

PART THREE: MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION

Syllabus Objectives	<p><i>Knowledge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• have a knowledge of a variety of prayer traditions and contexts• <i>be familiar with key figures and characteristics of the mystical traditions</i> <p><i>Understanding</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• have an understanding of the nature of religious experience• <i>have an understanding of Buddhist and Christian meditation</i> <p><i>Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• analyse different forms and expressions of worship• identify and where appropriate, participate in some of the techniques of meditation and prayer used by the major religious traditions• differentiate between types of religious experience <p><i>Attitudes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• respect for the prayer and worship traditions of the major religious traditions• appreciation of the importance of prayer in the life of the person of faith and in their relationship with the divine/transcendent
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Topic: 3.1 Meditation

Procedure

Introduction - *The place of meditation in two major world religions*
- *Buddhist meditation as an experience of emptying (Higher Level)*
- *Christian meditation as an experience of encounter(Higher Level)*

Review Sample Lesson plan for Junior Certificate Section E Part 5

Brainstorm the students understanding of meditation.

Take feedback and conclude that meditation is a type of prayer that is common to many religious traditions.

- Meditation in the Buddhist tradition involves a self-emptying in which the individual systematically removes from consciousness that which is not part of the quest. ‘Samatha’ is the calming of the contents of consciousness and a subsequent release from external circumstances. The goal of Buddhist meditation is to turn consciousness away from self toward an encounter with the divine Other. It is believed to be a movement away from egoism toward selflessness.
- In the Christian tradition meditation is associated in the early monastic period (5th-12th century) with *lectio*, a reading aloud and memorising of scripture in a way that integrated mind and body. This was reminiscent of earlier Jewish practices. It was a focusing of the mind on the scriptures.

The origins and development of meditative techniques
The use of sacred and inspirational texts & the use of mantra in meditation

Brainstorm the students understanding of the origin and development of meditative techniques.

Take feedback and conclude explaining that in Buddhism meditation is understood as a process of self-emptying. This is achieved through the repetition of a “mantra” which is a short phrase. The term ‘mantra’ conveys the simple and continuous repetition of a phrase so as to root it in the heart.

Students participate in or observe the use of sacred or inspirational texts from two major world religions and the use of “mantra” in meditation.

Research Assignment: Do a case study on one of the major figures in the history of Christian meditation e.g. Ignatius of Loyola (1495-1556) or Teresa of Avila (1515-1582).

Outcomes

- Explain the term “meditation” and give an account of the significance of meditation in the prayer and worship of two major religious traditions
- In the case of meditation with mantra and meditation with sacred text:
 - Explain the origins of the particular form - Explain how it is used in contemporary prayer
- Compare and contrast the Buddhist and Christian traditions of meditation.

Resources which teachers have suggested include:

Prayer Body and Soul: Methods and Practices of Anthony de Mello, Dublin: Columba Press, 1997.

Topic: 3.2 The contemplative traditions

Introduction - Origins and development of some contemplative traditions
- Some modern expressions of this tradition

Brainstorm the students understanding of the contemplative tradition

Note feedback on the chalkboard and conclude that contemplative communities usually live in monasteries removed from the general activities of normal life in order to foster silence and recollection.

Research Assignment: Research the origins and development of two of the following contemplative communities:

- Cistercian and Benedictine monks (male)
- Poor Clares and the Carmelites (female)
- The Taizé community in France (ecumenical)
- Etc.

Or Read *Student Work: THE TAIZÉ COMMUNITY*

(Adapted from Junior Certificate Religious Education Higher Level Paper 2004)

Discuss: In what ways is this community part of the contemplative tradition?
What were the key moments in the development of this community?

Hermitage, pilgrimage, poustinia, and retreat: examples of these traditions, particularly in the modern context.

Review Sample Lesson plan for Junior Certificate Section E Part 1 - Places of significance

Brainstorm the students understanding of retreat, pilgrimage, hermitage asking them to recall any example of which they have experience.

Or present students with the following word cards:

HERMITAGE / POUSTINIA	PILGRIMAGE	RETREAT
Hermit comes from a Greek word for “desert”. Poustinia is the Russian word for “desert”. In the Christian tradition by the end of 3 rd Century the practice arose of moving to the desert to lead a contemplative life, living alone and separated from all distractions.	A journey to a place associated with a person or event of religious significance. Pilgrims move away from distractions and temptations to devote their lives to God.	A period of separation from normal routine and activity to focus on spirituality, prayer and meditation. This can take place alone or with others.

Or read *Student Work: THE REEK*

Discuss: In what sense can “The Reek” be described as a place of retreat, pilgrimage, hermitage?

Note feedback on the chalkboard and conclude that:

- A retreat can be defined as a limited period of isolation whereby an individual or small group withdraws from the regular routine of normal life for the purpose of religious renewal.

- People usually go on pilgrimages for a temporary release from social ties to be at one with humankind and nature. A place of pilgrimage may be associated with miracles, apparitions, the birth, life or death of a significant figure or some other spiritual magnetism.
- A hermit is a religious ascetic who lives alone in order to attain complete openness to God through solitude, silence, penance and prayer. In contemporary life individuals visit hermitages to temporarily experience a hermit's life.

Research Assignment: Research the origins and development of contemporary expressions of the contemplative tradition i.e. retreats, pilgrimages and hermitages.

Activity: Students go to a place of retreat or visit a monastery and interview some of the community keeping a journal of reflections on their experience.

Outcomes

- For one contemplative tradition
 - Give an account of the origin of the tradition
 - Explain how it has developed into its contemporary form
- Explain the terms hermitage, poustinia pilgrimage and retreat for two of these
 - Explain the origins of the tradition
 - Name one example and describe its significance
 - Discuss why this particular tradition continues to have popular appeal

Resources which teachers have suggested include:

www.taize.fr
 www.monks-of-adoration.org/chapel.html

Topic: 3.3 The mystic tradition

*Introduction - Characteristics of the mystical traditions
 - These characteristics expressed in the life and works of two mystics*

Brainstorm the students understanding of the mystic tradition

Note feedback on the chalkboard and conclude a mystic can be defined as a person whose experience of the Absolute is direct, intuitive and immediate.

Or Visual Verbal Square Assignment complete the following -

1. Write a definition of the word *mystic*
 e.g. as a person whose experience of the Absolute is direct, intuitive and immediate

2. Write a sentence using the word ...

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MYSTIC
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3. Give a word that is connected to this word...

4. Draw a sketch of the word or something connected to it ...

Take feedback on the assignment and if necessary explain that -

- How and what mystics experience is particular to their faith and cultural contexts.
- How they experience the Absolute is also dependant upon their own consciousness and lifestyle.

Many mystics speak of:

- an ecstatic experience where they appear to stand outside themselves and overcome the limits of the ego.
- the long inner journey of pain and desolation as their hearts are purified.
- the inner journey to the 'distant shore' or the 'furthest island' or the 'highest mountain'.

A life of contemplation does not remove the mystic from the responsibilities of service or charity.

Research Assignment - Research the life story of two of the following:

- Within the Christian tradition:

- § Julian of Norwich (d. c. 1420)
- § Meister Eckhart (d. 1327) author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*
- § Teresa of Avila
- § John of the Cross
- § Etc.

- Within the Islamic tradition:

- § Dhu'n-Nun (9th Century Egypt)
- § Jalalu'l Din Rumi
- § Etc.

- Etc.

Discuss: In what way was each person's experience of the Absolute direct, intuitive and immediate?

What similarities are there in each person's experience of the Absolute?

What differences are there in each person's experience of the Absolute?

Take feedback and conclude by reference to the particular contribution of each person to the mystical tradition.

Outcomes

- Explain the term "mystic"
- Give the characteristics associated with the mystical traditions
- Give a brief account of the life of two mystics and their particular contribution to the mystical tradition

Resources which teachers have suggested include:

Tinsley, A. (1997) *The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich*, Dublin: Columba Press

Eckhart, Meister *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Eliade, Mircea (1987) *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* New York: Macmillan.

www.symbols.net

Assessment Questions

1. (a.) Explain the term 'meditation'.
(b.) Explain the importance of meditation in one major religious tradition
2. Compare and contrast the Buddhist and Christian traditions of meditation.

Student Work: THE TAIZÉ COMMUNITY

The Taizé community was founded by Brother Roger. As a young man he had been seriously ill. During his illness he decided to set up a community where the Gospel would be lived out in simplicity and kindness. In 1940 Brother Roger left his native Switzerland and went to live in eastern France, settling in a small village called Taizé. When the Second World War started Brother Roger made Taizé a place of welcome for groups as varied as refugees fleeing the war, French war orphans, and German prisoners-of war. Gradually other young men joined Brother Roger in Taizé. On Easter Day 1949, the first brothers took vows to live as a religious community. Today there is a community of about one hundred brothers. The brothers do not accept gifts or donations for themselves. They give anything they receive to the poor. Taizé continues to be a place of welcome for families uprooted from their lands - Vietnamese, Rwandans, Bosnians etc. Taizé brothers have also gone to live with people who are suffering because of poverty or conflict in Asia, Africa and South America.

Over the years, the number of visitors to Taizé has continued to grow. Every week from early spring to late autumn, tens of thousands of people, mainly between the ages of 17 and 30 gather in Taizé. Visitors come from different countries all over the world. Some are from different church backgrounds and some from none at all. While people come to Taizé for different reasons, all are searching for meaning or a deeper relationship with God. While many are active in churches at home, others have difficulty in finding a church where they feel welcomed and listened to. Some come for a chance to meet other Christians their own age or for an experience of community rooted in the Gospel. It can be a life-transforming experience to spend a week listening to people talking about faith and the search for meaning in life.

An important part of the Taizé experience is making links between Christians of different denominations by praying and working together. The Taizé community has welcomed church leaders like the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Orthodox metropolitans, Lutheran bishops, and countless religious ministers from all over the world. Life at Taizé is centred on prayer, work and hospitality. Three times a day the bells ring out and everyone, brothers and visitors alike, stop what they are doing and head towards the Church of Reconciliation. In the church visitors join the community in worship. People join in a form of meditation in which praying in song and silence plays a large part. The community likes everyone to take part in the singing even though visitors speak many different languages. To overcome this difficulty the brothers composed simple tunes with few words that are easily learnt. Each day groups of people meet with the brothers to reflect on and discuss the Bible. Every afternoon at 5.00 pm people stop for tea and those who come from different continents talk about their countries and their hopes. Visitors also help with practical tasks like cooking and cleaning and everyone shares in serving the needs of the whole community. The Taizé community encourages people to take home what they have discovered and put it into practice in their lives. It also organises regional meetings where people from different countries come together and plan how they will contribute to the life of their Church, and work for justice, peace and reconciliation at home.

*Source: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé & Gill and Macmillan
(Adapted from Junior Certificate Religious Education Higher Level Paper 2004)*

Student Work: THE REEK

Croagh Patrick, locally known as “The Reek” is a special place of pilgrimage going back to pre-Christian times when the harvest festival of Lughnasa was celebrated there. My most recent visit to Croagh Patrick was with a young German student in the summer of 1997. We decided to climb the mountain in the traditional way beginning in the middle of the night. Darkness was always regarded as an important part of the experience, symbolising danger, fear, doubts, the power of evil and the unknown. The path up the Reek in the dark puts one in touch with many dark and dangerous forces. There are sharp stones, steep drops and slippery slopes, which have to be negotiated with great care. The words of St. Patrick’s Breastplate, a prayer for protection, were constantly in my mind as we set out on our journey. When we came to the statue of St. Patrick at the foot of the mountain we had our first experience of the ritual “Doing the Rounds.” A round is a circular walk around a sacred object or place. The tradition is that seven rounds must be completed whilst saying set prayers because seven is regarded as a sacred number. As we circled St. Patrick’s statue seven times I was aware of all the cycles of my life.

We began the steep climb to the summit by completing another set of rounds and prayers, aware that every step taken from then on would take a special effort. Silence descended as we made our way up, broken only by the crunch of the slipping stones underneath our feet. This reminded me of how difficult some occasions can be in our own lives. At the very top of the mountain there is a church. This is a place where heaven and earth seem to meet and there is a sense that God is not very far away. Doing the rounds at the top of the mountain I became aware of other people climbing the reek, coming out of the shadows from the mist. It made me think about the thousands of people who had made the same journey down through the centuries, some of whom came in their bare feet to show they were humble people of faith. After completing more rounds at Leaba Phadraig (Patrick’s Bed) we sat and rested under the sheltered gable of the church, until the new day dawned. Daybreak is a special time for prayer. It marks the time of change from the dangers and fears of the night to the hope and expectations of a new day.

As the early morning sun scattered the mist over the mountain and the wonderful view again made God seem very close. There is something unique about the shape of this mountain, which will always draw people to make their way to the top of the reek. It is no wonder that when Patrick first visited Mayo he climbed the mountain and marked it as a place of prayer for all time. We began our journey back down the mountain tired but happy.

(Adapted from Climbing the Reek by Fr. Michael Rodgers, Africa magazine July/August 1999
- *Junior Certificate Religious Education Higher Level Sample Paper 2002*)