

G. Worship, Prayer & Ritual | Sample Answer

Profile how the spiritual dimension of life was emphasised in the life and work of a mystic associated with one of the following world religions: Christianity (2019 Section G [b])

The spiritual dimension of life is evident in an inner journey undertaken by mystics which can involve prayer, contemplation, fasting as they strive for an immediate, personal encounter with the divine. The spiritual dimension of life is evident in the lives of mystics like St. Theresa of Avila.

St Teresa is famous for experiencing levitations, visions and spiritual rapture. Her writings give us insight into these mystical experiences. Teresa entered the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation at Avila in 1535, after her mother died in 1529. Within two years, her health collapsed and she was invalid for three years. During this time, she developed a love for mental prayer. However, after her recovery, she stopped praying. For fifteen years, she continued in this state, divided between a worldly and a divine spirit.

In 1555, she underwent a religious awakening. In 1558, she introduced reform to the Carmelite Order. Her reform required utter withdrawal so that the nuns could meditate on divine law and live a prayerful life of penance “our vocation of reparation” for the sins of mankind. She opened the first monastery of the Carmelite Reform. Teresa began to experience visions of Jesus Christ. In one of her visions, she saw an angel pierce her heart with a golden spear. The pain she experienced became a movement of ecstasy for her. She said, ‘the pain was so great... and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of the excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it’. This event became symbolic in her life and she believed that she was chosen to share in the pain of Jesus Christ.

Teresa of Avila was the first to catalogue stages in mystic experience. She wrote that meditation is the first stage of mystical prayer. They meditate on the life of Jesus and come to an interior feeling of devotion. This is the only stage that can be achieved by our own efforts. The Prayer of Quiet is the second stage of mystical prayer. We cannot achieve this by our own blessings, we are in union with Good for as long as the Prayer of Quiet lasts. It can be intense, and many believe that no

greater blessing is even possible. Few people go beyond this stage. The third stage is union. It is the union of your entire soul with God. The pleasure and delight you experience are incomparably greater than the Prayer of Quiet. The fourth stage is rapture. During rapture, all your faculties fade away and you are suspended. Your soul no longer seems to laminate your body. Your soul soars upwards far above itself and above all creates things. Sometime, the rapture was so powerful that Teresa's body was lifted off the ground.

Teresa of Avila is one of the most famous mystics and her spiritual writing gives us great insight into what is involved in a life of prayer, contemplation and mystical practice.