# Mindfulness and Relationship with the Divine According to St. Ignatius, Catherine of Siena and Judaism

The concepts of attention or mindfulness and relationship with the divine are important to, not only St. Ignatius and Catherine of Siena, but also to Judaism. While mindfulness may seem initially as a “New Age”idea and out of place for mystical Christian beliefs and Judaism, they are part of the practices of these individuals and religion for they contribute to the goal of living a Godly life. Comparing and contrasting their concepts and practices of attention/mindfulness and relationship with the divine reveal common and diverging threads. While all of them define mindfulness in connection to developing the inner self and establishing a better relationship with God, St. Ignatius, Catherine of Siena, and Judaism have differences in practicing attention. Furthermore, they similarly desire a deep relationship with God but differ in the specific ways of achieving it.

        St. Ignatius believed that mindfulness refers to a disciplined approach to paying attention to one’s inner and outer world and using that consciousness to become nearer to God and develop as Jesus’ disciple (Fontana, 2014). He asserted that giving intense attention to everyday activities and inner emotions and ideas can be used as a path towards heightening God’s presence in life (Fontana, 2014). St. Ignatius shows the importance of mindfulness to becoming closer to God as it builds a strong inner personality that can weather real life’s multiple ups and downs.

Like St. Ignatius, Catherine of Siena asserted that mindfulness refers to paying deep attention to one’s inner life for spiritual contemplation (Catholic Online, n.d.). She wrote to her close friend, Raymond of Capua, and advised him to do this during difficult times, “Build a cell inside your mind, from which you can never flee” (Catholic Online, n.d.). I believe she is saying that creating an inner cell indicates locking oneself inside it so that distractions are kept out. I think Catherine holds that mindfulness as a process of becoming more in touch with the inner self in order to connect to God better through prayer. Judaism likewise discerns the power of mindfulness for spiritual development.

Similar to St. Ignatius and Catherine of Siena, Judaism defined mindfulness as intense inward concentration that results in a deeper understanding of God’s presence (Rosenberg-Gottlieb, n.d.). Rabbis consider that attention to the inner self helps increase Divine energy which is essential to spiritual growth and development (Rosenberg-Gottlieb, n.d.). Jews aim for a peaceful soul that is balanced, where “shalom” means both peace and “completion, perfection, wholeness” (Rosenberg-Gottlieb, n.d.). I believe this means that mindfulness helps the Jews feel whole as they build stronger inner worlds that are connected to God. The subsequent point focuses on the process of being mindful.

To practice mindfulness, St. Ignatius formed the method called the “Daily Examen” which can be performed twice a day (Fontana, 2014). Meditating on the positive events called consolations and negative counterparts or desolations and determining why they stood out, how the Holy Spirit worked during these times, and how the teachings and events from Jesus’ life are related to these moments are important to the “Daily Examen” (Fontana, 2014). Based on this process, being mindful means reflecting deeply on what happens around and inside us in order to relate more to God and His teachings.

Unlike St. Ignatius and Jewish rabbis, Catherine of Siena did not suggest any specific method for achieving attention. A biography of her life shows that she prayed in silence and away from people (Catholic Online, n.d.). If I understood this correctly, it may be inferred that she practiced attention through meditating on silence and focusing on prayer. Furthermore, Catherine often fasted so it is possible that emptying herself physically helps her meditate too (Catholic Online, n.d.). I think Catherine connects fasting and meditation to mindfulness, which is not something that Judaism practices.

Judaism practices mindfulness through meditation like St. Ignatius and Catherine but using more Jewish practices. While different rabbis may recommend alternative ways of attention, others recommended the “*chassidic* practice of *hitbonenut* meditation” (Rosenberg-Gottlieb, n.d.). It focuses on reflecting on a spiritual concept until it produces wider creative intelligence, increases awareness, and integrates into consciousness (Rosenberg-Gottlieb, n.d.). Essential to meditation is prayer or *tefillah* which includes connecting to the spiritual source (Rosenberg-Gottlieb, n.d.). The prayer book *siddur* is noted as a “highly sophisticated, structured guide to cultivating our awareness of the presence and the power of G-d” (Rosenberg-Gottlieb, n.d.). If I understood correctly, mindfulness is attained through structured prayer. The next point compares and contrasts conceptions of relationship with the divine.

St. Ignatius stated that God made humanity and wanted to share His life with them eternally and to fulfill their end, they must praise, honor, and serve God (Fleming, n.d.). God made all things out of His love and people must use these gifts with reverence to praise and honor God which develop a deep relationship with Him (Fleming, n.d.). I think St. Ignatius is saying that, by being good stewards of nature, they also become good followers of God. Furthermore, St. Ignatius believed in balance through not focusing on external things alone but mostly on serving God (Fleming, n.d.). To build a strong relationship with God entails wanting and choosing all that contribute to “God’s deepening life in” humanity as well as praying to Him constantly (Fleming, n.d.). I believe St. Ignatius see people as dutiful followers of God’s will.

Catherine of Siena has the same thinking as St. Ignatius regarding the human-divine relationship though with emphasis on prayer, fasting, and compassion to becoming good children of God (Catholic Online, n.d.). She regarded that a deep union with God starts with fasting and prayer, essentially underscoring the role of mindfulness to a strong God-centered life (Catholic Online, n.d.). Furthermore, Catherine led an active compassionate life to promoting peace. She once wrote letters to her followers and even Pope Gregory XI to advocate for peace among  the states (Catholic Online, n.d.). In addition, Catherine is also compassionate to the needy. While she starved herself, she gave most of her food to the poor (Catholic Online, n.d.). I think she shows how building a relationship with God includes compassion for the marginalized sectors of society.

Judaism has a more binary view of people’s relationship with God connected to their being children of God and often imbued with metaphors. First, Jews hold that people are made in God’s image so “they have an insight into the world that is unlike other species and closer to God's, and that they have a sense of self and relationship which is God-like” (Scheinerman, n.d.). I think this makes God the Father and the Jews His children. Second, Jews also have metaphors for their relationship with the divine, “king/subject, parent/child, shepherd/sheep, lover/beloved, and so on” (Scheinerman, n.d.). I believe Judaism supposes that human-God relationships can be deeply personal and unique for every person too although structured prayers and religious activities are fundamental (Scheinerman, n.d.). I believe the Jews understand that they can build a strong relationship with God as the Father and in connection to their everyday spiritual activities.

These three religious references define mindfulness as developing the inner self and forming a better relationship with God but have differences in attaining it, whereas they seek for a deep relationship with God but differ in the means to the Divine. From my understanding, St. Ignatius, Catherine, and Judaism believe in mindfulness as giving attention to the inner self and praying to achieve it, but Catherin includes fasting while the Jews have a  more structured process. They also see themselves as children of God too, but, to achieve a strong relationship with the Divine, good deeds are essential to St. Ignatius and Catherine, but, for the Jews, prayers and Jewish practices are more important. Hence, I believe St. Ignatius, Catherine, and Judaism are similar in valuing mindfulness as one of the roads to a better human-Divine relationship.

## **References**

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