

## G. Worship, Prayer & Ritual | Sample Answer

### **Discuss the role a mystical form of prayer plays in a major world religion today, making reference to the work of one mystic that you have studied (2016 Section G [b])**

Mysticism is the practice of religious ecstasies - religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness. A mystic is a person who has a direct experience of the sacred, unmediated by conventional religious rituals or intermediaries. Achieving that sacred experience requires “transcending established belief systems, bypassing the intellect and dissolving identification with the ego self”.

The definition of mystic varies according to who’s doing the defining and who religion or belief system they subscribe to. However, there are some universal defining characteristics of mystic experiences that I will discuss. The experience can be described as “ecstatic”. You experience your connection to life expand significantly. You feel that life is sacred and full of beauty. This feeling and phenomenon is somehow objective and outside of your individual self. The experience is also “ineffable” or “indescribable”. The overwhelming magnitude of emotions and intuitive understanding you embody makes the attempt to even describe it feel limited by and insulting to the depth of the experience. Words cannot fully convey the experience. It is an experience of ‘conscious unity’. The boundaries of where you perceive your individual consciousness and identity to begin and end vanish. Instead, you are left with a boundless and infinite union with all that is around you. The experience is ‘temporary’ or ‘rhythmic’. It is not a permanent state. The very nature of the experience is its transience. Eventually you end up returning back to your habitual way of life, but the experience changes something deep inside. It is an experience of immense gratitude. This gratitude is an overwhelming sense of awe at your insignificance in comparison to the vastness of existence. Your sense of gratitude is so vast that you feel almost undeserving of having the opportunity to experience such a miracle. Your outlook on life is renewed.

All mystical experiences are different to the individual. Each varies in length and intensity. These are only some of the defining characteristics. The experience is one of an undifferentiated sense of joyful unity with all of existence. The mystic I have studied is the Spanish nun, St Teresa 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 meditation divine law and through 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 1st 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. She experienced levitations, visions and spiritual rapture throughout her life, and she claimed that these visions provided insights into the

nature of God. Her spiritual writing gives us great insight into what is involved in a life of prayer, contemplation and mysticism.