



Four Ways of Knowing God **Exploring Children's Spiritual Styles**

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Three decades ago, Urban T. Holmes proposed a phenomenology of prayer that he referred to as the Circle of Sensibility—a conceptual map of four broad ways of engaging in prayer.¹ Sensibility speaks of how human beings become sensitive, or sensible, to different types of prayer and expressions of spirituality.² By laying out two axes—the vertical axis denoting the

¹ Urban T. Holmes, III, *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analytical Introduction* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2002), 3-5.

² Corinne Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth* (Bethesda, MD: Alban, 2000), 31.

illumination of the mind or heart and the horizontal axis representing emptying (apophatic) or imaginal (kataphatic) forms of meditation—he was able to create a framework of understanding the four types or styles of prayer.³ Building on Holmes’ work, Corinne Ware labeled these “spiritual types” as *head, heart, mystic, and kingdom*.⁴

Drawing from Holmes and Ware, Joyce Bellous and I have come to believe that their ideas not only refer to different ways of engaging in Christian spirituality and prayer; they also speak about spirituality more widely understood as the inherent human capacity to engage in self-transcendence. Based on the findings of our own research and experimentation, we proposed that there are four distinct yet overlapping approaches to transcendence—four *spiritual styles*, as we refer to them—that human beings use in their daily living: word, emotion, symbol, and action. Along with Denise Peltomaki and Karen Bellous, we created resources that help adults and children assess their dominant spiritual styles and learn about these different ways of knowing God and expressing ultimate concerns.⁵

While people often exhibit one or two dominant styles, a healthy spirituality involves some degree of balance between these four approaches to spirituality.⁶ Going too far into any one style or focusing solely on a single style can lead to extremism or, to use Ware’s term, an aberration of the spiritual style. Each style has an extreme form that “can damage and restrict

³ Holmes, *History*, 4.

⁴ Ware, *Discover*.

⁵ Joyce E. Bellous et al., *Spiritual Styles: Assessing What Really Matters* (Edmonton: Tall Pine, 2009). Joyce E. Bellous et al., *Spiritual Styles—Children’s Version: Assessing What Really Matters* (Edmonton: Tall Pine, 2009).

⁶ Joyce E. Bellous and David M. Csinos, “Spiritual Styles: Creating an Environment to Nurture Spiritual Wholeness,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 14/3 (2009): 213-24.

growth, both personally and in the community.”⁷ Thus, nurturing a healthy spirituality involves creating environments that are infused with aspects of each and every style so that all those who are present are included and nurtured according to their dominant style as well as challenged to branch out and explore different ways of experiencing God.⁸

Although the limited discussion of spiritual types has focused on adults, Bellous and I hold that many children also make regular use of spiritual styles. This became rather clear to me in the autumn and winter of 2007 and 2008, when I engaged in a six-month qualitative research study involving a series of interviews with thirteen children from three Protestant congregations in Ontario, Canada. In this essay, I will draw from the data that I collected from this study in order to shed light on how spiritual styles are manifested in the lives of children. First, I will share some words about children and spirituality as they have been understood in recent years and as I conceive them in my research project. Next, I will offer some background information about the research that I conducted. Third, I will outline the ways in which each spiritual style was manifested in the lives of these children. Finally, I will speak about limitations of my research and possible avenues for further study and end with some brief concluding words.

While Bellous and I have already written about spiritual styles as they are broadly understood,⁹ this essay will begin from the ground-up as I use the data gleaned from the lives of thirteen Protestant children in order to focus on how children make use of spiritual styles. A word

⁷ Ware, *Discover*, 9.

⁸ See David M. Csinos, “Saturated Spirituality: Creating Environments that Nurture All Children,” *Lifelong Faith* 4/3 (2010): 3-15.

⁹ Bellous and Csinos, “Spiritual Styles.”

of caution, however, is necessary before I begin: my sample of thirteen children is not representative of young people in every context and of all ages, races, and religions. However, I do believe that the insights I gleaned from the specific contexts in which I performed my research can be used to initiate a conversation about how children in different contexts and from various walks of life might make use of spiritual styles in their quests for God.

CHILDHOOD AND SPIRITUALITY

Throughout history, children and childhood have been understood and perceived in different ways. In his writings, John Westerhoff describes three metaphors that have been used to understand the phenomenon of childhood. The first was that of raw material. Instruction, education, and curriculum were understood to be like the production lines through which the raw material was processed and adults were seen as responsible for molding children into their predetermined designs.¹⁰ This paradigm reflects John Locke's view of children as blank pieces of paper.¹¹ Similar metaphors, like children as wet cement or sponges—demonstrate that such a conception of children is still prevalent today.

With that advent of psychology and psychoanalysis, however, another paradigm emerged during the twentieth century. Ideas about human development led to the belief that children must

¹⁰ John H. Westerhoff, III, "The Church's Contemporary Challenge: Assisting Adults to Mature Spiritually with Their Children," in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen, 355-65 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 356.

¹¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 104.

progress through the “maturation process from lower to higher stages of development.”¹² The new paradigm for childhood became that of the greenhouse and young people came to be seen as divine seeds that require nurturing by gardeners (adults) if they are to properly develop.¹³ While both of these metaphors—the production line and the greenhouse—certainly reflect common notions of the day, they tend to rob children of agency. Children are seen as needing adults to do things *to* or *for* them in order for them to properly grow and become adults.¹⁴

A new paradigm, one that valued the agency of children, was spearheaded by Robert Coles at the end of the twentieth century: children as pilgrims (particularly spiritual pilgrims).¹⁵ Through his research with young people, Coles discovered that “As the children traveled the ordinary days of life, from time to time they sensed a spiritual purpose.”¹⁶ With this idea came a model in which children are active agents who walk with adults on the journey of life. In this model, adults do things *with* children. This is, in the words of Westerhoff, “a relational model of equals—a model in which all of us have something to offer each other.”¹⁷ My study finds its home in the paradigm of children as spiritual pilgrims, which values them as active agents who make meaning of themselves and the world around them in unique and personal ways.

¹² John H. Westerhoff, III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2000), 100.

¹³ Westerhoff, “Church’s Contemporary Challenge,” 356.

¹⁴ Westerhoff, “Church’s Contemporary Challenge,” 356.

¹⁵ Westerhoff, “Church’s Contemporary Challenge,” 359.

¹⁶ Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 195.

¹⁷ Westerhoff, “Church’s Contemporary Challenge,” 359.

Many people are beginning to believe that more and more individuals in the west see themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” In *The Great Awakening*, Jim Wallis briefly states that the amount of people who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” can constitute an entire denomination.¹⁸ It appears as though some people believe that it is possible to choose whether or not one will be a spiritual person. However, although spirituality is understood differently from tradition to tradition, all human beings are spiritual.¹⁹ Religion, on the other hand, comes out of personal and communal expressions of one’s innate spirituality.²⁰

Coles, in his research into the political and moral lives of children, discovered that young people often speak about spiritual matters. This led him to conduct the research presented in his book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*. Coles sat down and spoke with hundreds of children from different religious (and nonreligious) traditions and concluded that young people are inherently spiritual creatures. They each possess an innate spiritual life that “grows, changes, [and] responds constantly to the other lives that, in their sum, make up the individual we call by a

¹⁸ Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 16. There is debate, however, about the validity of this view. Christian Smith has found that, contrary to popular opinion, relatively few young people in the United States see themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 295-7. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 260. In Canada, however, young people seem more open to identifying themselves as spiritual outside of a religious tradition than do young people in the United States. Reginald W. Bibby with Sarah Russell and Ron Rolheiser, *The Emerging Millennials: How Canada’s Newest Generation is Responding to Change and Choice* (Lethbridge, AB: Project Canada, 2009), 163.

¹⁹ Barbara Kimes Myers, *Young Children and Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 101.

²⁰ David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, rev. ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), 25. Donald Ratcliff, “Rituals in a School Hallway: Evidence of a Latent Spirituality of Children,” *Christian Education Journal* 5 (2001): 10.

name and know by a story that is all his, all hers.”²¹ As previously mentioned, he asserts that young people are spiritual pilgrims who “march through life” as they seek God, ask questions and discover answers, and wonder about what lies ahead of them.²² Children and adults alike are pilgrims on the spiritual journey, for “Spiritual aliveness knows no age barriers; the young child and aged philosopher stand on level ground.”²³

Other scholars have helped to lay a solid foundation for understanding children’s spirituality. Rebecca Nye engaged in a groundbreaking qualitative study that explored the spiritual realm of childhood among children in British schools. In collaboration with David Hay, she published her findings in *The Spirit of the Child*. Through her research, Nye discovered that, “children’s spirituality was recognized by a distinctive property of mental activity, profound and intricate enough to be termed ‘consciousness’, and remarkable for its confinement to a broadly relational, inter- and intra-personal domain.”²⁴ Thus, she defined this human quality as *relational consciousness*, an aspect of the human condition that can be seen more clearly in children and young people because of its fundamental quality. It has been sustained throughout the evolutionary process of natural selection because it has survival value for the species at an individual level.²⁵

²¹ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 308.

²² Coles, *Spiritual Life*, 326.

²³ Donald Ratcliff and Scottie May, “Identifying Children’s Spirituality, Walter Wangerin’s Perspectives, and an Overview of this Book,” in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff, 7-21 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004), 8.

²⁴ Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 109.

²⁵ Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 135.

While Nye uses the term relational consciousness to refer to the spiritual dimension of humanity, Barbara Kimes Myers discusses spirituality as a process of transcendence. In her opinion, transcendence speaks of the innate human ability and desire to go beyond the present self and reality—it is “the essence of who we are as humankind.”²⁶ Nye would agree that this desire for transcendence is a fundamental quality of spirituality, for she holds that relational consciousness always intersects with self-transcendence.²⁷ All human beings, therefore, are concerned with the transcendental, with moving beyond the here and now. And all human beings are spiritual.

As one can see, spirituality is a complex concept that eludes definitive understanding. Nye appropriately likens spirituality to the wind: “though it might be experienced, observed and described, it cannot be ‘captured.’”²⁸ Yet in order for it to have meaning, spirituality must possess conceptual limitations.²⁹ We need to be aware of what we are referring to when we use the term *spirituality*. Thus, I offer a working definition of spirituality suitable to the purposes of this essay: *spirituality, as an inherent and biological aspect of the human condition, is a sense of relational connection to a being or power that transcends the limits of ordinary, material existence.* Different religious traditions describe this power in different ways. In Christianity, the

²⁶ Myers, *Young Children*, 101.

²⁷ Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 157.

²⁸ Rebecca Nye, “Relational Consciousness and the Spiritual Lives of Children: Convergence with Children’s Theory of Mind?” in *Psychological Studies of Spiritual and Religious Development: Being Human: The Case for Religion*, vol. 2, ed. K. Helmut Reich et al., 57–82 (Lengerich, Germany: Pabst, 1999), 58.

²⁹ Philip Sheldrake, “What is Spirituality?,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins, 21–42 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 21.

Triune God is named as that higher power and the Christian community is designated as a key context through which this connection is fostered.³⁰

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

My research study took place over a six-month period beginning in September of 2007. Throughout this time, I met with thirteen children for a series of qualitative interviews and research activities. My goal was to gain a sense of the ways in which people and places at churches affect their relationships with God and their faith communities. The sample for this project consisted of three children from an independent Baptist church, five from another Baptist church, and five from a Presbyterian church.³¹

From Northview Community Church, a 20-year-old independent Baptist congregation with an average attendance of more than 1100 people, came Caleb, a nine-year-old boy, Abigail, a nine-year-old girl, and Ben, a seven-year-old boy. Four children attended Townsend Baptist Church, which was founded in the late 1960s and is one of the region's largest congregations, with about 1500 people attending each week: Laurie, an eight-year-old girl; Keira, a ten-year-old girl; Megan a nine-year-old girl; Nicholas, a nine-year-old boy; and Owen, an eight-year-old boy. The final five participants attended Lawrence Park Presbyterian Church, a 150-year-old downtown congregation with a weekly attendance of 600: Freddy, an eleven-year-old boy; Juliet,

³⁰ Allen, "Exploring Children's Spirituality," 11; Sheldrake, "What Is Spirituality?" 40.

³¹ In order to maintain confidentiality and protect anonymity, each child and congregation has been given a pseudonym.

a ten-year-old girl; Gordon; an eight-year-old boy; Ian, a seven-year-old boy; and Houston, a ten-year-old boy.

Methodology

Researching children's spirituality is an incredibly complex and multifaceted endeavor and requires several different methods of data acquisition. "The more sources of information an adult has about a child, the more likely that the adult is to receive the child's messages properly."³² In this study, I adopted a multi-method, "mosaic" approach that allowed children with various interests and skills to become actively involved in the research process.³³ I chose to use qualitative methods of research because they are often more effective than quantitative methods when studying children's inner lives. Researchers such as David Elkind and Rebecca Nye are aware that doing good research with children necessitates hearing their unique stories, ideas, and anecdotes. Qualitative research can gain valuable information about their religious experiences that is not elicited well through structured, quantitative methods.³⁴

Over a six-month period, the children in my sample met with me for five focus group discussions, consisting of one to five children from the same church, depending on their availability. During these interviews, I facilitated discussion by asking open-ended questions and

³² James Garbarino et al., *What Children Can Tell Us: Eliciting, Interpreting, and Evaluating Critical Information from Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 15.

³³ Alison Clark, "The Mosaic Approach and Research with Young Children," in *The Reality of Research with Children and Young People*, ed. Vicky Lewis, 142–56 (London: Sage, 2004).

³⁴ David Elkind, *A Sympathetic Understanding of the Child: Birth to Sixteen*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), 151-154. Rebecca Nye, "Christian Perspectives on Children's Spirituality: Social Science Contributions?," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff, 90-107 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004).

allowing the children time to respond and engage in conversation with one another. In conducting the interviews in this manner, I provided “a forum for the children to express themselves”³⁵ and I sought to empower them to be active members of the research process; both of these strategies are fundamental for eliciting information about children’s inner experiences.³⁶ Throughout the interviews, I followed Coles’ lead, who said, “I let the children know as clearly as possible, and as often as necessary, what it is I am trying to learn, how they can help me.”³⁷

During the first interview with each group, I asked the children to complete a social mapping exercise. Social mapping is a relatively new form of qualitative research that Angela Veale found to be an effective descriptive and analytical tool. Social maps describe the child’s perspective of the geographical area being depicted in the maps. They are analytical in that “this method generated visual data, a ‘map’ of the community that could be analyzed through determining the features and people that were included and also those that were excluded.”³⁸ Each child received a map of his or her church and two sets of colored plastic bits—one color represented children and the other represented adults (I allowed the children to decide which color would represent which group). I then asked them to place these bits of plastic on the map of their church in a way that *described* their views of where people spend time during Sunday

³⁵ David Heller. *The Children’s God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4.

³⁶ Malcolm Hill, “Ethical Considerations in Researching Children’s Experiences,” in *Researching Children’s Experience: Approaches and Methods*, ed. Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, 61-86 (London: Sage, 2005), 63.

³⁷ Coles, *Spiritual Life*, 27.

³⁸ Angela Veale, “Creative Methodologies in Participatory Research with Children,” in *Researching Children’s Experience: Approaches and Methods*, ed. Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, 253-72 (London: Sage, 2005), 259.

services. Afterwards, I requested that they put the bits on the map in a way that *prescribed* where they would prefer people adults and children to spend this time.

The second interviews were conversation-based. I developed a set of open-ended questions about the children's experiences at their churches and about the people and places that helped them to feel safe or feel close to God. Rather than simply asking the children question after question, I allowed the children's conversations to guide the interviews while making sure that they addressed each of the topics and questions I brought to the interview.

During the third set of focus groups, I asked the children to draw pictures of people with whom and places where they experienced or felt close to God. Since children often lack adequate vocabulary for speaking of their spiritual experiences, drawings can be quite helpful, because they "seem to be able to plumb the inner depths of a person and uncover some of the otherwise inaccessible inside information."³⁹ But drawings often provide only partial windows into children's inner lives, since young people can only draw based on their knowledge and abilities. Thus, Dana Hood recognizes that "drawings are often metaphors to represent ideas."⁴⁰ Having the children discuss their pictures as they drew as well as asking them to explain them to the group helped me to gain a more holistic sense of what the children were expressing through their drawings.

³⁹ Marvin Klepsch and Laura Logie, *Children Draw and Tell: An Introduction to the Projective Uses of Children's Human Figure Drawings* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1982), 11.

⁴⁰ Dana Kennamer Hood, "Six Children Seeking God: Exploring Childhood Spiritual Development in Context," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff, 233-48 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004), 245.

Another research method of which I made use was photography, a type of participatory research.⁴¹ At the end of the second interviews, I gave a disposable camera to each child with instructions to photograph the places and objects that help him or her feel close to and experience God or where and with which her or she feels safe, comfortable, or at peace. At the third round of interviews, they returned the cameras to me and I had the film developed. The next time I met with each group of children, they shared their photos with the groups and explained what they depicted and why they took them. Like the process of drawing, having the children revisit their photographs and explain their reasons for capturing each image worked together with the images to create a more complete representation of the children's experiences and spirituality. This method was also helpful in building a rapport with the children, for the simple act of handing the children their very own cameras showed them that their ideas and experiences were important.

After completing social mapping exercises, discussing their lives with me and one another, drawing pictures, and taking photographs, the children met with me a fifth and final time. This round of interviews was devoted to readdressing the data I had collected over the previous months. I asked specific open-ended questions in order to clarify previous discussions or fill in gaps that had arisen. At the end of our time together, I gave each child a copy of his or her photographs and I thanked the children for participating in this project.

The final method of data acquisition involved interviewing the children's parents. Although parents cannot completely enter into their children's spiritual experiences, they can certainly act as expert witnesses to their children's lives. After conducting the third focus groups

⁴¹ Veale, "Creative Methodologies," 254.

with each group of children, I met with at least one parent of each child in small groups for interviews arranged according to the churches involved in this study. I asked the parents questions about their views of spirituality, their participation in their children's spiritual lives, and their perceptions of their children's spiritual experiences and involvement in their congregations. In order to uphold confidentiality and prevent responses from being skewed by predetermined information, I did not disclose any information that the children had provided to me during our conversations with one another.

Through these many methods of data acquisition, I was able to gain a window into the spiritual lives and experiences of the children involved in this research project. Doing research *with* children in this way respected the agency of the children, allowed the participants to have a legitimate voice in the research process, and was more likely to lead to accurate and valid results.⁴² These thirteen children, while certainly not representative of all young people, offered me a glimpse of some of the experiences that young people face as they walk along the spiritual path. I am grateful to them for permitting me to explore their spiritual lives with them.

FOUR WAYS OF KNOWING GOD

One of the risks (and benefits) of qualitative research is that the researcher gives up some control of the research in order to let participants guide conversations towards what they believe matters most. This was the case with this research project. I began this study hoping to

⁴² Sandy Fraser, "Situating Empirical Research," in *Doing Research with Children and Young People*, ed. Sandy Fraser et al., 15-26 (London: Sage, 2004). Mel Lloyd-Smith and Jane Tarr, "Researching Children's Perspectives: A Sociological Dimension," in *Researching Children's Perspectives*, ed. Ann Lewis and Geoff Lindsay, 59-70 (Buckingham, PA: Open University Press, 2000), 60-62. Garbarino et al., *What Children Can Tell Us*, 15.

understand how people and places at congregations affect children's spiritual experiences. Yet as the research progressed, I discovered that what seemed to have the most significant impact on the children's spiritual lives and their experiences with their congregations was their dominant spiritual style. In a sense, the primary spiritual style of a child acted like a lens through which he or she experienced and made meaning of God and the world.

Based on the work of Holmes,⁴³ Ware,⁴⁴ and Bellous,⁴⁵ I examined the data I collected in order to determine the dominant spiritual styles through which the children were operating. I then analyzed the data and materials I collected so that I might describe spiritual styles from the ground-up. I wanted to understand some of the key ways in which spiritual styles were manifested in the lives of these children and, in so doing, gain a sense of how they might affect the spirituality of children in general. In this section, I will outline the significant characteristics of each spiritual style as they appeared in the lives and experiences of these thirteen children.

A Word-Centered Approach to Spirituality

A word-centered approach is “a thoughtful, cognitive approach to spiritual experience based on the significance of words.”⁴⁶ Words matter a great deal to people of this style, for the correct words in the correct relationship lay out propositional knowledge and doctrine that is

⁴³ Holmes, *History*.

⁴⁴ Ware, *Discover*.

⁴⁵ Joyce E Bellous, *Educating Faith: An Approach to Christian Formation* (Toronto: Clements, 2006). Joyce E. Bellous and Dan Sheffield, *Conversations that Change Us: Learning the Arts of Theological Reflection* (Toronto: Clements, 2007).

⁴⁶ Bellous and Sheffield, *Conversations*, 104.

foundational for faith. Reason and logic are seen as the avenues for knowing God and people of this style value clarity, accuracy, precision, and thoughtfulness as they examine ideas about faith, life, religion, and God. The aberration, or extreme form, of a word-centered spirituality is rationalism, “an overintellectualization of one’s spiritual life with a consequent loss of feeling, often perceived as dogmatic and *dry*.”⁴⁷

Four children involved in my research project demonstrated a word-centered approach to spirituality—three from Townsend Church (Nicholas, Keira, Megan) and one from Northview (Ben). For these children, spirituality and experiencing God are bound up with their knowledge about God. They *know* God through *knowing about* God. For example, Nicholas told me that he feels closest to God at Sunday school, because “[I] learn more about him . . . because it’s all about God.” In fact, he believes that his church is an important place because it is there where people learn and talk about God. Keira also acknowledged the importance she places on knowledge and learning about God, for she feels particularly close to God when she talks about God with others, especially at home, church, and even in our focus group interviews. Ben’s mother told me that her son is “more likely intellectually to say something he learned maybe more so than he’d talk about feeling stuff.” These are all common views of people with a word-centered spirituality.

For people of this style, having an accurate understanding of God, the Bible, and theological tenets is of the utmost importance. And a key way that one can gain such knowledge is by reading the Bible, which may be best characterized by people of this style as the sacred

⁴⁷ Ware, *Discover*, 38.

Word of God. In Keira's words, "When I'm reading the Bible, I learn about God and learning about God is good. . . . When you learn more about him it makes you smarter in the eyes of God." While Megan and Nicholas also explicitly spoke of the importance of reading the Bible, Ben identified his VeggieTales⁴⁸ videos as important resources for learning about God. While watching these films, which tell stories based on biblical narratives and values, Ben's relationship with God is nurtured.

Each of these children spoke about a specific place where they feel especially close to God. One of the common threads among these different places is that each of these four children learn and talk about God in these places. Megan spoke of her private Christian school, where she receives instruction about the Bible and God from her teachers, as well as her home, where she listens to the her parents' Bible study group as they converse about God. Nicholas feels God's presence all over his church, for he hears about the Lord in the sanctuary, gymnasium, and classrooms. Ben feels close to God in the room where we met for interviews, for it was at this time and in this place where he could openly talk with others about God. As one can see, what matters most to these children was not necessarily *where* they experience God, but *what they do* in these places—learning and talking about God.

The importance of words was also demonstrated through the fact that most of these children identified their church library to be of particular importance to them. Libraries provide them with access to a wide variety of reading materials and resources through which they can

⁴⁸ VeggieTales, created by Phil Vischer, is a video series in which cartoon vegetables act out variations of traditional Bible stories, such as Ruth and Boaz or Joseph and his brothers. At the end of each episode, the hosts, Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber, apply the story to children's lives with the help of a Bible verse.

gain information about God and spiritual matters. A church with a well-stocked and accessible library can be a powerful place of spiritual nurture for word-centered children. By walking into a library, selecting a book, and opening it up, these children have profound and meaningful spiritual experiences.

The children with a word-centered approach to spirituality are not always content with simply cracking open their Bibles and reading Scripture by themselves. Rather, there are particular people in their lives who help them know about God, which in turn allows them to feel close to God. These people clearly and explicitly teach them about God and the Bible. Megan in particular spoke of the people in her life that help her learn about God, including Mr. Lane, a teacher from her Christian school who “helps me know God more because he teaches me about God in Bible [class].” Megan’s parents also told me about the vital role of her teachers, for her new Christian school has helped her intellectual and verbal reasoning about God to be “ratcheted up a few notches. . . . Now she’s willing to discuss what her opinion is in terms of God and Bible verses and what not.” Parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, and family friends were also identified by these children as the people who perform the vital spiritual role of teaching.

To summarize, the children who express a word-centered approach to spirituality value propositional and cognitive knowledge about God. Although many books and writings may help these young people learn about God, sacred texts are of particular importance. Such texts are stockpiles of particularly accurate and reliable information about God and they reveal God to these children. The people who have a spiritual influence on these children are those who help them make gains in their knowledge of God—teachers, family members, and church leaders.

Places of importance are those where they learn about God, particularly church libraries, which are storehouses of knowledge about God.

An Emotion-Centered Approach to Spirituality

While word-centered spirituality is based on the importance of words, an emotion-centered approach to spirituality places feelings at the core of one's spiritual life.⁴⁹ In the words of Ware, "it is all heart—combined with the concrete, real-life stuff."⁵⁰ People of this style prize creativity, expression, and emotion and tend to see God as here and now, a present reality with which one can be in relationship. Personal renewal is the goal of this style, which offers faith communities "a clear witness of Christianity's message and power."⁵¹ The aberration of this style is pietism, which leads to isolation and an "us versus the world" mentality.⁵²

Music is central to the spirituality of children of this style, which demonstrates what many music therapists have known for a number of years: "There an integral link between music and spirituality that dates back to the beginning of history. . . . Music is a natural human expression of emotion."⁵³ Each child who expressed this spiritual style demonstrated a strong affinity for music and connected musical experiences to feelings of God's immediate presence. Abigail took photos of audio tapes that included recordings of songs that she sings in her

⁴⁹ Bellous, *Educating Faith*, 66.

⁵⁰ Ware, *Discover*, 39.

⁵¹ Bellous, *Educating Faith*, 67.

⁵² Ware, *Discover*, 40.

⁵³ Natalie Wlodarczyk, "The Effect of Music Therapy on the Spirituality of Persons in an In-Patient Hospice Unit as Measured by Self-Report," *Journal of Music Therapy* 44/2 (2007): 154.

church's children's programs, she drew pictures of musicians at Northview, and she fondly recalled times of musical worship that connected her to God. Owen drew pictures of his church's worship band and he said that what makes Townsend a church is the fact that the people there "sing songs about God." He loves to sit in the services and sense God's presence through these songs. Although his mother spoke of her son's love for music, Houston demonstrated that music is just one of several art-forms that connect children with an emotion-centered spirituality with God. As an avid singer, he said, "God feels close to me when I sing into the sanctuary," but he also senses God's presence through dramatic presentations and plays that the children perform for the congregation. Thus, the performing arts in general are vital to stirring the emotions of these children, which in turn helps them sense the closeness of the Divine. Music, however, seems to be the key art-form for children of this style.

The places where these children hear emotionally-charged music are of central importance to them. Whether the children's church room, the sanctuary, or the choir room, spaces in which children hear and engage in musical worship to God are vital for their spiritual health. Thus, these children believe that corporate worship—which often stresses affective responses to music—is a necessary component of the life of the local church. When these four children and I discussed what they felt was important for visitors to know about their congregations, most spoke of power of community worship. However, each of their churches has a children's program in which these four children participate in musical worship separate from the congregation. While Abigail did not seem to mind this age-segregated approach to Sunday services, the other three children of this style told me how much they enjoy the rare moments

when they sing and worship with the wider congregation. Thus, churches who wish to nurture children of this style do well to include them in the corporate life of the wider congregation, in which they can join together with a cloud of witnesses in singing and worshipping God.

All four emotion-centered children identified their church leaders as people who help them to feel close to or experience God. Both young people of this style from the Presbyterian congregation said that their church's minister helps them to feel close to God. Through a drawing, Houston also identified Lawrence Park's director of Christian education as an important person in his spiritual life. Abigail and Owen both had very fond things to say about their Sunday school teachers and the members of their churches' worship bands. It appears as though all three of these churches are doing a fine job of nurturing children of this style, which may not come as a surprise when one learns that their children's programs and activities include times of musical worship and emotional experiences with God. However, it raises questions about the roles of parents in the spiritual lives of these children. Have churches, with their contemporary curricula and professional musical performances, trumped parents in influencing the spirituality of emotion-centered children?

Let me summarize what I have found to be key elements of an emotion-centered approach to spirituality. Since the power of music to evoke feeling is such a vital component of this style, the spaces in which congregations make music are important, and children enjoy spending time in these places. Worship also appears to have a central place in the spiritual life of these four children, particularly when it focuses on experiencing God through music and the arts. Since all three churches involved in my research project emphasize worship during their Sunday

services, the children with an emotion-centered spirituality focus on corporate worship as a vital characteristic of their congregations and their experiences with God. Those who lead young people in affective experiences like corporate worship and times of music are the people who have the most impact on nurturing their spiritual lives.

A Symbol-Centered Approach to Spirituality

Popular author and pastor Rob Bell has written that, “The Christian faith is mysterious to the core. It is about things and beings that ultimately can’t be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not.”⁵⁴ For a symbol-centered approach to spirituality, words fall short of describing God and spiritual experiences. Any attempt to fully explain God is believed to lose that which is precious about God. Thus, people of this style are mystics who hold that God is “more felt than spoken” and they often push the boundaries of spirituality, allowing the imagination to run free.⁵⁵ It is not surprising, then, that these people often become uncomfortable with organized religion and struggle to fit into typical faith communities.⁵⁶ The extreme form of a symbol-centered approach is quietism, which can result in passivity and withdrawal from reality and the world.

It is believed that Gandhi once said, “In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light.” This is unquestionably true for the four children of this style—Caleb, Laurie, Ian, and Freddy—each of whom value quiet and silence as part of their spiritual experience.

⁵⁴ Rob Bell. *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 32.

⁵⁵ Bellous, *Educating Faith*, 68-9.

⁵⁶ Ware, *Discover*, 41.

Moments of quiet and silence are often moments of solitude. Thus, these children have special places where they go to be alone and experience quiet and silence. Caleb will often go to a small pond near his home where he engages in a peaceful, transcendental solitude that he found difficult to put into words: “Usually I don’t feel peaceful—I feel overworked. . . . I find that [at this pond]—I just don’t know why—I just walk in there and I don’t feel like I have to fear anything at all.” Laurie likes to quietly sit by a river near her home: “I feel really peaceful there and when it’s peaceful it reminds me more of God.”

Along with quiet solitude comes prayer, a quality of this style that is highly valued by these children. Ian feels closest to God in his bed because that is where he engages in prayer. In his words, “It feels like God is close to me when I’m saying prayers and [my bed is] where I feel God the most.” While these children are capable of experiencing God with other people, their preference is to be with God in quiet and silent solitude. This is not to say, however, that a symbol-centered spirituality is inherently isolating. Rather, many of these children spoke of family members—parents, siblings, and grandparents—with whom they experience God. But without quiet solitude and private prayer that need not be uttered through words, the spirituality of these children cannot reach its full potential.

The natural world is another significant feature of this spiritual style. When I asked Laurie to tell me some important things about her spiritual life, she made a point of saying, “I also like the animals, but just everywhere, in trees and stuff. So, basically nature.” Her mother verified this: “[Laurie] likes to be outside. She’s kind of a ‘nature nut.’” Ian’s mother also expressed this sentiment about her son: “He loves to be outside. He loves going for hikes.”

Freddy likes to sit outside in a field near his home, listening to the sounds of nature, the sounds of God. Caleb loves animals, so he enjoys sitting near water and watching wildlife in their natural settings. Each of these symbol-centered children spoke fondly of the role of nature in their spiritual lives, demonstrating, in the words of Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, that nature is “a special locus of divine revelation and a place for humans to encounter God.”⁵⁷

Since symbol-centered young people enjoy being outdoors, it is not surprising that most of them prefer to be in wide, open spaces. Thus, spaces like Sunday school classrooms often make these children uncomfortable. Referring to classrooms at her church, Laurie said, “I like the big [rooms] because whenever I’m in the little ones I feel all shoved up—like I’m being crammed inside of a locker.” Ian also identified his preference for open spaces by placing many children and adults outside of the church building during the social mapping exercise so that they can have room to move around.

A final important characteristic of this spiritual style is an embrace of the mysteriousness of the Divine. This was most poignantly demonstrated by Caleb. He is a lover of all things mysterious, especially Stonehenge, ancient Egypt, and the Bermuda Triangle. He recognizes that the Bible is filled with mysteries about God, but, in his words, “those mysteries will have to be waited for a long time to solve.” Thus, he does not actively seek out answers to mysteries—he is content to remain in the realm of the unknown, aware that answers to questions may never come. According to him, teachers at church focus on what is known about God, and rarely, if ever, wonder about God’s mysteries. He believes that by doing so, “they’re explaining the wrong

⁵⁷ Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007), 55.

things.” “I feel like they’re saying that there are no mysteries of [God] . . . when I know there are.” In order to satisfy his spirituality, Caleb reads the Bible to reflect upon the enigmatic aspects of God, followed by quiet time in his room where he wonders about such things.

To summarize, symbol-centered children value places with plenty of room where they can quietly and silently spend time with God. Since they love nature, such places are often outside among God’s creation. Although they like to be alone, their family members can be strong influences on their spiritual lives. Prayer is a vital practice for these children, which is often manifested in quiet, private ways. When it comes to God, they see the value in the mysteriousness of the Divine and they can be suspicious of those who seek to explain away all of God’s mysteries. It is no wonder, then, that symbol-centered children can struggle to fit into organized congregations and regimented, instructional church programs.

An Action-Centered Approach to Spirituality

The final spiritual style is often the least represented, so it is somewhat difficult to depict.⁵⁸ Similar to its symbol-centered neighbor, an action-centered approach to spirituality affirms that God and the spiritual life cannot be fully expressed to others. However, this spiritual style causes people to do more than pray for the world—they actively seek to transform it.⁵⁹ In the tradition of the prophets and liberation theologians, the transformational goal of this style is to change oppressive and harmful aspects of society while stressing God’s love presence, and

⁵⁸ Ware, *Discover*, 43.

⁵⁹ Bellous, *Educating Faith*, 68.

justice.⁶⁰ Since action-based people can be impulsive and often avoid being constrained by rules and regulations, they tend to care less about organizational and denominational affiliations than do people who have spiritual lives characterized by other styles.⁶¹ Encratism is the aberration of this style. It involves single-minded “tunnel-vision” and often causes people to see those who do not express complete support for a cause as outsiders.⁶²

Since Juliet was the only child to express an action-centered spirituality, I could not compare her experiences to those of other children of the same style. What I was able to do, however, was use her approach to spirituality to discuss what may very well be common characteristics of an action-centered approach to spirituality.

Juliet’s spirituality includes a few characteristics that link her to other styles. Like mystics, she values an active prayer life, although her prayers are frequently responses to disaster and injustice. Juliet also has a strong appreciation of worship expressed through music, likening her to emotion-centered spirituality. Finally, the speculative nature of her spiritual style is expressed through a focus on the Bible and learning about God—she believes that one of the qualities of Lawrence Park Presbyterian Church that defines the space as a church is that, “we discuss [God’s] word and what it means.”

When it comes to the critical elements of her dominant spiritual style, three were repeatedly manifested. First, Juliet expressed a deep appreciation for her church’s intergenerational community, which her mother confirmed by disclosing how much Juliet loves

⁶⁰ Bellous, *Educating Faith*, 68.

⁶¹ Ware, *Discover*, 43.

⁶² Ware, *Discover*, 44.

to worship and volunteer alongside a diverse group of Christians. In Juliet's words, this community is important because there are "lots of people that take care of you if anything happens." She can feel safe at her congregation because she has a church family that will take action and look out for her if she is in trouble. For her, the value of community is in the actions of its members for the betterment of one another.

Second, while she appreciates being cared for, Juliet's spirituality is most vividly expressed through the care she shows to others, especially through acts of social justice. Her favorite memory of her church is providing a free meal to homeless people in their downtown neighborhood: "I'm helping the homeless and it's really fun doing it at the same time." Social justice and relief projects are central to the vitality of her spiritual life, for, "[they help] me feel close to God because I'm giving to other people." Furthermore, Juliet has a strong desire to go to Africa on a mission trip. Her mother is keenly aware of Juliet's action-centered approach to spirituality, for she told me that, "she's starting to realize that what she learns [at church] needs to have some sort of impact in what she does. And I sit with her and listen to her prayers at night and . . . it's changed a little bit from, you know, 'Thank you for a mommy who loves me so very much' . . . to 'Help me to make a difference in the world.'"

For Juliet, being in a local community and acting for the betterment of the world is expressed through communion, a ritual which the children and adults at Lawrence Park celebrate together. She feels especially connected to God during communion. Even though she sees other people chatting or moving around during this special time, Juliet takes time to pray "for what

communion's about." For her, Jesus' sacrifice should not be taken lightly and it influences the sacrifices that she makes for the sake of other people.

According to this data, Juliet experiences God through actions of justice, rather than through particular places. The people who are part of her church—including her family—have a great impact on her spiritual life, for her membership in her church family allows her to feel loved and cared for and is physically manifested through intergenerational works and communion. While prayer, knowledge, and emotions matter to her, what is most important is how they are expressed in acts of compassion and justice that seek to change the world.

As I sought to explore Juliet's spiritual life, I became fascinated not only with the fact that Juliet was the only participant to demonstrate an action-centered approach to spirituality, but also that she was the only child of color involved in my research project. Perhaps, as an African Canadian, she has experienced social injustice and this motivates her fight for justice in the world around her. Maybe she was raised hearing stories about the struggles of her ancestors and she refuses to allow other people to treat fellow human beings in such destructive and dehumanizing ways. While the research process did not allow me to carefully explore whether or not the fact that Juliet is an African Canadian prompts her (consciously or unconsciously) to possess an action-centered approach to spirituality, I would be shocked to discover if her spiritual life and dominant style was not affected by her race.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My six-month qualitative research project uncovered fascinating insights about the spiritual lives of children. But it is not free of limitations. One limitation is the small scale of the sample. I do not fool myself into thinking that these thirteen children (especially Juliet, who alone demonstrated an action-centered spirituality) are representative of all children. While their experiences open a window to discovering spiritual styles, much more research is needed to gain a fuller glimpse of the richness and nuances inherent in each style. Further research might include children from different Christian traditions—Catholic, Pentecostal, Mennonite, or Nazarene—in order to better understand the four spiritual styles and to gain a sense of the ways in which certain traditions might influence children to possess a particular dominant style. For example, perhaps the Pentecostal tradition, with an emphasis on emotional responses to the Holy Spirit, might be more apt to help children get in touch an emotion-centered spirituality. Furthermore, research with children of different religions might yield quite different results. Although I suspect that spiritual styles are manifested in the lives of people from several religious traditions (as well as those with no religious tradition), research to substantiate this suspicion has yet to be performed.

Another limitation is the descriptive nature of this study. Upon witnessing the power of the spiritual styles to influence one's experiences with God and church, I sought to describe key characteristics of each style as they were expressed in the lives of these children. I was not able, however, to explore questions about just how children's spiritual styles are influenced by their social location and context. I suspect that the theologies, liturgies, rites, and philosophies of

particular congregations and traditions might, to a degree, have an effect on which spiritual styles are manifested in the lives of children within these communities. I also would not be surprised to learn that parents, siblings, friends, and other significant people affect children's spiritual styles, as do culture, race, and social location. After all, Juliet was the only child of color in my sample and she was also the only one to possess an action-centered approach to spirituality. Further research can focus on understanding the relationships between contexts and styles and whether these are relationships of correlation or causation.

A final limitation to this project is the "snapshot" nature of it. The study was conducted over six months, which is long enough to get an informed sense of spiritual styles in children, but not nearly long enough to understand how styles might shift, morph, and alter as children grow, enter adolescence, and eventually reach adulthood. The project was not created to gain a sense of the ways in which age might be related to spiritual style. Thus, a longitudinal study is needed to answer questions about spiritual styles across the lifespan. Perhaps a study that involves interviewing children once every three or four years for the first twenty years of life might shed light on how age affects spiritual styles and how styles might transform and change as young people grow and develop.

CONCLUSION

Carl Jung once wrote, “The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases.”⁶³ This is true for those children involved in this study—each expressed different ways through which they came to know and experience God. Within this diversity, however, four vital spiritual avenues were demonstrated: the path of the intellect, the way of the emotions, the journey of mystery, and the road to justice. Thus, congregations and organizations that wish to nurture the spirituality of every child within their care 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. This can be done through the activity of including.

Joyce Bellous and I have written that “It is vital that religious and spiritual educators create spaces that speak to the whole spectrum of spiritual styles in order for all children to feel a sense of inclusion and fit.”⁶⁴ Children who do not feel a sense of fit, who feel that people with their approach to spirituality are not welcome, are at risk of keeping their spiritual experiences and sensibilities private, thus robbing others of the richness of spiritual diversity. This certainly seemed to be the case for Caleb, who felt like he did not fit in with his church’s children’s ministries. Exclusive environments not only put some children in danger of feeling isolated or thinking that something is wrong with them; they also deprive young people (and adults) from learning from one another about the many ways in which God can be known and experienced. Thus, teachers and ministers ought to heed the advice of Bellous:

⁶³ C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Bagnes (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), 69.

⁶⁴ Bellous and Csinos, “Spiritual Styles,” 222.

Inclusive teachers [and churches] provide for the study of words, so that children become precise and make cognitive gains; offer opportunities to learn through feeling and open up occasions for telling personal stories and explaining what they mean, using the arts; allow time for silence, wonderment and imagination to set the agenda for interpreting experience; and bring children into settings where they can take specific, focused action aimed at improving the world.⁶⁵

Of course, these words do not apply only to ministry with children. People of all ages express themselves through spiritual styles, so ministry with all people ought to be inclusive of every spiritual style.

If an environment with such a balanced tension exists, children will be more likely to develop what Holmes refers to as a sensible and sensitive spirituality: “‘Sensibility’ defines for us that sensitivity to the ambiguity of styles of prayer [and spirituality] and the possibilities for a creative dialogue within the person and within the community as it seeks to understand the experience of God and its meaning for our world.”⁶⁶ Such balanced sensitivity is a mark of churches that provide spaces for children of all spiritual styles to freely express and their spirituality and to have authentic encounters with God.

⁶⁵ Joyce E. Bellous, “Five Classroom Activities for Sustaining a Spiritual Environment,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 11, no. 1 (2006): 102.

⁶⁶ Holmes, *History*, 5.