

Mindfulness and Christian Devotional Meditation

(In Press). *Soul & Spirit* [A publication of the Society for Christian Psychology]

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Psychotherapy reminds me of the fashion industry. In fashion, a new style is introduced, becomes “hot”, and then fades to the status of regular clothing (or worse) over time. One of today’s most fashionable treatment interventions involves Buddhist-derived mindfulness meditation. Many Christian therapists have training in mindfulness meditation through their knowledge of Dialectical Behavioral Training, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. A growing empirical literature supports each of these (e.g., Baer, 2006). Strikingly, many Christian clinicians know more about mindfulness than Christian devotional meditation forms. What’s wrong with this picture?

In this article, I briefly describe mindfulness, define Christian devotional meditation (CDM), present three points of contrast between the two meditation forms, and then provide a case illustration. My purpose is not to debate the appropriateness of mindfulness for Christians (though that is a worthy topic), but rather to humbly invite Christian therapists to grow in the knowledge of the rich resources we have in our own faith tradition. From a Christian psychological perspective, we must begin the task of an in-depth comparison and contrast between these two meditation forms. I readily acknowledge my weaknesses to even explore this topic. I am not a thoroughly trained theologian but a psychologist who loves God, has received spiritual direction, has benefited from reading Christian contemplative classics, and has received mindfulness training.

Mindfulness and Christian Devotional Meditation Defined

Kabat-Zinn (2005) describes mindfulness meditation forms as involving several core principles: (a) increasing awareness of internal and external experience (feelings, thoughts, images, bodily sensations internally; sights, sounds, smells, etc. externally), (b) nonjudgmental observation and acceptance of these experiences, (c) cultivation of compassion towards self-experience, (d) developing curiosity and openness towards experience, and (e) returning to the present moment when one's mind wanders into daydreaming or fantasies.

Christian devotional meditation, sometimes called contemplative prayer interchangeably, has 2000 years-worth of authors and definitions. For the purposes of this clinical article, I define CDM as a variety of strategies designed to enhance focused attention on the Trinity, Scripture, or one's self for one or more of the following purpose(s): (a) deepening one's relationship with the Lord, (b) cultivating spiritual growth or emotional healing, and (c) growing in love towards one's neighbor and one's self (Garzon, In Press).

Three Differences

The table below highlights three key differences between CDM and mindfulness.

Attributes:	Mindfulness	CDM
Focus	Self	God, Scripture, & Self
Meditation Relational Context	Self-Awareness (+ Therapist Input in session)	Self-Awareness + God-Awareness (+ Therapist Input in session)
Key Attitudes	Acceptance & self-compassion	Trust, Confession, Surrender, & Grace

While mindfulness focuses the meditator on the self's internal and external experience, CDM immerses the meditator in God, Scripture, and self-experience. The Trinitarian reality of God in His immanence and transcendence fills the Christian meditator with more than self-

awareness. The meditator experiences Emmanuel, God with us. As such, the relational context of CDM radically changes compared to mindfulness. Mindfulness concentrates on building self-awareness of on-going experience. CDM cultivates both self-awareness and God-awareness in that experience.

Core attitudes differ as well. Mindfulness seeks an attitude of acceptance and self-compassion towards negative internal experiences. For the Christian, at times, these attitudes may conflict with the Christian psychological principle of putting off the old man and putting on the new (Eph. 4:20-24). For example, should I cultivate an attitude of acceptance and compassion towards my feelings of hate, rage, jealousy, lust, and pride when they occur? Should I teach my clients to do so?

One reason for mindfulness' popularity is its pragmatic emphasis on examining what works or is helpful in dealing with negative emotions versus what is not. Proponents of mindfulness rightfully critique denial, suppression, and repression (common strategies among evangelicals) as unhelpful methods in dealing with feelings like those mentioned above. They argue that acceptance and self-compassion are much more useful. CDM offers another important alternative to consider instead of repression that fits the relational context of communing with a holy God. A brief composite case example serves to illustrate key Christian attitudes of trust, confession, surrender, and grace.

Brief Case Example

Henry, a 37-year-old White man, suffered from major depression with marked irritability and criticalness towards his wife, family, and himself. "I hate that I'm doing this! I just can't stop it!" I approached his treatment from a cognitive and family systems perspective. Early in treatment, I introduced CDM as one strategy to change his relational cycle with God and others

from one of angry outburst, confession of sin (to God and family), self-loathing, another angry outburst, [repeat cycle].

One meditation strategy centered on contemplating a core theological truth that both Henry and I could agree on: God loves him. We practiced this initially in-session. Almost immediately, of course, Henry's self-loathing and guilt surfaced as he did this. I encouraged him to see if he could just acknowledge these feelings, trust God in the midst of these uncomfortable reactions, surrender his anger at himself and others to God (rather than suppressing these reactions), and trust in God's grace through this healing and sanctification process. Henry agreed to practice this for 10 minutes a day. He would go to his study (a quiet place), make himself comfortable, take slow deep breathes in, and state "God loves me" as he exhaled.

Over the next three weeks, the truth that God loved Henry no matter what self-recriminations he experienced in the meditation or what he had done during the day became more real for him. He reported reductions in his self-criticalness. He also reported painful memories of his father's criticalness towards him that surfaced during some meditations. Exploring these in session led to valuable insights and growth. We applied similar CDM principles to his angry outbursts towards family. Henry added "God is in control" as a CDM practice. When Henry encountered a situation where he was getting upset, taking a deep breath in and stating "God is in control" as he exhaled reminded him that he could surrender the frustrating situation into God's hands. He also studied Scriptures related to themes of God's love, sovereignty, and control. Over the course of 14 individual and three family sessions, Henry's relationship with God, his family, and himself changed. His depression, in turn, remitted. CDM helped embed into Henry's personal experience important theological truths that helped him overcome depression, reconnect with his family, and grow in the fruit of patience.

Conclusion

Mindfulness-based therapies continue to garner impressive empirical support for their effectiveness. It is likely that this currently fashionable trend will become a regular part of psychological intervention rather than go out of style. The present *zeitgeist*, therefore, should be seized. Christian psychology has a unique opportunity to research its own meditative faith resources and to develop therapies that both engage the greater psychological community's infatuation with meditation and point to the distinctive benefits the Christian worldview offers when considering these methods.

References

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