

**THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MEDITATION IN BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY  
AND ISLAM IN AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN CONTEXT.**

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**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

In the religious arena, religiosity is fast taking over spirituality. This situation was expressed in Paul's letter to the Roman Christians where he states that "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites (nowadays Christians) is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:1-2).

Meditation is a spiritual discipline according to Zachner in the sense that it relieves us of superficiality as a religious exercise and discipline<sup>1</sup>. The above stated points express the nature of meditation as that which draw human beings closer to God and is beneficial to them. It is through meditation that one seeks to converse with God and turn his or her innermost thoughts to God with an assurance of hearing, feeling, sensing, and receiving a prompt response.

In the pre-Christian era, Siddharta Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, claimed to have obtained solution to man's problem of suffering through meditation. Moses, the founder of Judaism got the second necessary ingredient- the law, (the other three being people, land and a ruler/king respectively) for his people to become a nation after a forty-day solitary meeting with the LORD on Mount Sinai, (Exodus 34:28). Elijah, an Old Testament Prophet encountered the Lord in a similar experience to receive instructions on what he needed to do before his departure from the earth (I Kings 19:8-21).

Jesus Christ, the rock on which Christianity is built commenced and continued his earthly ministry on constant meditation '(cf Mathew 4:1-17, 14:23, 17:1-8)'. Apostle Paul expressed a typical experience of meditation in II Corinthian 12:2 where he talked of

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Zachner (ed), A Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 237.

a man caught up into the third heaven. John, the beloved Apostle, got the content of the Book of Revelation on his banishment to Patmos while meditating.<sup>2</sup>

The post-Christian era recorded that Muhammad used to spend long hours in meditation, fasting and seeking the face of Allah when he got the Qur'an revealed to him.<sup>3</sup> The importance of meditation could be seen in Jonathan Lindsay's words "The Spirit of God cannot illuminate a servant who will not spend some time waiting, meditating and opening himself to guidance of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of life is to worship God, hence the need for closeness with Him in meditation is a necessity. Longing for intimacy with Allah in meditation is a principal aspect of Islam. To buttress this, Rabia-al-Adwiyya penned these thought provoking words :

O my Lord, if I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell,  
If I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence,  
But if I worship Thee for Thine Own sake, then with-hold not from me  
Thine eternal beauty<sup>5</sup>.

Commenting on this 'man', says Al-Ghazzali, 'when in the crucible of abstinence is purged from carnal passion and attains to the highest,...becomes endued with angelic qualities... no longer in fleshy delight.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (eds.), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1029.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Anderson, *Islam in the Modern World: A Christian Perspective* (England: Apollos, 1992), 65.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan A. Lindsay, "When You Pray...Prepare" *Proclaim* Vol. 4, No 2, January – March, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> John A. Subhan, *Sufism: Its Saints and Shrines* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938), 16. This quotation is equally cited in Idries Shah's book *The Way of the Sufis*

<sup>6</sup> Al-Ghazzali, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (London: The Octagon Press, 1980), 15.

## B. RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the practice of meditation is not peculiar to Christianity alone, this writer is of the opinion that a unique pattern or techniques be fashioned out, different from its practice in other religions, to distinguish and help younger Christians from being lured away into some cultic practices in the name of meditation.

This will also help in doing away with syncreticism, which is the bane of contemporary religious society. Whatever is planned for Christian meditation should be biblically used. For example, the story of Elijah in the wilderness, with all its rich symbolism and drama in I Kings 19:1-4 can be seen as a description of one man's experience of meditative prayer. All the elements of meditation are present: a place of solitude, the journey and the experience of utter stillness found beyond the turmoil,

a stillness filled with the presence of God. The result of Elijah's experience is a renewed capacity to engage the world.<sup>1</sup>

Another distinctive step to Christian meditation should include focus and breathing method. This type of meditation explore one thought to the exclusion of all else. It employ the usage of God, Saints and/or Prophets as concentration focus.

A better alternative will be for churches to include training in the art of meditation into their on going educational programmes. As a result, people who look elsewhere for solutions to their spiritual problems will now have new windows open into their inner life and experience direct inspiration from God that will create in them the awareness of a nearby solution to such problems.

Meditation should be seen as an act of worship and should be inculcated into both private and corporate worship practices of contemporary Christians. Based on this Ettu said that :

Worship is a spontaneous act as the heart of the worshipper Meditates on the glory of God.... Essentially, it is ritualistic and liturgical. The acts may be formal or informal, regular or extempore, through words or deeds.<sup>2</sup>

However this researcher will highly recommend the Recliner Chair Method as the first choice sitting method for all. This is because people who cannot comfortable sit for 20 minutes on the floor are often able to sit a full hour or even longer without back pain, numbness, or leg cramps using this method.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Fenhagen, *More Than Wonderers: A Spiritual Discipline for Christian Ministry* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1978), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence O. Ettu, *Prayer and Church Growth* (Owerri: Charismatic Forum Publications Ltd., 2002), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Card, Ratzinga and Alberto Bovone, *Meditation Handbook* (Rome: Office of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 1989), 221.

## B. CONCLUSION

The importance of worship cannot be over-emphasized. It is at this point that the mortal meets with the immortal to receive guidance. Jonathan Bunday had rightly observed that "The spirit of God cannot illumine a servant who will not spend some time waiting, meditating and opening himself to guidance of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup> An encounter with the Lord in meditation can yield lots of dividend. Divine revelation that calls for prompt human response is a constant experience of mediators. On this Z. T. Fomum affirms that "The person who want to know the Lord must separate himself from self, sin, the love of the world, the love of thing of the world... separate and consecrate himself in meditation to God."<sup>5</sup>

It is an established fact that the practice of meditation is not alien to Christianity, hence its reintroduction into churches' mode of practice should not be seen as syncretism, this writer therefore recommend it for contemporary Christendom as the most relevant and spiritual growth catalyst for today churches.

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Anderson, Islam in the Modern World: A Christian Perspective, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Zechariahs Tanee Forum, Knowing God: The Greatest Need of the Hour (Yaounde: Christian Publishing House, 1993), 18.