

# Spiritual styles

A six-part series exploring the variety of ways in which people experience God and make sense of the world around them.

## Part 1 Different ways of knowing God

We come to know and experience God in different ways. Within this diversity four vital spiritual avenues can be identified: the path of the intellect, the way of the emotions, the journey of mystery, and the road to justice. Congregations that wish to nurture the spirituality of each individual do well to take into account the different spiritual styles through which they can come to know and experience God in real, life-changing ways.



*'The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases.'* Carl Jung

In this six-part series, David Csinos helps us to reflect on the impact of the four styles on the way we plan and provide worship and learning opportunities. Beginning with an overview, the series will consider the impact of the four styles on each aspect of our provision and offer practical suggestions to help you to create truly inclusive church communities.

### Introduction

All people are spiritual beings. But we don't express this spirituality in uniform ways. How we connect with God and express our ultimate concerns differs from person to person.

During a six-month research project that involved interviewing children about their spiritual lives, four distinct yet overlapping avenues for knowing God became clear, each one as legitimate and vital to spirituality and formation as the other. I have called these four ways of knowing God *spiritual styles*. And since that research project, my colleagues and I have noticed the same four styles also at work in the spiritual lives of adolescents and adults.

These preferences affect us in deep ways, shaping the way we make sense of the world, what we value, how we live out our quest to transcend the here-and-now, and our relationships with others.

**Q** What style of worship helps you to pray? Quiet, active, music, reading or a combination?

### A word-centred approach to spirituality

This approach focuses on the importance of words, of using the right words in the right way. Clarity, precision, accuracy and concreteness matter. When it comes to spiritual formation, word-centred individuals equate growth in faith with increases in knowledge. They know God when they know about God. Thus, they focus on helping people make gains in propositional knowledge about God in ways that can be conveyed with accuracy. The ability to articulate beliefs with clarity is seen as evidence of a well-grounded faith, a faith that's shared through rational argument. Increasing propositional knowledge is the transformational goal of this style.

Spoken and written words are central to the spiritual lives of word-centred people, for it is through these words that they learn about God and the world around them, and thus grow as spiritual persons. Liturgical and formational practices emphasising cognitive learning are seen as the crux of spiritual formation – practices like exegetical preaching, analytical Bible study, instructional Sunday school lessons, and personal study. For word-centred individuals, the Bible is central to Christian faith; it is the Word above all words.

**Q** How important is it to you to study the Bible in detail?

### An emotion-centred approach to spirituality

This approach upholds feelings as the core of spirituality. For these people, having deep emotional experiences is what tends the garden of the soul and spiritual formation involves helping others have similar experiences. This isn't a lazy alternative to the rigorous intellectualism of word-centred spirituality; it involves the difficult and sometimes exhausting work of getting in touch with the inner self's deepest feelings. While it's easy to assume that only warm, fuzzy emotions matter to this style, the *type* of emotion seems to matter less than the *intensity* of it. Deep sorrow, grief, fear, anxiety and other emotions are just as valid as joy and happiness. The transformational goal of this style is a personal renewal of the innermost being, a renewal that touches the core of one's deepest feelings.

The performing arts are often seen as effective for evoking strong emotions and nurturing an emotion-centred spirituality. Christians who prefer this style often attest to sensing God's presence through music, dance and drama, particularly when it grants them freedom to express what they feel in the moment.

Highly-emotional conversion experiences are sometimes stressed as the hallmark of authentic faith, and emphatic testimony of God at work in personal lives is seen to help others come to faith. Close personal relationships are treasured and Jesus is often perceived in relational terms, as divine friend, lover or parent, who knows the highs and lows of life.

**Q** What place does music or art have in the way you like to express your faith?

## A symbol-centred approach to spirituality

People who prefer this style value abstract symbols, images and metaphors over concrete words and emotions. They are mystics who see God as ultimate mystery, the being that surpasses all understanding.

People with this style value ineffable sensing of God's presence. When they sense God, they may not wish to speak about the experience, for words cannot describe these transcendental encounters. For them, God and experiences of God can never be fully understood, and attempts to contain them are seen as rendering these experiences impotent. The transformational goal is union with the ineffable, transcendent God.

Nature is a locus of the divine for people with a preference for this style. God is sensed through the beauty, awe and wonder of the natural world. But God also shows up for symbol-centred people through beautiful and aesthetically-inspiring works of art and architectural marvels. God can be felt in a babbling brook or a majestic stained-glass window. Symbol-centred people often sense God in times of silence, quiet and solitude. In addition to encounters with God in nature, spiritual practices like centring prayer, Taizé chants, silent retreats, *lectio divina*, and meditating on icons are ways of tapping into the great Mystery of mysteries.

**Q** How do you react to time for private reflection or meditation within worship?

## An action-centred approach to spirituality

Action-centred spirituality is based on a seemingly unquenchable thirst for justice. Instead of focusing on what one thinks, feels or senses, people of this style focus on what brings about positive transformation in the world. They are activists who would rather get to work than attend another book study or worship service.

Spirituality is more lived than spoken or felt. Action-centred people encounter God and nourish their spiritual lives through work to transform the world. God is seen in the cry of the poor rather than the beauty of an icon. Motivated by relentless passion and deep union with the needs of the world, people who express this style might stop at nothing to fulfil their unswerving mission to bring justice, healing and wholeness to the world. The transformational goal is instigating change by working to counteract harmful forces in society and cultivating justice in the world that God so loves.

An action-centred approach can be isolating, for zealotry can be misunderstood as impatience and single-mindedness. While a word-person might want to stop and clearly map out the most appropriate way to act in a situation, an action-centred person might see this talk as a waste of time. They just want to roll up their sleeves and start chipping away at injustice.

**Q** What part does action for justice play in your life?

## Things to keep in mind

Understanding spiritual styles helps us understand ourselves and each other. Many people have one or two preferred styles that shape the landscape of their lives. When we run into people who operate out of another style, conflict may ensue. But conflict can also erupt among people of the same style, as two word-centred people might argue about the correct meaning of a certain biblical text. When we are sensitive to

spiritual styles and embrace each one as a legitimate way of knowing God and expressing what matters, we can work together across the styles.

If ecclesial leaders remain unaware of the variety of spiritual styles, they may tend to lead out of their dominant style, shaping worship and teaching in ways that nourish only their own style. People who see the world through the lens of another style might be made to feel that they don't fit or that something is wrong with them because they don't feel close to God through certain prescribed experiences. While most people will tend to favour one or two styles over others, a healthy spirituality involves a degree of balance between every style. Straying too far to any pole leads to an extreme aberration that can be damaging to oneself and others. So a healthy, vibrant spiritual life is one that reflects a balanced tension of all four styles. And when ministers, leaders and teachers include practices that nurture people of each style, people's spiritual needs are met according to their dominant style, but they are also challenged to grow by being stretched in new directions. And as the people in our ministries engage in practices that nurture different styles, the contours of their spiritual lives can be shaped and reshaped. After all, one's preferred spiritual style can change as one encounters different people, contexts and practices on the spiritual journey.

As a minister, teacher or leader...

**Q** What do you suspect is your own dominant spiritual style(s)?

**Q** How does your dominant spiritual style(s) shape the way that you plan worship services and learning sessions?

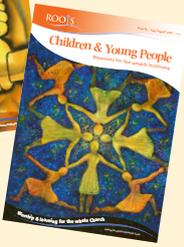
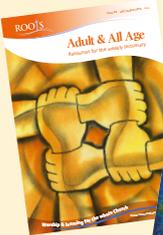
*David Csinos is Assistant Professor at Atlantic School of Theology, where he teaches in the areas of practical theology and ministry studies. He is the founder and president of Faith Forward, an ecumenical organization for innovation in ministry with children and youth. His book, Children's Ministry that Fits, was published by Wipf and Stock in 2011.*

This article was first published in ROOTS in January 2013  
© ROOTS for Churches Ltd 2013.



### Resources to enrich worship and learning with:

- adults
- all ages
- families
- children
- young people



ROOTS resources are published online at [www.rootsontheweb.com](http://www.rootsontheweb.com), and in two bi-monthly magazines, **ROOTS Adult & All Age** and **ROOTS Children & Young People**.

**Weekly lectionary-based materials to nourish, encourage and inspire.**