THE MYERS-BRIGGS, ENNEAGRAM, AND SPIRITUALITY

By ROBERT J. THESING

'OH YES, IT WILL PROBABLY HELP YOU in assigning me a retreat director to know that I am an ENFP and '4' on the Enneagram.' This kind of statement, utterly incomprehensible twenty years ago, is now one of the most common self-descriptions retreatants offer before coming for a personally-directed retreat. It is but one example of the enormous popularity and popularization of the Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram among people doing the work of spiritual guidance. But with this growing popularization have also arisen more divergent understandings and more varied applications of these two systems. In this article I will attempt to call us back to fundamentals by asking about the origins and nature of the Myers-Briggs and Enneagram. From this perspective, questions about their current usage and varieties of interpretation can more profitably be raised. Likewise, from this basis and from my own experience as a spiritual director, I hope to suggest some ways that I see the Enneagram and Myers-Briggs authentically contributing to the Christian spiritual journey.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)[1] is an instrument designed by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine C. Briggs to identify different personality types on the basis of habitual preferences in four areas. Building on the theory of Carl Jung,[2] the MBTI measures a person's basic 'attitude' toward the world (extraversion or introversion) and how one normally 'functions' in perceiving (sensation or intuition) and judging (thinking or feeling). To briefly summarize what most readers will already know, extraversion (E) is an orientation of interest and psychic energy that moves outward to the world of people and material objects, while introversion (I) is an orientation that moves toward the inner world

of ideas and reflection. Jung speculates that while an extravert tends to typify humanity's 'prolific' mode of adaptation, the introvert demonstrates a certain 'self-preservation' of the species.[3]

Considering next the functions, the MBTI measures first one's preferred mode of perception. In sensation (S) perception or the gathering of information comes through the five senses with immediacy and 'hands on' concreteness; while intuition (N) collects data through more unconscious processes that see the world in terms of possibilities and interrelationships. Turning then to the judging function, the MBTI assesses one's preference for thinking (T) as the mode of appraising data and coming to decisions by objective, logical processes, versus feeling (F) which is more subjective and value-based in its ordering and decision-making.

Fourthly, the MBTI measures whether the individual generally prefers the perceiving (P) process of observing and gathering information or the judging (J) process of coming to conclusions and moving to action. Joining this final preference to the others, the MBTI identifies and describes sixteen different personality types.

As a tool for psychological assessment, the MBTI is well-grounded in both theory and empirical research. Building on Jung's theory, it clearly defines the attitudes and functions being identified and measured. An individual's profile from the survey (e.g., ENFP: extraverted-intuitive-feeler-perceiver) describes one's conscious, preferred style of activity. It is important to remember, however, that such a profile describes one's *preferences* or habitual modes of operating in each category; the alternative options are also available to the individual to greater or lesser degrees. Secondly, these preferred functions are major components of the conscious personality, of what contemporary psychology refers to as the 'ego'. As we will discuss later, when dealing with spirituality the unconscious parts of personality are also extremely significant, and so the attitudes and functions that are not part of one's MBTI profile can be just as important to consider when one attends to one's relationship to God in prayer and life.

A dimension of the MBTI that can sometimes be overlooked is its developmental aspect.[4] A child begins to prefer and make use of one attitude (extraversion or introversion) and one of the four functions even in pre-school years, and during childhood develops a 'primary function' (e.g., extraverted feeling or introverted intuition). During the teenage years an 'auxiliary function' is also

solidified, so that persons by early adulthood are frequently functioning 'typically' for their Myers-Briggs type. As the adult continues to develop, the 'tertiary function' begins to receive more attention, and in midlife the fourth or 'inferior' function becomes more noticed (perhaps for its painful absence as much as for its emergence). This developmental sequence affects preferences, and hence test scores on the MBTI. For instance, a thirty-year-old INFP might test ISFP as more attention is given to the third function of sensation. Moreover, environmental factors (both from early family life and present circumstances) also affect how one scores on the inventory. Consequently, a personal interview which looks at environment and life history is a necessary supplement to the testing data to determine which of the sixteen types is most typically one's own.

The Enneagram

The nine-pointed symbol of the Enneagram[5] has been used for centuries in certain Middle and Near Eastern spiritual traditions to understand the underlying principles of cosmic and human functioning. Its roots and origins are not clearly known. In the West, G. I. Gurdjieff[6] introduced the Enneagram in the first half of this century as an instrument of spiritual development which he had learned from loosely organized spiritual brotherhoods that he had contacted on his travels. Gurdjieff used the Enneagram not only to illuminate personality traits, but as a way of understanding various human and cosmological processes.[7]

In 1970 Bolivian Oscar Ichazo introduced the Enneagram to a group of North Americans.[8] Ichazo's insight into the Enneagram especially illuminated the relationship of the Enneagram and personality types. His work quickly spread not only through the teaching of his own Arica Institute, but also through the contributions of Claudio Naranjo, John Lilly, Joseph Hart, Bob Ochs, S.J., and others in the fields of transpersonal psychology and of spirituality. From these recent roots have come many workshops and writings on the Enneagram, as well as its current usage in religious (especially Roman Catholic) circles as an approach to personality types and spiritual development.

Unlike the MBTI, the Enneagram does not have a commonly agreed upon theoretical basis. Different writers make use of quite different vocabulary, descriptions, and applications. Moreover, empirical verification of the system is only beginning to be

attempted.[9] The Enneagram is an intuitive wisdom system, and in a very real sense its truth and effectiveness are currently as good as the intuitive powers of the persons teaching it and making use of it. This lack of 'scientific' reliability makes it difficult to make judgments about the various versions of the system as they are being taught, but it does not deny the fact that many people have found the Enneagram a significant vehicle for self-discovery and spiritual growth.

The Enneagram describes nine different personality types (each with three subtypes). Each of the nine types manifests a characteristic bias of thoughts and emotions in perceiving and dealing with the world. The word 'ego' is used by the Enneagram for the false personality that is fixated in this stance. The 'ego' is a biased, distorted sense of oneself, a limited mode of human awareness that has been taken on to protect oneself from threatening aspects of the world.

In contrast to the ego, 'essence' is the true self according to the Enneagram. Essence is the unique, whole, centred person who is able to be in true relationship with God, others, and the world. Ichazo says,

> In essence every person is perfect, fearless, and in a loving unity with the entire cosmos; there is no conflict within the person between head, heart, and stomach, or between the person and others.[10]

The purpose of the Enneagram system is to provide a way for persons to become deeply aware of the false consciousness of ego so that a return to essence can be accomplished.

Most of what is written about the Enneagram is not about how to achieve the spiritual transformation of returning to essence, but rather descriptions of the nine types of personality. To name briefly these nine types, personality types Two, Three and Four are types fixated in the heart centre of the person. Helen Palmer[11] calls them 'The Giver', 'The Performer', and 'The Tragic Romantic' respectively. Types Five, Six and Seven experience their distortion more in the head centre, and can be characterized as 'The Observer', 'The Devil's Advocate', and 'The Epicure', while types Eight, Nine, and One are centred problematically in the belly centre, as 'The Boss', 'The Mediator', and 'The Perfectionist'. Each of the nine types experiences a central problem or dilemma

in dealing with reality. A Devil's Advocate, for example, motivated by fear and suspicion, seeks security by types of loyalty and courageous achievement that are not called for by the reality of the world. Such a pattern is acted out again and again in one's life. Unless a person can begin to observe and let go of this compulsive motivation, living out of the freedom of essence will not be possible.

Beyond this basic dilemma, commentators on the Enneagram describe a wide variety of characteristic issues and traits for each of the nine personality types. These descriptions are becoming more divergent as more people write about the Enneagram. Unfortunately, there is little discussion in print about how individual authors are coming to their own particular interpretations, leaving the student of the Enneagram at pains to judge between competing views. Commentators on Jung, to cite a parallel example, work carefully to show how their interpretation of analytic psychology is in agreement with the founder's point of view, or else cite reasons and data to justify their taking a different position. Such a climate of critical discussion and research is not apparent in Enneagram studies. There is a real need for commentators to begin validating their claims with more careful reference to originators like Gurdjieff and Ichazo, and with empirical research and documented case studies that can support particular interpretations.

A further question arises about using the Enneagram apart from the religious world view within which it arose. For both Gurdjieff and Ichazo the Enneagram is a tool for spiritual development that emerges from a much larger understanding of the human person and the cosmos, a viewpoint quite distinct from Christian and western ways of seeing things. What does it mean, then, when people make use of the Enneagram as a spiritual or psychological tool without reference to this world view? By analogy, what would happen if the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius were used as a tool for growth without reference to Ignatius's own view of God and the human person, or without the assistance of a guide familiar with the inner dynamics of the *Exercises*? In the same way, the Enneagram can seem more like a parlour game than a profound approach to spiritual development when detached from its original religious context. But given the foreign nature of that context, coming to know and appreciate such a world view is no small matter!

An example of this issue is simply the use of the term 'ego' in the Enneagram. This 'ego' has no parallel in western psychology.

It includes elements of Freud's 'superego' and Jung's 'persona' and 'shadow'. It describes ways a person has adapted to society at the expense of one's own true individuality, as well as ways one is affected by unconscious, broken and repressed aspects of the personality. Whether the Enneagram 'ego' also includes the centre of identity and freedom that western psychology terms 'ego' is not clear in various commentators; in so far as it does, then this spiritual system sees the importance of also moving from such false individuality to the reality of 'essence'. Such a process, though familiar enough to many eastern mystical traditions, stands in sharp contrast to traditional Christian spirituality.

Type, mis-type, and stereotype

Obviously, to make maximum use of either the MBTI or the Enneagram in understanding oneself or another it is essential to assess correctly one's true type within either system. Both systems assert that a person is only one type, and we do not change types during our life, though at various times dimensions of other types may take on greater importance for an individual.

Finding one's type within the Myers-Briggs system is not as easy as simply taking the inventory. As Jung reminds us, 'Only careful observation and weighing of the evidence permit a sure classification...because every individual is an exception to the rule'.[12] Such observation requires self-awareness—an ability to stand back, observe, and name how I function in the outer and inner worlds. Looking at personal history, environmental influences, and the relative strength of one's preferences are necessary supplements to the testing data. An interview with a person well versed in the MBTI can be a valuable means of weighing this data and coming to a better assessment of one's real type within the Myers-Briggs.

Finding one's type within the Enneagram is even more difficult. First, there is as yet no testing instrument that has been proven to be effective for discovering one's Enneagram type. More importantly, though, it seems to me that the Enneagram requires a much more acute ability for self-observation to even notice the data that are crucial for identifying one's type. Frequently people type themselves on the basis of some external behaviour ('I'm a workaholic, so I must be a Three'; 'I'm always helping people, so I'm a Two'); but the essential data to be noticed are the thoughts and feelings, the *motivations* that underlie one's behaviour. Very

frequently, people are not consciously aware of these (that's precisely part of their compulsive nature). In so far as these underlying thoughts and feelings remain unobserved, people will not be ready to identify their true Enneagram types. Traditionally, the Enneagram has been taught within the structure of a teacher-disciple relationship, and the value of a teacher or guide for understanding this complex system and for discovering one's place within it should not be underestimated. Also, meeting and observing people of each Enneagram type is another helpful way to learn the various types and find one's place within the system. One common sign that an individual has discovered one's true Enneagram type is a reaction of distress and shock ('Oh no, anything but that!'), because finding one's type is also realizing the bias, disorderedness, and incompleteness of my ego-consciousness.

In my experience of doing spiritual direction I meet many people who as they grow in self-awareness come to see themselves as a different type from their initial assessment on both the MBTI and the Enneagram. I also hear people describing themselves as a particular type in ways that fit neither the system they are using, nor their own behaviour as I observe it. This makes me wonder how many of us mis-type ourselves in these systems and in doing so miss the fuller opportunities for self-knowlege and growth that might be available. Hence, I find a certain 'healthy uncertainty' about one's type, a willingness to reassess as new data about myself becomes available, to be a very helpful attitude.

A frequent complaint registered against using personality typologies is the danger of 'stereotyping' other people. Labelling another person as a number or a set of four letters is obviously not respecting the individuality and uniqueness of the other, nor is it conducive to fruitful relationships. (Luckily, God 'calls us by name', and not by number!) But just as problematic as stereotyping other people is the danger of stereotyping myself. Identifying my type can lead me to deeper self-understanding, or it can bring to a halt my efforts to observe and own my actual experience of life. Spiritual growth requires continual attention to the 'voices' within me, the 'movements produced in the soul', the alternations of consolation and desolation, the spontaneous emergence of thoughts, emotions, images and desires. Self-observation of such movements leads to the understanding that comes from discernment, and then leads back to continuing self-observation. Stereotyping myself is making a judgement about who I am that stops the flow of

continuing self-awareness and hence closes the question of 'where and how is God's Spirit moving in me today?'

Self-knowledge and spirituality

Both the Enneagram and the Myers-Briggs provide theories of personality that can help us understand other people better and enable groups to function more smoothly through clearer mutual understanding. As aids to spiritual growth, however, these systems seem to me most powerful as tools for self-understanding, rather than for understanding others. Each system provides extensive profiles of what a person of a particular type is like, enabling individuals to notice more fully and appreciate aspects of their own personalities. Even in so far as one dis-identifies with particular aspects of a given type, this too leads to greater self-awareness.

The question then arises: what role does such self-knowledge play in a person's spiritual journey? How does knowing myself better through the MBTI or Enneagram relate to my spirituality? In an effort to answer this question, it is helpful to name briefly what is meant by 'spirituality'. Sandra Schneiders has proposed a definition that can assist our discussion:

> [Spirituality is] the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives... [For a Christian] the ultimate concern is God revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit within the life of the Church.[13]

Looking at this definition from the perspective of self-knowledge, several important movements can be identified. First, spirituality includes coming to more conscious awareness and integration of who I know myself to be before God. Second, it also involves recognition of ways I choose 'isolation and self-absorption', rather than authentic integration. And third, Christian spirituality desires self-transcendence, conversion beyond my current self-definition toward a truth more fully related to God and the person God calls me to be. In what ways can the Myers-Briggs and Enneagram contribute to such movements?

Gifts differing,[14] Isabel Briggs Myers' book on personality types, suggests by its very title the movement of spirituality enabled by the MBTI. Seen in relationship to God, the strengths and talents

I discover in myself through use of the Myers-Briggs are realized to be 'gifts' from God, offering richer life for myself and for others. These gifts are particularly mine (differing from those of most other people), and yet they offer the opportunity for closer relationship to others, to the world, and to God. Learning to accept and love myself in my giftedness, and even more radically to experience acceptance and love from others and from the Other in my giftedness, are steps in the development of human identity before God. In Ignatian terms, this is part of the 'Principle and Foundation' of spirituality, an essential and never completed stage of our conscious integration before God. Indeed, the attention that contemporary spiritualities give to themes such as self-knowledge and self-acceptance, the goodness of all creation, and the centrality of God's empowering love attests to the need and importance of experiencing this giftedness in our own day.

Though some authors stress the giftedness of various types within the Enneagram in a similar manner, my own understanding of this system places primary emphasis on the fact that 'ego' is inherently a false personality, a perspective on self and world that is biased and incomplete. In our ego consciousness we experience feelings and ideas that we take to be reality, but that are in fact the products of wounded and disordered functioning. In so far as this is true, the Enneagram does not reveal our giftedness before God, but rather our distorted self-knowledge, our misperception of the world, the illusion and unrelatedness of our lives. In a real sense, 'isolation and self-absorption' are unmasked by this type of knowledge. In my experience of listening to others, when persons begin to realize or have revealed to themselves the patterns of their Enneagram type in their actual experiences, the movements of spirit are not dissimilar to what Ignatius describes as 'graces' in the first week of the Spiritual Exercises. Though the term 'sin' may or may not be used, people do experience such things as 'deep knowledge of my sins [or alienation] and a feeling of abhorrence' at this reality; or they come to 'an understanding of the disorder of my actions'[15] in day-to-day perceptions and choices. In so far as spirituality includes the recognition and repentance of ways that my life is not integrated according to my ultimate value, this type of self-knowledge is a vital step in one's spiritual journey.

As I begin to observe and recognize the thoughts and feelings that occur within myself, the Enneagram gives me a way to sort out which of these movements are not really connected with my

deepest self (or essence). In so far as I come to see these places of illusion, I can dis-identify with them and make room in my consciousness for other desires, emotions, and understandings. In such a process self-transcendence begins to open for me. I can hear calls that take me beyond my current self-definition, that enable me to cross boundaries of perception and action that were previously closed in my experience. I become available for the ongoing conversion that lies at the heart of the Christian spiritual journey and that can ultimately bring me to my truest self, my essence before God. The wisdom of the Enneagram can provide a deeply helpful perspective on this journey.

The MBTI also has its boundary dimension, expressed primarily in its presentation of the 'inferior function'. This fourth or inferior function is always the opposite of one's primary function (e.g., for an extraverted feeler the inferior function is introverted thinking). By definition it is the least used, least preferred, and least comfortable mode of one's operation. It exists primarily in the unconscious of the individual, in realms where one is neither self-aware nor self-controlled. And this is precisely why its potential for assisting self-transcendence is so great.

As Marie-Louise von Franz points out, operating out of the inferior function has 'a mystical quality about it'.[16] Because this function is so close to the unconscious, it can become a door (unclosable and unlockable!) through which images and energies of the unconscious come into consciousness.[17] Such psychic material can enliven, alter and re-define who I am. And in so far as our deepest reality is our being fashioned in the image of God, such movements from the unconscious can call to conversion to God, to our ultimate value. For an extraverted intuitive to really dwell in the present moment while baking bread, for example, or for an introverted feeler to take decisive action for justice in the world can be extraordinary moments of grace in so far as these are responses to a calling beyond one's self-definition. What would be an ordinary event for one person can be a place of self-transcendence for another when the inferior function is engaged in response to an invitation to richer life.

As Christians we can never be content to accept and live our current self-awareness, either as gifted children of God or as sinners in need of God's mercy. The continual call is to conversion, to lose ourself in order to gain our true self. This means that we need to dwell on the boundaries of our self-knowledge, trusting that God

will continue to reveal to us who we truly are before God and our neighbour. Personality typologies like the Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram can block such movement when used to provide us with 'comfortable' self-knowledge—knowledge that reinforces controlling behaviour and closes us to further revelation and self-transcendence. But they can also open us to see ourselves as we truly are, to let down our defences before others and before God, and to sort out the various movements, images, desires and callings that stir within us. At such times they can become powerful tools in service of God's grace at work among us.

NOTES

[1] See Myers, Isabel Briggs: *Gifts differing* (Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., Palo Alto, California, 1980).

[2] Jung, C.G.: *Psychological types* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1976).

[3] *Ibid.*, pp 331–332.

[4] For an extensive treatment of the developmental aspect of the MBTI see Grant, Harold W., Thompson, Magdala, and Clarke, Thomas E.: *From image to likeness: a Jungian path in the gospel journey* (Paulist Press, New York, 1983).

[5] Current writings on the Enneagram include: Keen, Sam: 'A conversation about ego destruction with Oscar Ichazo', *Psychology today* (July 1973), pp 64–72; Beesing, Maria, Nogosek, Robert J., and O'Leary, Patrick H.: *The Enneagram: a journey of self discovery* (Dimension Books, Inc., Denville, New Jersey, 1984); Palmer, Helen: *The Enneagram: understanding yourself and the others in your life* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988); Riso, Don Richard: *Personality types: using the Enneagram for self-discovery* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1987) and *Understanding the Enneagram: the practical guide to personality types* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1990).

[6] For more information on Gurdjieff and his use of the Enneagram see: Speeth, Kathleen Riordan: *The Gurdjieff work* (And/Or Press, Berkeley, CA, 1976).

[7] For a presentation of the Enneagram as applied to life processes, rather than personality types, see: Bennett, J.G.: *The Enneagram* (Coombe Springs Press, Gloucestershire, England, 1974).

[8] See Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp 46–54.

[9] For information on the current status of empirical research into the Enneagram see Palmer: *op. cit.*, pp 379–387.

[10] Keen, *op. cit.*, p 67.

[11] Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp 37–41.

[12] Jung, *op. cit.*, p 516.

[13] Schneiders, Sandra M., I.H.M: 'Spirituality in the academy', *Theological studies* 50 (1989), p 684.

[14] Myers, *op. cit.*

[15] Exx 63.

[16] Von Franz, Marie-Louise: 'The inferior function', *Jungian typology* (Spring Publications Inc., Irving, Texas, 1971), p 31.

[17] *Ibid.*, p 54.