

6-30-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Plante, T. G. (2021). Using the Examen, a Jesuit Prayer, in Spiritually Integrated and Secular Psychotherapy. *Pastoral Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00967-0>

The final publication is available at Springer via <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00967-0>

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## **Using the Examen, a Jesuit prayer, in spiritually integrated and secular psychotherapy**

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## Abstract

The Examen is a 500-year-old end of day prayer developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus better known as the Jesuits. Like many other religious or spiritual practices, such as mindfulness and yoga, the Examen is suitable as either a spiritually focused or secular intervention strategy to assist people within clinical psychotherapy practice and elsewhere. Adapting the Examen as a cognitive behavioral psychotherapy intervention is easy to do and may add another important tool to the toolbox of practicing clinicians interested in thoughtfully integrating spiritually based approaches in their clinical work for the religious as well as non-religiously minded clients.

*Keywords:* Catholic, Jesuit, Examen, prayer, meditation, cognitive-behavioral

Various spiritual and religious practices over the centuries from all of the great wisdom and faith traditions have often been used to provide comfort, solace, hope, and help in living for those who follow or belong to these various traditions (e.g., Pargament, 2007; Plante, 2009). Prayer, meditation, confession, spiritual music, attending religious services, almsgiving, fasting, spiritual direction, pastoral counseling, and so forth have been helpful and therapeutic for many both for those within a particular originating religious tradition and across traditions. A number of these useful religious and spiritually based strategies have been secularized in recent years so that those who may not have any interest in the religious or spiritual traditions where these techniques originated from can still benefit from the wisdom associated with these particular interventions and therapeutic activities. Some have expressed concerns about religious appropriation, using religious practices, symbols, clothing, and so forth in ways that was not intended by the originating religious tradition and for secular and even profit-making purposes (Bregman, 2019; Brunk & Young, 2009; Nardella, 2012). Like cultural appropriation in general, many are concerned about ethical problems associated with borrowing from various groups is done without permission and respect or when profit motive is a primary motive (Brunk & Young, 2009).

### **Secularization of Religion and Spiritual Strategies**

Perhaps the best example of the currently popular secularization trend of religious and spiritual practices is the exploding interest and practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness, and most specifically mindfulness based stress reduction, has become remarkably popular in recent years throughout the United States and the western world (e.g., Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013; Khoury, Lecomte, Fortin, Masse, Therien, Bouchard, et al, 2013). While mindfulness has roots deep within the Buddhist tradition, it has been stripped of these roots so that it appeals to not

only non-Buddhists but to those who have no interest or affiliation with any spiritual or faith tradition. Many people benefit from practicing mindfulness without any particular connection to Buddhism (Barker, 2014; Plante, 2016). Yoga is another good example of this secularization trend as well. While yoga has roots within the Hindu tradition, the style of yoga practiced in the United States, and many other western countries, is mostly stripped of these Hindu roots and it often has become essentially an exercise class frequently offered in exclusive health clubs and spas or yoga studios among well healed and secular clients (Khalsa, 2013; Smith, 2011). In fact, high priced yoga wear fashions (e.g., Lululemon) have become as much part of the yoga and popular culture scene as the actual yoga postures conducted during an instruction class (Lozanski & Lavrence, 2019; Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow, Padro, Burris, & Suddreth, 2017).

In addition to mindfulness and yoga, religious and spiritual iconography and jewelry have been adopted by many, especially fashion minded musical celebrities, regardless of their particular religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices. For example, rap and hip-hop musical artists often wear large golden crosses or red Kabbalah string wristbands even if they do not necessarily believe or practice the faith traditions that these symbols represent (Alexander, 2010; Tinajero, 2013). The point is that many religious and spiritual symbols, techniques, strategies, and interventions have been secularized so that they appeal to a mass audience who may or may not have any interest in the religious and spiritual traditions where these approaches actually came from. Religious and spiritual wisdom that helps with better living can thus be used in a way that appeals to the religious and non-religious alike. Ethical issues about religious appropriation must be carefully considered and groups must be attentive not to offend and disrespect religious groups or to borrow their techniques, strategies, and symbols without consultation and permission to do so (Brunk & Young, 2009).

## The Examen

Another useful and possible new addition to this secularization trend could include the Examen (Manney, 2011). The Examen is a brief end of the day prayer and reflection from the Roman Catholic faith tradition and, more specifically, from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius (Martin, 2021; Mottola, 1964), founder of the Society of Jesus (also known as the Jesuits; Barry & William, 2014; Martin, 2013; O'Malley, 1993). Ignatian spirituality and techniques are very popular within the Roman Catholic faith tradition and have been frequently adopted by other related faith groups as well (e.g., Episcopalians, Lutherans; Schwickerath, 2011). While the Examen is popular within Roman Catholic and Christian circles, it could easily be adapted to accommodate the interests of a secular audience in the way that mindfulness and yoga have done (Plante, 1999, 2008, 2017). St. Ignatius and the Jesuits have supported the use of the Examen by wide audiences including both diverse religious and non-religious ones without apparent concern about religious appropriation (Chinnici, 1997; Martin, 2013; Tetlow, 1994). The Examen is a good example of a likely useful cognitive behavioral technique readily available to secular psychotherapists and their psychotherapy clients.

What exactly is the Examen? The Examen is a brief 5-point prayerful method to review the day and to reflect upon and learn from it as one anticipates the next day (Manney, 2011; Martin, 2021). It was developed and refined by St. Ignatius over 500 years ago and is part of his *Spiritual Exercises* (Manney, 2011). It has become of fundamental part of Ignatian spirituality incorporated by Jesuits and others through current times (Martin, 2013). The Examen meditative process can easily be completed within 15 minutes or so and may be useful for a variety of purposes in psychotherapy as a cognitive behavioral therapy homework assignment. The first step in the Examen is to put oneself in God's, or the sacred, presence. The second step is to give

thanks and to be grateful for aspects of one's day and life. The third step is to review the day looking back on the various activities and interactions and reflect upon them in terms of what went well, or not so well, and where the presence of the divine or sacred may have been evident during various key moments and inflection points during the day. The fourth step reviews one's shortcomings or places where improvement in thought or behavior is most desired and needed. The fifth and final step includes looking forward to the next day being better prepared for what is to come and learning from the Examen review of the current day. The Examen has been used in various types and styles of mental health treatment and care including, for example, in couples therapy (Priester, 2006) and in treating worker stress and burnout (Case, Keyes, Huffman, Sittser, Wallace, Khatiwoda, et al., 2020; McMillin, 2021). Perhaps an example of the use of the Examen in psychotherapy could prove useful. The following highlights an Examen from a religiously affiliated and engaged client while the second iteration secularizes the example so that it could be used more generally for anyone, religious or not.

### **Examen Example 1: Bob**

Bob is a 50-year-old married man with two small children who he and his wife recently adopted. Bob is an engaged and active Roman Catholic who retired early in life after a successful business career. Since he and his wife tried but could not have children on their own, they recently decided to adopt two young children. Bob struggles with obsessive-compulsive personality issues and sought psychotherapy to help him with marital conflicts, obsessive tendencies, and anger management. Bob wished to integrate his faith into his life and sought out psychotherapy from a Catholic psychologist who he expected would respect and understand the importance of his faith tradition. Bob also is in spiritual direction with a Jesuit priest at a local retreat center.

In practicing the Examen, Bob starts by putting himself in God's presence by finding a quiet part of the house to sit for 15 minutes. He then recites the *Hail Mary* prayer as well as the *Our Father*, two very popular and rote Catholic prayers. He then moves to the second step in the Examen process. He thanks God for giving him and his family another day of life and for mentioning several things about his day that he is grateful for (e.g., sharing some laughs with his wife, seeing his son's delight interacting with a dog in the park, enjoying a lovely warm and sunny day). Bob then moves to step three of the Examen by reviewing his day and examining where he felt God's presence. For example, he noticed the face of God in the homeless person who asked him for money during his daily walk and felt God's presence in his interaction with one of his friends who he spoke to who is challenged by a recent cancer diagnosis. Bob then moves to the fourth step in the Examen by looking at his shortcomings during the day. For example, he feels bad that he snapped at his wife over an unexpected costly expenditure that she paid for as well as his impatience with her when she challenged him on spending too much time, in her view, on the phone with his parents during a recent call. He also felt bad that he scared his son when he loudly swore as he burned himself with spilled hot coffee in the morning. Finally, Bob moves to the last step of the Examen by looking to the next day and asking God to give him more patience with things, and people, that frustrate him. This included being more kind to a neighbor who he plans to talk to about tensions regarding noise from his buzz saw that he uses in the evening when his children are being put to bed. He ends his Examen with another *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* prayer.

While the Examen is a religious and spiritual process it can easily be secularized and used in cognitive behavioral psychotherapy. We can take Bob's Examen experience noted above



in this example and secularize it for use with those who are not from or comfortable with the religious elements of the Examen process.

For example, Bob can find a quiet place to start the Examen process and rather than using a prayer to quiet and center his mind he could read a passage from a secular book of poetry, briefly sing or hum a soothing song, or just sit still for several minutes in contemplation. He can then move to the second step of the Examen process by reflecting on what he is most grateful and thankful for about his day (e.g., enjoying his family, pleasant weather). Moving to step three of the Examen, Bob could then review different moments of his day and try to examine where things went well or did not go so well. He might see where he was pleased with his behavior and where he was displeased. In step four, he might focus on where he could have been better in terms of his reactions to daily events and how he could use cognitive behavioral strategies (e.g., thought stopping, cognitive restructuring) for better managing his anger and obsessive compulsive tendencies. Finally, in step five, he might plan for the next day anticipating challenges and coming up with strategies to manage likely difficult situations. Thus, Bob can use the Examen process and strategies in either a religious and spiritual manner, as the Examen was intended by St. Ignatius and subsequently by the Jesuits and others, or in a completely secular manner.

### **Examen Example 2: Lea**

Lea is 75-year-old married women who has a long history of challenges with panic disorder, agoraphobia, and depression. She also struggles with her relationships with her adult children and their spouses being demanding about expected behavior of those relatives closest to her. She is Roman Catholic and is actively engaged and active in her faith tradition.

As in the previous example with Bob, the Examen will be presented from both a religious and a secular approach here to demonstrate the integration of the Examen into cognitive behavioral psychotherapy for both religiously and non-religiously minded clients.

Lea goes to her private sewing room in her home to do the Examen each evening before bed. During step one, she quiets her mind with a hymn that she has found meaningful and soothing, *Be Not Afraid*, from the St. Louis Jesuits. Moving to step two of the Examen, Lea then thanks God for giving her another day of life (which she especially appreciates after recovering from breast cancer several years ago). She reminds herself that although her days may not be perfect she can be grateful for a loving husband, a lovely home, the gift of life after her successful treatment with cancer, and other aspects of her daily experiences. She enjoys sewing and is grateful that God has blessed her with this particular skill and interest feeling that she can bring joy to others with these talents. In stage three of the Examen, Lea reviews the day looking for the moments when she felt God's presence (e.g., an unexpected visit from a caring neighbor, a loving call from her son, and a lovely day where she saw a rainbow outside after a brief spring shower). She also looks for the moments when she felt that God's presence was absent (e.g., when she got frustrated with her daughter-in-law for not thanking her for a recent and expensive birthday gift, getting angry at her husband about spilling something in the kitchen). During stage four of the Examen, Lea reviews her shortcomings with particular focus on how she can easily get frustrated with others, demanding and sometimes entitled with her family members, and prays that God will bless her with more loving and grateful acceptance of both herself and others. She considers ways to do so and asks God to be with her during challenging moments. Finally, in stage five of the Examen, she anticipates the next day and considers ways that she can make her day better and her interactions with others more loving, accepting, and comfortable.

She ends her Examen with another hymn that she finds solacing; *You are Near*, also by the St. Louis Jesuits.

As in the earlier example with Bob, the Examen process with Lea can easily be secularized adapting it for those who may be uninterested in the religious or spiritual elements of the Examen process. Lea, for example, could find a quiet place to conduct the Examen and find another song that is secular or another way to quiet her mind including sitting in silence for several minutes. During stage two of the Examen, she could reflect on what she is thankful and grateful for about her day. During stage three of the Examen, she might review her day noting when she felt especially good or bad and what factors might have contributed to each experience and feeling. During stage four, she might consider her shortcomings from the day and reflect on ways to do better in the future. Finally, during stage five, she might look forward to the next day and plan to manage her challenges by planning and using cognitive behavioral strategies to do so.

## **Conclusion**

The Examen was developed by St. Ignatius as a religious, spiritual, prayerful, and meditative end of day activity (Manney, 2011; Martin, 2021; Mottola, 1964). The Jesuits have been generous with the sharing of the Examen offering it to the diverse religious and secular communities (Martin, 2013). Yet, with some thoughtful adaptation, it is certainly suitable for present day cognitive behavioral psychotherapy intervention. With or without the religious and spiritual elements of the Examen, it acts as a daily homework assignment to review the activities and interactions of the day and to highlight areas of improvement as well as areas of possible growth (see Table 1). It requests a brief time each day to review and learn from daily interactions, behavior, and plans in order to improve oneself for the next day. It also

acknowledges that we should and could be more grateful for what we do have and to see the world and our lives as a glass that is half full rather than half empty offering a positive reframe of daily events. Ignatian spirituality offers a variety of cognitive behavioral therapy friendly approaches in addition to the Examen as well (e.g., Ignatian contemplation is similar to guided imagery, Martin, 2021). While St. Ignatius was certainly not a cognitive behavioral psychotherapist perhaps if he lived during present times, he could have been (Plante, 2020).

[Insert Table 1 about Here]

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Table 1

## Five Steps of the Examen, Religious and Secular

<u>Religious</u>	<u>Secular</u>
1. Put self in God's presence	1. Quiet and center the mind with silence
2. Give thanks to God	2. Be grateful
3. Review the day attending to God's presence	3. Review the day attend to good moments
4. Attend to daily shortcomings	4. Attend to daily shortcomings
5. Invite God to be with you tomorrow	5. Plan for tomorrow and to do better