

Identifying Types of Spirituality and Types of Approach

“Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: Whoever rejects Evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things.” (The Qur’an, Al Baqara, 2:256).

In the world today most of us come into regular contact with individuals who represent cultures, religions and life-styles different from our own. We are thus faced with challenges and opportunities that were rare in earlier times. Each time two people come into contact with each other, something happens. Neither individual remains exactly as he or she was before. People have an influence on each other.

If we ignore this fact of life and it continues to be operative, eventually we shall all conform to a common pattern. What that pattern will eventually be is determined by many factors, one of which is missionary endeavor, that is, activity which has as its goal to influence the religious life of other people so that it becomes more like one’s own. Seen from this perspective, the attempt to persuade others of the validity of our own religion is a vital survival mechanism. We do not have to be so altruistic that we are interested in “saving the souls of others.” The soul we save is first of all and primarily our own.

This realization must be an encouraging one. It implies that mission activity is successful even when we fail to persuade others to join us in our own beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, successful activity can be attained and measured in terms of goals. A goal-oriented approach to human contacts may seem mercenary, but it is a fact of life with which we must deal. We are surrounded by pressures to conform to often hidden agendas. That is why it is of value to think about one’s own agenda.

Before setting up goals, it is necessary to understand the situation. In the matter of religion, we need to know what kinds of forces confront us. Any model of spiritual types reduces reality to a caricature at best. Such models are more like maps than landscapes, but as such they may also serve as maps in a landscape where we might otherwise be lost. The model of spiritual types in Table One combines a series of degrees of social acceptance with a series of degrees of religiosity. These are not the only terms that might be used, but they provide twelve slots which can be used as a lense for both self-

evaluation and the evaluation of those which whom we come into contact. The degrees of acceptance are based on those of Alan Race, *Christian and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 1983. His three-part classification is a useful tool without necessarily accepting his rather liberal view of religion as such.

It is useful to evaluate both oneself and the individual with whom one is in contact in order to establish what the spiritual values of each person actually are. It is also useful to re-evaluate periodically to see to what extent the situation has changed. One's spiritual profile may be made up of several slots, although some of them must be seen as mutually exclusive. If we evaluate an entire religious tradition in the same way, it may be possible to make some remarks in all twelve categories, because religious traditions are made up of various types of spiritualities beyond those that are generally considered typical of it. The reality of life is also that one individual may fit quite well into one configuration at one period of his or her life, and into another at a later period. The goal of missionary endeavor is to facilitate that happening.

Another possibility is that one individual may shift his or her spiritual profile slightly or even greatly, depending on the situation. This is commonly known as hypocrisy, but it is often used by missionaries as a vehicle. St. Paul himself noted that he is all things to all men. Although this approach is very common among Christian desiring to convert Muslims, it is highly questionable whether it is licit. This is a further reason for trying to define matters accurately. Otherwise, it is someone else who will determine the course of events.

Table One: Types of Spirituality

Table One: Types of Spirituality

	Exclusive	Inclusive	Pluralistic
Mystical	Considers that only one faith is valid, and that it consists in direct religious experience.	Considers that the direct experience of faith is the only valid one, and that it occurs in all traditions in basically the same way.	Considers that there are many distinct ways of experiencing the divine directly, all of which are valid for those who engage in them.
Belief Oriented	Considers that only one faith is valid, and that its most important expression is in what people believe.	Considers that there is a fundamental truth at the core of all religions, and this common truth makes all religions equally valid and in fact one faith.	Considers that sincerity of belief is what is important, and that all beliefs as such are equally valid.
Action Oriented	Considers that only one faith is valid, and that its most important expression is in what people do.	Considers that the ethical element in all faiths is essentially the same, and it is this element with makes all faiths in reality one.	Accepts diversity of belief and organization, because what really matters is cooperation on social, ethical and spiritual essentials.
Secular	Considers the religious identity important, without participating in religious life; or strongly rejects sectarian identity.	Considers that all religions are the same, and serve the same functions for people who are dependent on them.	Maintains that all religions are expressions of human experience, and all are equally valid or invalid.

In Table Two I have defined six basic methods of approach as combining the features of directness and indirectness with a unifying approach, a confrontational one, and an illicit one. Most goal-oriented situations will be characterized by one or more of these approaches. Illicit approaches must be recognized for what they are. The desire to persuade, especially when frustrated, often leads to one of these un-Islamic approaches. Neuro-linguistic programming has become common in not only selling, but in therapy, teaching and religion. It is not compatible with Islam, because it leads to a change in behavior which bypasses the conscious decision of the individual based on reason. From an Islamic point of view, that is immoral.

Table Two: Methods of Approach

Table Two: Methods of Approach

	Direct	Indirect
Unifying	Focus on common aspects of the different faiths.	Find common interests with a neutral faith content.
Confrontational	Confront differences actively, trying to persuade to change belief system and behavior.	Find ways to introduce circumstances which may cause reflection and self-motivated change.
Illicit	Direct force.	Manipulation, hypnotism, neuro-linguistic programming.

The establishment of a spiritual profile is a dynamic process involving the individual in several types of influencing circumstances. Religious authorities, social and religious peers, and individual characteristics integrate in an individual's experience to produce and reinforce a religious identity, a belief system, and a pattern of behavior. This is the template upon which all of the methods of approach noted in Table Two must come to bear.

Now let us approach some of these issues from a practical standpoint by way of illustration. I shall begin with a personal profile. Looking at the twelve slots, I find myself best described by the intersection of mysticism with exclusivity. My major form of spirituality is within the Islamic mystical tradition. However, I consider that the direct experience of the divine is necessarily dependent on an exclusive belief system, so I would add a secondary slot to my profile, the exclusive belief-oriented, defined as twelver Shi'ite Islam. In addition, I find that practice is essential, so I would add the exclusive action-oriented slot as well. A personal evaluation reveals that I do practice the duties of Islam more or less successfully. I have no particular interest in the matter of religious identity, and am willing to be called anything the observer likes.

Now let us suppose that there is a person who would like to persuade me to become more like himself. Let us say that the profile of this person is exactly like mine in belief and practice, but differs in rejecting mysticism and focusing on the importance of religious identity. What will be his goal? He will try to dissuade me from an interest in mystical matters, gnosis or cirfan as it may be called. Secondly, he will try to convince me of the importance of maintaining a high profile in terms of religious identity. He will

have no goals in relation to my belief system or in relation to my actions, since I have the same beliefs as he and since I perform my prayers in exactly the same way that he does.

Let us suppose there is another person whose spiritual type fits into the same slots, but who defines their content differently. Let us suppose he emphasizes that he is a Christian and considers this identity essential. He may also typically emphasize belief-oriented exclusivism. His goal will be somewhat more complicated. He will try to get me to forget about Islamic mysticism. He will try to get me to identify myself strongly as a Christian. He will try to get me to change my beliefs from typically Shi'ite ones to those which he himself holds: let us say, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the doctrine of the Atonement (that is, that God exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that I must look to the vicarious, sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross in order to be forgiven for my sins and be saved). He may not emphasize actions very much at all, except that he will try to get me to stop praying in the Islamic way, stop fasting during Ramadhan, etc. He will try to get me to pray by kneeling and folding my hands and speaking to God or Jesus using the formula typical of his communion. He may try to get me to engage in some kind of Bible study program. He may try to get me to be baptized and attend church services. He will have a big job in front of him. It might be easier for him to invent a theology which permits my salvation without conversion, and then he will himself move into one of the areas of either inclusivity or pluralism.

One of the great challenges to Islam is the fact that Western society has gradually shed the requirements of reason and accepted absurdity in their place. This is the process of centuries. The early Church Father Tertullian is famous for having said that he believed in Christian doctrine because it was absurd. Reason is an essential characteristic of Islam and is becoming increasingly difficult to impose as a common parameter. In using direct confrontation, it is necessary to establish the law of non-contradiction as a bare minimum. Otherwise discussion is futile. Yet this is probably the biggest goal and the hardest to achieve. If Muslims could infuse the critical use of reason into Western society, they would have no other tasks to accomplish. Society would islamicize itself.

We have tried to establish the following points. First, that people can be roughly classed according to degrees of religiosity and degrees of acceptance. Second, that evaluating oneself and the other person according to such a classification is useful in determining goals for interaction and the process of achieving them. Thirdly, that ways of achieving goals through interaction can be classified as indirect and direct, and as confrontational and unifying. Which of these types of approaches must be used will depend on the type of person and situation. Fourthly, illicit approaches are noted, those involving some form of coercion.

Image:

Table One: Types of Spirituality

	Exclusive	Inclusive	Pluralistic
Mystical	Considers that only one faith is valid, and that it consists in direct religious experience.	Considers that the direct experience of faith is the only valid one, and that it occurs in all traditions in basically the same way.	Considers that there are many distinct ways of experiencing the divine directly, all of which are valid for those who engage in them.
Belief Oriented	Considers that only one faith is valid, and that its most important expression is in what people believe.	Considers that there is a fundamental truth at the core of all religions, and this common truth makes all religions equally valid and in fact one faith.	Considers that sincerity of belief is what is important, and that all beliefs as such are equally valid.
Action Oriented	Considers that only one faith is valid, and that its most important expression is in what people do.	Considers that the ethical element in all faiths is essentially the same, and it is this element with makes all faiths in reality one.	Accepts diversity of belief and organization, because what really matters is cooperation on social, ethical and spiritual essentials.
Secular	Considers the religious identity important, without participating in religious life; or strongly rejects sectarian identity.	Considers that all religions are the same, and serve the same functions for people who are dependent on them.	Maintains that all religions are expressions of human experience, and all are equally valid or invalid.

Table Two: Methods of Approach

	Direct	Indirect
Unifying	Focus on common aspects of the different faiths.	Find common interests with a neutral faith content.
Confrontational	Confront differences actively, trying to persuade to change belief system and behavior.	Find ways to introduce circumstances which may cause reflection and self-motivated change.
Illicit	Direct force.	Manipulation, hypnotism, neuro-linguistic programming.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/invitation-islam-survival-guide-thomas-mcelwain/identifying-types-spirituality-and-types-approach>