhajan's intense yoga sets gave them the 'high' they previously found in drugs and alcohol. Bhajan's teachings, which proclaimed that only this "3HO technology" could guide humanity through the transition to the Aquarian Age, quickly spread across the US and Europe. Back in 1977, *Time* called 3HO a cult. As a self-proclaimed spiritual leader of the Sikhs in the West, the charismatic Bhajan met with popes and presidents. After his death in 2004, he was honored by the American Congress. In New Mexico, the *Yogi Bhajan Memorial Highway* was inaugurated.

What did the abuse and malpractice consist of?

Coenen: 'Bhajan always had fourteen 'secretaries' in his harem. In total, he abused at least 100 women. He sent hundreds of 3HO children to boarding schools in India where they were beaten, neglected and abused. A known pedophile was sent there as a teacher. With the school fees, Bhajan bought horses and jewelry. Gays were taunted. People who spoke out and those that tried to leave the group were chased and threatened with death. 3HO companies grew rapidly thanks to the *selfless service* of his followers. Bhajan's lieutenants were convicted of drug and arms trafficking. Some of his honored students were convicted for a variety of fraudulent businesses. *Akal Security*, which made billions from securing government buildings in the US, helped the Trump administration separate refugee parents and children at the Mexican border. Within 3HO, Bhajan was worshipped as a god. "Rape is always invited," he said. His listeners were silent. They were sight blind."

How and when did everything come to light?

Coenen: 'At the beginning of 2020, the memoirs of Pamela Saharah Dyson, a former 'secretary' of Bhajan, unleashed an avalanche of abuse stories. Hundreds who had been silent for decades began to speak. In the US, Vice released a documentary on the cult's abuses. There are two more in the works.'

The link with child abuse in the Catholic Church and 'Godvergeten' is easily made. Do you see any parallels? (note for the non-Belgian readers: 'Godvergeten' (Godforsaken) was a 4-episode documentary on Flemish television in Sep-Oct 2023 in which survivors of the horrible abuse in the Catholic church here in Belgium testified.)

Coenen: 'Absolutely. Abuse of power in a spiritual context is especially poignant because people put their trust in spiritual leaders. In 3HO and the church, a code of silence was demanded to protect the institution. That caused additional damage and years of tragic and damaging isolation of the survivors.'

Like the book *In de Naam van de Vader* (transl: *In Name of the Father*) by Rik Devillé, *Under the Yoga Mat* immortalizes stories of survivors with the aim of naming the pain and damage, opening eyes, and preventing history from repeating itself. In the church and in 3HO, the stories were told decades earlier. Only now does it dawn on people how big the problem is. Like the TV series *Godvergeten*, the Vice documentary about Bhajan's abusive *Empire of Yoga* shook up many, both inside and outside the institution.

New stories continue to emerge in 3HO as well. And the organization's recovery and reconciliation initiatives were also experienced by many as inadequate, humiliating and retraumatizing. Whistleblowers are labeled as difficult subjects and need to learn to deal with silence as an answer.

It wasn't until I watched *Godvergeten* that I realized the gigantic irony of the fact that I wrote parts of my book in an abbey that until now had remained silent about the abuse in "its very own institution." It was for this exact reason that I have cut all ties with the 3HO/Kundalini Yoga cult. Yes, I was finally seeing my own blindness.

Your book mentions the sexual abuse of some students in Belgium by a teacher who taught healing techniques. Knack spoke with one of those women. She herself did not call it transgressive behaviour.

Coenen: 'That's right. This teacher allowed an individual healing session to turn into sex. It surprised her, but she didn't say no. The teacher, who is now active in Moscow, asked her to keep quiet and that weighed on her. Even if she didn't experience it that way, what he did is certainly inadmissible because of his position of power as a teacher. He should have drawn that line.'

Is sexual abuse specific to Kundalini Yoga?

Coenen: 'No, sexual abuse has also come to light in Vinyasa, Ashtanga, Sivananda and Bikram yoga. Specific to the Kundalini Yoga story is the extent and pervasiveness of the wrongdoings. And, that it stayed under the radar for much longer. Bhajan was a genius in that aspect. He abused his religious status and was able to take advantage of his political connections.'

British comedian, actor and presenter Russell Brand is accused of sexual abuse. He also practices Kundalini Yoga. Coincidence?

Coenen: 'Kundalini Yoga fits perfectly with his mentality. The worst part is that now, out of the limelight, he is giving wellness workshops to women using Bhajan's cult techniques.'

Remarkably, Bhajan's Kundalini Research Institute recently released a book to heal sexual trauma.

Coenen: 'That's right. It is silent about the abundance of sexual trauma in its own ranks. A basic knowledge of trauma-informed yoga is enough to see that the proposed exercises are totally inappropriate. In situations like this, that's downright dangerous. The 'yoga of awareness', as the serial rapist Bhajan called his Kundalini Yoga, I call the 'yoga of irresponsible behavior'.'

Is yoga dangerous anyway?

Coenen: 'Practicing yoga is fine! As long as you keep your wits about you. And above all: you know what's best for you. Dare to say 'no' to your teacher if something doesn't feel right and remain critical. Choose a teacher who wants to talk about abuse, boundaries, and ethics.'

Recently, a yoga studio in Washington DC used *Under the Yoga Mat* to reflect on safe yoga with yoga teachers and students. That's the way forward."

The Belgian Kundalini Yoga Federation

Response

The Belgian federation of Kundalini Yoga does not currently have a president. One of the three board members, Sige Mariën, responds on his own behalf:

'I have not read the book *Under the Yoga Mat* by Els Coenen and have no intention of doing so. The Belgian federation has taken initiatives in the past to combat abuse. We give that subject enough attention with, for example, a workshop during our annual festival. I believe there should be a pure relationship between a yoga teacher and student. We continue to use the teachings of Yogi Bhajan. His words have helped me a great deal. Let me be clear: I have never met this man and in Belgium we have received no complaints about his abuse. Kundalini Yoga is certainly not a cult.'

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