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MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN NAIROBI

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1. Introduction

This Paper explores meditation and contemplative practice among young adults in Nairobi. A general opinion about young people is that they are usually not interested in religion. This could as well be more than a mere opinion. Sylvia Collins-Moyo (2010) states, "Young people are less likely to identify with any one religious tradition than their older contemporaries, less likely to subscribe to the creed of a major world religion and less likely to attend a place of worship on a regular basis" (See also Davie, 2000; Voas & Crockett, 2005). Such situation is common particularly in the urban contexts, even in Africa (Shorter & Onyancha, 1997). Despite this general trend in young people's attitude towards religion, some scholars have argued that religion could have a positive impact on young people, often even changing their behaviour, when they could be invited to an experiential form of religion (Smith & Denton, 2005).

The difference in the response of young people to matters of the spiritual could be understood in the context of the distinction made in contemporary scholarship between religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity is associated with institutional affiliation, whereas spirituality refers to individual and personal experiences that may or may not be even related to the 'Sacred' (Selvam, 2013). In a more sophisticated discussion, while religiosity may be identified with ritualism and formalised belief, spirituality is related to "a search for meaning, for unity, for connectedness, for transcendence, and for the highest of human potential" (Emmons, 1999, p.5).

It is possible that young people are more and more attracted to the individual and experiential forms of spirituality than to the institutional

form of religion. As for their impact on youth, both religiosity and spirituality have the potential to facilitate positive outcome, though at different levels. Reviewing some related literature, Donahue and Benson (2010) have shown that religiousity is positively associated with pro-social values and behaviour, and negatively related to suicide ideation and attempts, substance abuse, premature sexual involvement, and delinquency.

Again, examining the literature on the impact of religiosity and spirituality on addictive behavior and recovery, Selvam (2012) concludes that religiosity appears to provide a protective element against addiction. This protection may be mediated by religion-based preventive education or by affiliation to religious groups that proscribe, or warn against, the use of drug and alcohol. Religion may also improve coping skills and reduce stress and thus indirectly guard against psychological factors that trigger addiction. On the other hand, spirituality based interventions appear to facilitate recovery from addiction to some extent, and play a greater role in maintaining recovery. Moreover, spiritual practices, such as meditation and silence, are said to have a positive impact on long-term recovery from substance abuse.

A popular means of facilitating the positive effects of spirituality on young people is by the use of meditation, or what is popularly known as, 'mindfulness.' For instance, Broderick and Jennings (2012) have suggested that mindfulness practice among adolescents could be a promising approach to supporting emotion regulation and preventing risky behaviour. Despite the lack of sufficient evidence emerging from well-designed experimental studies, mindfulness in children and youth may be an effective method of building resilience in general population and in the treatment of mental disorders in clinical populations (Greenberg & Harris, 2011).

What is mindfulness? In the words of a report from the UK-based Mental Health Foundation, "Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment by using meditation, yoga and breathing techniques. It involves consciously bringing awareness to our thoughts and feelings, without making judgments…"(MHF, 2010, p. 12). Shapiro (2009, p.556) defines mindfulness as "the awareness that arises through intentionally attending in an open, accepting, and discerning way to whatever is arising in the present moment."

Although mindfulness is sometimes used in therapy and other

contexts of intervention without any religious connotation, its roots in religious and spiritual traditions cannot be denied. The MHF document (2010) further states, "Mindfulness is most commonly linked with Buddhist practices, although similar ideas and techniques are found in ancient Greek philosophy, contemplative Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Gestalt and humanistic psychologies and today's 'slow movement'" (see also Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). More specifically, in the Christian tradition, there are methods of prayer which are comparable to techniques that are referred to as 'mindfulness' (Molleur, 2009). The way of 'praying' with these Christian methods is often referred to as contemplation.

It is interesting to note that, often in academic literature, 'mindfulness' is also simply referred to as 'contemplative practice' (Holland, 2006; Nanda, 2009). On the other hand, meditation, at least as understood in the Christian tradition, would be considered different from contemplation, in that meditation involves more a prayerful reflection on a religious theme. It involves the mind; that is why it is also referred to as 'mental prayer.' That is to say, meditation is more discursive in nature. Whereas, contemplative prayer involves the heart in its initial stages, and eventually through prolonged sitting in quietness it is expected to lead the practitioner to an experience of emptiness. One method that most resembles mindfulness is the "Jesus Prayer" or also known as, 'Hesychasm.'.As Appel and Kim-Appel (2009, p.507) have pointed out, "Many have also compared the Eastern Orthodoxy tradition of the hesychast practice of focusing one's attention on an individual object to a direct form of meditation or mindfulness. Philokalia (read: hesychasm) can be seen as a form of a meditation of the heart … whose goal is to ignore the senses and achieve an inner stillness." This justifies the use of "Jesus Prayer" among a sample of Christian young adults in Nairobi in order to explore the psychological and social effects of contemplative practice.

It is said that "Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti, 1969, p.1) and yet the systematic study of the social and psychological impact of religion and/or spirituality on the African population, particularly the young people, is wanting. Far from being even discussed is the use of any method of contemplative practice in the formation of young people. The aim of this paper is to report a section from a larger study (Selvam, 2012) that attempted to fill the gap in research, by examining the effect

of meditation on wellbeing among the young population in Nairobi, Kenya.This qualitative study began with two basic research questions: i) What are the experiences of young people practicing the Jesus Prayer technique of Christian contemplative practice? ii) What is the impact of the contemplative practice on their outlook of life and behaviour?

2. Method

a) Research Design: The study being reported here is a qualitative exploration of the experiences of the participants in a larger intervention-based experiment. Psychology relies heavily on quantitative studies. Nevertheless, as Molden and Dweck (2006, p.192) assert, "The search for universal principles of human behaviour and information processing is one of the primary goals of psychological science… However important universal principles are, they sometimes obscure how real people actually function. That is, by attempting to describe only the average, one runs the risk of describing nobody in particular." This limitation in quantitative studies can be overcome by means of qualitative approaches. While quantitative studies help researchers establish collective scientific patterns (etic perspective), qualitative data contributes to the understanding of the perceptions and experiences of individuals (emic perspective). The present report focusses on the latter.

b) Participants: Twenty-five participants were recruited from a surveyed sample of 504 university students and working youth in the city of Nairobi, Kenya. The recruitment criterion for the meditation intervention was that they scored above the cut-off point in one of the three measures of addictive behaviour: compulsive use of internet, alcohol misuse, and sexual addiction. At the end of the intervention, 10 participants agreed to be interviewed. The mean age of the sample was 23.5; age range was from 21 to 28. Five of them were males, and five others females. The present paper reports the data from the interviews. Table 6.1 presents a description of all participants who were interviewed.

Table 6.1 Description of the Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation
P1	23	Female	BA student
P2	22	Female	Unemployed
P3	27	Male	Electrician
P4	20	Female	BA student
P5	21	Male	Employed
P6	28	Male	Employed
P7	27	Male	Teachers' Training
P8	25	Female	Teachers' Training
P9	21	Female	Unemployed
P10	21	Male	Form IV leaver

c) Intervention: Christian contemplative practice refers to certain practices of praying that involve silent, mostly individual, awareness-based, God-focused techniques. It is different from communal liturgical worship, and the individual prayers in its various forms (petitions, praise and thanksgiving, penitential invocations) that are common in Christian traditions. It is also subtly different from Christian meditation that basically involves a "discursive reasoning process" (Hall, 1988, p.9). Contemplative prayer transcends the thinking and reasoning of meditation, and to some extent, even the emotional and feeling aspects. It can be described in terms of silence, presence, and awareness. Phrases like "loving gaze," and "knowing beyond knowing" (Hall, 1988, p.9), are often used to elucidate the dynamics of contemplation. Finney and Malony (1985) offer a definition that shows a similarity to the definition of mindfulness, while being different from it: "Contemplative prayer can be defined as a particular form of Christian prayer in which one gives one's full attention to relating to God in a passive, non-defensive, non-demanding way. It is a patient waiting on God to deepen one's confidence in God's power and love. Having been made more secure by increased confidence in God, one is freed to love others more unconditionally" (p.173).

The method of Christian contemplation practice used as intervention in the present study was "Jesus Prayer." It originated in Egypt in the 3rd Century CE among the earliest groups of Christian monks, popularly known as "Desert Fathers and Mothers." The Jesus Prayer consists in

repeating a short invocation combining it with rhythmic breathing and the use of prayer beads. Each of these elements is briefly described below.

The invocation: The repetition of the invocation offers the possibility for the Christian to practice the injunction of St Paul: "Pray without ceasing" (1The 5:17). St Cassian invited his fellow monks to pray a sentence from Psalm 69: "O God, come to my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me." In due course, the name of Jesus came to be used. The words suggested in the intervention of this project were "Jesus, Son of the living God, have mercy on me." There have been various versions in vogue throughout the centuries. The earliest known version used in the 6th century was, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" (Barrington-Ward, 2007).

The 19th century classic, The Way of Pilgrim (Anon., 1991) uses yet another version: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner." These words are based on two texts from the New Testament. One is from the cry of the blind man in Jericho, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"(Luke, 18:38); and the other is of the tax collector in the parable of the two men who went to the temple to pray. The tax collector prayed in utter humility, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). The suggested version in the present intervention was meant to be short enough for repetition within one cycle of inspiration and expiration.

Breathing: The inner silence is facilitated by a focus on breathing. It is probable that the exercise of breathing began to be combined with the Jesus Prayer at least starting from the time of John Climacus in the seventh century. Climacus said, "When you unite the memory of Jesus with your breathing, then you will know the benefit of hesychia" (Barrington-Ward, 2007, p.47). Breathing acts as an anchor in the endeavour to be attentive. However, for attention to be effortless and relaxed, breathing is not to be purposely manipulated. When the practitioner begins to pay attention to breathing, particularly when seated without movement, usually a rhythm is spontaneously established. Some recent writers have tried to theologize on the act of breathing, relating it to the breath of the Spirit, 'ruah,' in Hebrew (Goettmann & Goettmann, 1996).

Prayer Beads: The use of different forms of prayer-beads or prayer-ropes is common among most known religious traditions of the world

(Wiley & Shannon, 2002). They are generally used in repetitive prayers, or mantras, as they are referred to in religions of Indian origin. The purpose of the beads is to count, but they also act as an additional anchor for attention. The earliest use of prayer beads could be traced to Hinduism. They are referred to as Japa-Mala with 108 beads, and they are used to chant the holy names of deities, or for the repetition of simple mantras, but generally for the purpose of concentration. Similar use is also observed in Buddhism especially in the Tibetan tradition. The Tasbih with 33 or 99 beads is used by the Muslims to repeat the 99 names of God. In general, the use of the name of God or deities is common in repetitive prayers across religious traditions. In the present intervention the beads were used as an anchor to aid the practitioner to get back to concentration when they realise that they are distracted. Moreover, since it involves a tactile experience that is almost effortless, the movement of the beads in one's fingers might provide a sense of grounding – being here and now; together with the breathing and the invocation, the movement of the beads could help in bringing the whole person to the contemplative practice.

d) Procedure: The participants and the facilitators of the meditation sessions were blind to the research questions. Though the primary researcher was present for all the training sessions, he was not directly involved in the intervention. To begin with, the participants went through a weekend practice of Jesus Prayer. They were asked to practice the prayer at least for 20-minutes on a daily basis. Audio guides in the form of a CD were provided. To monitor if they practiced on a daily basis, the participants were given a journal to note the duration of practice and the experience during the practice. The group also came together for common practice for ten consecutive Saturdays. The interviews were conducted during the course of the 10th week. On the last Saturday, there was a debriefing of all the participants by the primary researcher.

e) Data Collection: The semi-structured interviews, that lasted 15 to 20 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed for emerging themes by two researchers. The following questions formed the basic Interview Guide, other probing questions were asked as the need arose. Note that the word "meditation" was used in the interview in order not to be too technical with the participants.

1. What has been your experience in general with the meditation practice in the last ten weeks?
2. What happens to you actually when you sit in meditation? Were there any specific experiences?
3. Have you noticed any change in your behaviour after you started the training?
4. What were the challenges that you have faced in these ten weeks in the practice of the meditation?
5. Do you think you will continue to practice the meditation?

f) Data Analysis: The method employed in the analysis of data in the present study was thematic analysis. "Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Often this approach goes beyond identifying and analysing to interpreting various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis consists of coding the data systematically and finally reporting patterns that are identified in the data. A similar procedure was employed in a previous work by the primary researcher (Selvam & Collicutt, 2013). Since no theoretical framework was used in the coding process, the epistemological framework of the present data analysis could be termed as a "grounded theory approach" (Charmaz, 2008). For the sake of reliability the coding process was carried out by the two authors comparing notes at different stages:

Step 1.Open Coding: The transcribed interviews were meticulously read by the two authors independently, highlighting words, phrases and sentences that had possible meaning in relation to the two research questions. Each highlighted text-unit was assigned a theme on the margin by each author.

Step 2. Axial Coding: In the second level of coding the two authors came together to compare their notes. There was a high level of similarity in the coding as they went through the text paragraph by paragraph. When there was a difference of coding they agreed on a possible common code after due discussion.

Step 3. Thematic Identification: Having agreed on the list of codes in relation to the coded text, the authors focussed on the most salient themes that provide significant answer to the research questions. The results section reports the identified themes.

3. Results

This section reports the emerging themes from the transcribed interviews. The themes are presented in two major groups, based on the two research questions: (a) Experience of the Christian contemplative practice; (b) The impact of the Christian contemplative practice on the young adults' outlook of life and behaviour. The themes are substantiated with verbatim quotes from the participants. Numbers within brackets at the end of the quotes indicate the participant(s) whose details are presented in Table 6.1.

a) Experience of the Christian Contemplative Practice

Initial Difficulties: Most participants spoke of certain level of difficulty at the initial stages of learning to contemplate. "First to start it is not that easy, until it becomes a routine. Once you do it every day it becomes easy" (P2). What were these initial difficulties about? Sometimes these were in the form of distractions from the environment: "I could sit down and meditate somewhere. Or as I was distracted by my friends and music so I used to go somewhere alone and meditate… So at the start it was a bit difficult but as I continued it became easier" (P4). Other times, the distractions are cluttering thoughts and emotions within oneself: "when you sit down and meditate, your thoughts kind of… you know, at first you're having, because you are having all these thoughts coming together all at once, but by the end of the couple of weeks, you feel like, you know you are at peace" (P5). And another male participant (P3) acknowledged, "So during the meditation, the major challenge to me was stray thoughts: you can be meditating then you could be thinking of something different, … may be you are talking of, you are praying for to leave something like alcohol in my case, then your mind goes away to your friends and to the pub where you used to take." For one female participant (P2), sometimes moments of silence could be tormented by guilt and the absence of God, as will be described here below.

Feeling light and being lifted up: Despite these initial difficulties, almost all participants described in very vivid terms particular instances of sitting for meditation that were coloured by experiences of elation.

These experiences were described in terms of "feeling light and carried up" and "being lifted-up". When asked what really happens to them when they are sitting in meditation, one typical statement was, "Ok, when I begin meditating I find always myself, er… I always get light, and carried up. I just feel like I am light. Then I feel humbled inside me, and I just see that I am a different, at least I am in a different place, I am not like er, I am in a different world, if I can put it that way, because, I er I just feel. Ok, I cannot have the best word to express, but I feel humbled and focussed" (P3). Similar expressions are in the mouth of a female participant (P4), "I was seated in the chair. I was using the CD to meditate, then I felt… I felt like I was being lifted. And I was feeling like I was at the climax of meditation. I was feeling relaxed. And I was, I was not feeling like I was seated down, I was feeling like I was seated somewhere. And I felt I was closer to God that day. I was not thinking of anything, and my mind did not get distracted that day. I was just there. I felt like I was hanging somewhere but relaxed." Sometimes there seems to an opposite feeling of "being weighty." Perhaps it is a sense of being overwhelmed emotionally which is not necessarily a negative experience: "Yeah, sometimes it can be so weighty that I find myself sheding tears. Sometimes I walk out with some joy, I have not yet achieved the thing but there is that inner joy. I can even just smile, and shed tears at the same time I smile" (P7).

Experience of God: Often these instances of "being lifted" were related to "the experience of being closer to God" (P6). "And I felt I was closer to God that day. I was not thinking of anything, and my mind did not get distracted that day. I was just there. I felt like I was hanging somewhere but relaxed" (P4). The same female participant (P4) goes on, "Yeah, I learnt that through silence God can speak to you… because if you concentrate and focus yourself in meditation you can feel God's presence." The male participant (P3) who described his experience in terms of feeling "light and carried up", spontaneously adds: "When I start meditating, I, especially when we say, 'let it be' I find everything, (in a louder voice) I feel like the presence of God, so that I can… I can… ok I am humbled, in a way that I er, all my feelings are concentrated on God alone." The experience of God is not always associated with a sense of euphoria but emptiness and silence, though such experiences are not negative in themselves, "So, I would keep on

repeating, repeating Jesus prayer, until I just feel, I don't need it again. But, in me I just feel yeah, my heart is silent like I am empty, the mind is empty, the heart is empty, the inner me is empty and I can now feel God" (P2).

b) Impact of Contemplation on Participants' Outlook of Life and Behaviour:

While speaking about the effects of the contemplative practice, most participants were spontaneous in acknowledging that for sure, there has been a difference" (P1). One participant claimed, "The experience of meditation has changed my life… My life is now just going on well" (P10). Another participant even spoke of certain "change of character:"

> "Since I started meditation, everything has changed. I have that intrinsic motivation… I feel at peace with myself, and there is that desire to make other people feel at peace… since then so many people have responded, eeeiii, now days you have changed, I just need your encouragement. Then I have been wondering why is my character changing? Yeah, then the most thrilling part of it all, I just preformed very wonderfully [in exams]. (Laughs) … I attribute it to the meditation… Yeah, it just allures your flow. Yeah! It is quite exiting" (P7).

This lengthy quote captures the general impression of almost all participants. We explore these changes under the following themes.

Intrapersonal Transformation: The first set of changes that the young adult participants have reported could be termed as a set of intrapersonal skills. These skills range from increased introspection to self-acceptance. The changes in the self begin with the need for silence and solitude that the contemplative practice has triggered in the individual. "Now I feel there are times that I contain myself for close to two weeks, yeah, everybody says you are too quiet nowadays… yeah, there is that thing that propels you to keep within yourself" (P7). And this is "normally positive, 'coz I don't find myself in quiet moments where I think about bad things, no I just think about positive things." And another participant claims "The silence there shows me a lot of things" (P10).

This silence facilitates "thinking about things happening within" (P7). As a result some are "able to tell when I am getting out of hand emotionally" (P1), most others are able to evaluate their attitudes and past choices: "Like when you sit for meditation, or when you do this mindful exercise, you are evaluating the previous day and you say I might have to correct these things" (P5, also P3); another participant (P10) puts it in similar words: the meditation has helped me "to realise the mistake that I have been doing. I don't know I have been doing mistakes. It has helped me a lot." This self-awareness in contemplation is usually with a lot of calmness leading to self-acceptance: it has helped me "for knowing myself more… but calmly, calmly to manage myself" (P8, also P9).

Calmness and peace of mind seem very tangible outcomes of the contemplative practice: "Peace. I just feel I have the peace of mind, nothing is disturbing me… I feel am now comfortable" (P2). Peace of mind is a result of letting go of worry (P4), despite difficulties in life: "I feel at peace with myself… even when things are very hot, am normally at peace, I find myself encouraging others" (P7). Peace of mind is often linked to the awareness of the presence of God: "God is there surrounding me. I would feel am at peace, and I would feel, I feel like extending [the contemplation] like hour, yeah!" (P2).

Self-awareness, among the interviewed participants, is linked up with a sincere humility. This humility could be an outcome of the experience of God that is humbling (P3), and humility also facilitates better relationship with others: "I find that not every time I am right, not every time I have to say something and everyone support it. I might meet opposition and through meditation I have learnt how to handle . . . oppositions. . . I think I feel care and I have, I become sensitive to others" (P2). The next theme elaborates the dimension of improved relationship with others.

Interpersonal Growth: Almost all participants in the contemplative intervention acknowledged improved relationships with others as a result of the practice. They listened to others more and were able to respond empathetically to others' feelings and concerns. "In terms of relationship with others I would say, am able to listen more, to listen more when somebody says something and not only just to listen to what they are saying but to also listen to what they are not saying. Am more

in touch also with others, also with their feelings that they display, and I must say intuitively I have grown" (P1). This empathy is also accompanied by being less judgmental about others: "… generally I am able to relate better with the people, and most of the times the people I consider annoying... You know when somebody just calls me and I know you are going to tell me something that will annoy me, I find am able to just listen without having judged already what this person is going to say. So it has helped me to see people for who they really are, not just what am thinking or perceiving they are" (P1).

Most participants also acknowledged a growth in altruistic sentiments in reaching out to others, being sensitive to their problems: "I can say my behavior has changed. There are times when you could just speak of your problems to me, then it's like I care less. But now I've gotten so much attracted to other people's problems than mine, that I tend to spend more time thinking about other people's problem than I used to…" (P7). Enhanced interpersonal skills are expressed most of all in forgiveness and reconciliation. Contemplative practice seems to aid letting go of grudges (P4) and sometimes expressing oneself calmly when hurt (P10), empowered by "better ways of solving conflicts" (P7). In brief, "When you are meditating … forgiveness is the first thing that can come into my mind. Yeah, it helps me a lot. I don't create enmity with people. And when I see somebody wants to hurt me in another way, and himself does not know, at least I better inform him. And if I have done wrong to him, I ask him to forgive me. And if himself has done wrong to me, himself also has to ask for forgiveness to me" (P10). Often this forgiveness is also expressed in reconciliation: "Like now there are several people who have wronged me in the past and I still talk to them, and I don't feel anything" (P4).

Making Considered Decisions: Another salient feature expressed by most participants was the change in their style of decision making. Since the practice of contemplation:

• they do not make decisions reacting on the spur of the moment, but the decisions are delayed and prudent: "You know someone does something to you, you don't go shouting out and er… and saying you did this, you did this. You know, you sit down and you kind of think it over before you decide to react" (P5);

• they were able to make more considered decisions which are even altruistic: "to think before doing something and also thinking of the consequences of what it would mean to myself and also to others" (P1; also P5);

• they begin to make decisions in the light of faith: "it's like surrendering [the decision] to God or thinking it in God's way… at the end of the day it is better, it is the right decision that you have made" (P2);

• their decisions are goal-oriented and filled with a hopeful future: "the decision I make are more mature, are more goal oriented… So you decide where you want to be, and you also set goals towards where you want to be" (P5); "Umm, there is this good life ahead. Yeah, there are times that we talk and you don't see a bright future, life is of ups and downs but there is this thing that I see that my life will be the best of lives" (P7); "Yes, I am going to achieve my goals in whatever way"(P8).

Related to purposeful living and taking responsibility is the attitude of the participants towards time. They are aware of the present moment; the practitioners of contemplation notice improved time-management – planning their day better (P3); being punctual (P7); and being able to accomplish more within a short time (P5), performing better and creating more time to achieve their goals (P6 & P7). It is worth mentioning also that some participants spontaneously mentioned changes in their previous addictive behaviour. It should be recalled that the participants were recruited because they scored high on some addiction measures. However, though during the practice sessions, there was no instruction encouraging or forbidding any behaviour, some participants (P3, P4, & P8) mentioned that they had reduced their drinking habit. One participant (P10) spoke of giving up his gambling habit. Others (P6 & P7) owned up to being moderate about their use of internet. Elsewhere the primary researcher has explored the association between contemplative practice and recovery from addictive behaviour (Selvam, 2012).

Increase in religiosity: It is worth noting that most participants acknowledged an increase in religiosity, in terms of participation in common worship, improved concentration during routine prayer (P7), and in the case of Catholic participants, using the sacraments (for instance, P4 and P8). What seems interesting here is the integration of the contemplative practice with regular religious practice. In the inter-

view, a participant (P3) talked about going to the church on weekdays as something new in his life after he began the contemplative practice: "you know, now-a-day I've begun going for this prayers in the church even during weekdays…"

Another female participant (P4) described her experience of going for the Catholic practice of private confession: "Then there was a day also when I started meditating when I was in church, people were told to go for confession and I was reluctant. I didn't want to go. Then immediately I started meditating, I just found myself, I just felt like going for confession immediately, I just stood and went without telling anyone that I was going for my confession." The same participant also acknowledged her improved attention in church-service: "Meditation has also helped me to concentrate especially in church during homily where my mind was always preoccupied."

To conclude the results section, we cite a spontaneous and powerful expression from one of the participants that sums up the effect of the contemplative practice on the young adult participants, "The ten weeks had been a miracle" (P8).

4. Discussion

The objective of the present study was to explore the social and psychological impact of spirituality on young people in the African context. More precisely, it was to examine how a method of contemplative practice could contribute to the formation of young people. The data in the form of emerging themes have provided insightful contributions in answering the two research questions: What are the experiences of young people practicing Jesus Prayer technique of Christian contemplative practice? What is the impact of the practice on their outlook of life and behaviour?

What the participants in the present study attribute as effects of the practice of a method of Christian contemplation is similar to what Hamilton and colleagues (2006, p.123) have claimed, namely that "mindfulness meditation promotes positive adjustment by strengthening meta-cognitive skills and by changing schemas related to emotion, health, and illness." Furthermore, Shapiro and colleagues (2002, p.640) list the following characteristics as the outcome of mindfulness: non-judging, non-striving, acceptance, patience, trust, openness, letting go,

gentleness, generosity, empathy, gratitude, and loving kindness. Most of these qualities have also featured in the present data.

On another plane, speaking solely in a secular context, Daniel Siegal (2007) offers insight into the neurobiological substrates of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness or contemplation, he claims, improves the working of the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which in human beings is responsible for decision-making. Mindfulness practice facilitates delayed response to stimulus and thus mediates a slower, considered response to situations and wiser decision making. The data from the present study supports this claim. Several participants spoke of improved decision making, as voiced by the 21-year old male participant (P5): "I felt like I could take a bit more time, to make certain decisions… You know, you sit down and you kind of think it over before you decide to react." What are the implications of the present study for education and formation youth? The Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century spoke of four pillars of Education (Delors, 1996): Learning to know, Learning to do, Learning to live together, and Learning to be. The first two pillars focus on knowledge and skills; but the latter two pillars are of particular interest to the present study. What do these two pillars stand for? The Delors' Document goes on to expand their significance:

> • Learning to live together: "by developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values and, on this basis, creating a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence…to manage conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way."
>
> • Learning to be: "everyone will need to exercise greater independence and judgement combined with a stronger sense of personal responsibility for the attainment of common goals."

The emerging themes presented in the Results section of the present paper suggest that contemplative practice among young adults has contributed greatly to the development of these two pillars of education, namely, learning to live together and learning to be. Several participants in the study have attested to the experience that contemplative practice has made them more altruistic, being sensitive to others' emotions, being non-judgemental, and building a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. Others have also spoken about growth in personal responsibility and being goal-oriented. If education is to go beyond learning of knowledge and skills, as Delors (1996) suggests, it seems imperative to integrate

contemplative practices in the formation of young people.

There is ample literature that supports this suggestion. For instance, Broderick and Jennings (2012) have conceptualised that mindfulness practice among adolescents has the potential to cushion the impact of neurobiological changes experienced at this stage of life, reducing stress and facilitating emotion regulation. Elsewhere, Jennings (2008) has pointed out how what she called "mindfulness education" could be used effectively in helping young people develop concentration, awareness, and compassion (see also Selvam, 2011).

Among the limitations of the present study could be acknowledged the small sample size. However, for a qualitative study the present sample size was indeed very moderate. Moreover, the rigour and transparency exhibited in the present study could make up for the lack in sample size. The qualitative design of the study itself could be cited as a limitation. It would be worthwhile to operationalize, in the future, a well-framed quantitative study among young African population to examine the effects of contemplative practice. A quantitative experimental design could help establish cause-effect relationship. In any case, despite these limitations, the present study has contributed to the growing support for the claim that "mindfulness-based intervention can be rigorously operationalized, conceptualized, and empirically evaluated" in the context of health and wellbeing (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

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