

Enneagram

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of
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History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity:

An enneagram (pronounced “any-a-gram” and named from Greek words for “nine” and “something written or drawn”) is a nine-pointed star shape drawn inside of a circle. This geometric shape is used by its advocates as a model for the study of human personality types. Each of the nine points is said to refer to a certain personality type, such as “The Challenger,” “The Achiever,” “The Individualist,” and so on. The self-study system helps the user focus attention inwardly on his personality, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. The goal of the enneagram study is movement upward through levels of “psycho-spiritual development.” With increased self-awareness the individual is freed from the need to identify with his inborn personality type, enabling him to react more peacefully to the circumstances of life. The enneagram self-study is not necessarily a spiritual program, although the model is sometimes used for spiritual development and includes spiritual aspects resembling the inward-focused mystical thought of many religions.

Founder(s):

Early figures in the enneagram’s modern use include the Russian teacher George Gurdjieff (c.1872–1949), his disciple P. D. Ouspensky, and Bolivian researcher Oscar Ichazo. Ichazo began using the enneagram methods in his Chilean school in the 1970s. Ichazo’s methods were brought to America by psychologists Claudio Naranjo and John Lilly. The Jesuit priest Robert Ochs brought enneagram methods to the attention of fellow Jesuit priests and seminarians who used the model for spiritual counseling. Contemporary advocates of the enneagram model include Don Riso (a former Jesuit) and Russ Hudson, co-founders of the Enneagram Institute and developers of the Riso-Hudson Enneagram Type Indicator, and Helen Palmer, a founder of Enneagram Worldwide.

Statistics:

There are no statistics on the use of the enneagram model, although advocates claim users numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

History:

Some advocates of the enneagram model trace its origins to Islamic Sufi mysticism (known most famously for its “whirling dervish” mystics). The personality model may borrow some of its spiritual aspects from a variety of mystical traditions, including Judaism (Kabbala), Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, and Greek philosophy (especially NeoPlatonism). One modern advocate of the enneagram model, Richard Rohr, believes that the enneagram has roots in the Christian mysticism of the fourth century monk Evagrius Ponticus, who used numerology in compiling a list of vices.

The modern development of the system is usually attributed to the Russian George Gurdjieff, who may have used techniques of Islamic mysticism in his teaching (some histories also mention

Gurdjieff's possible involvement in occult practices such as Tarot readings). Oscar Ichazo, with his school in Arica, Chile, continued to develop enneagram personality studies. He was the first to relate nine divine qualities (such as those found in Kabbala) to the nine pointed symbol. Psychologist Claudio Naranjo brought ideas from Ichazo's school to California in the 1970s. He made connections between the enneagram model and more widely used personality theories.

The Jesuit priest Robert Ochs brought the teachings to North American Jesuit communities. Don Riso, co-founder with Russ Hudson of The Enneagram Institute, is a former Jesuit who further developed the materials in light of modern psychological theories. Various organizations and websites such as The Enneagram Institute, Benjamin Saltzman's Touched and Transformed site, and Helen Palmer's Enneagram Worldwide provide popular access to the model.

Texts:

While many books and articles have been published about the enneagram model, there are no founding texts associated with the use of this personality study system.

Beliefs and Practices:

Each of the nine points in the enneagram shape represents a unique personality type. The names of the types vary according to descriptions of the model. For example, Type One is called The Perfectionist, Good Person, or The Reformer. Type Four is The Romantic, Sensitive Person, or The Individualist. The highest level, Type Nine, is usually called The Peacemaker or Peaceful Person. In popular use the personality types are sometimes compared to well known politicians, actors, or athletes or equated with different animals (the "perfectionist" as a terrier, the "status-seeker" as a peacock, and so on). In more serious use the enneagram model is said to resemble the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator, although with attention given to underlying spiritual meanings or motivations.

Using the enneagram model to study habitual personality patterns, the individual becomes more self-aware and learns to avoid negative or dysfunctional behaviors in stressful situations. According to the Enneagram Institute, such study reveals the individual as "a spiritual being who has lost contact with his or her true nature. Living out of this realization shifts completely how we see ourselves, others, and the world, bringing liberation, freedom, and joy."¹

The spiritual use of the enneagram system involves—as is common in many forms of mysticism—an upward ascent of the self from lower "animal" passions and instincts to higher "divine" aspects of the self. This upward ascent is necessary because the individual has over time fallen away from his higher self and become trapped in the negative aspects of his personality. According to one program of use, the enneagram identifies nine core "sins" related to the overuse of a particular aspect of each personality type. In Jesuit use the personality types are linked to the "seven deadly sins," for example, the helpful Type Two personality with the sin of pride, or sensitive Type Four persons with envy. Under stress, an individual regresses along the path of the nine-pointed star shape, but with counseling and study is able to make progress "upward" again toward core strengths or virtues. One writer comments that accessing "the ancient spiritual truths of the world's three great prophetic

¹ "Enneagram FAQs," available online at <http://www.enneagraminstitute.com/FAQs.asp> .

religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity” in the enneagram system may provide a helpful model for pastoral counseling.²

In the process of personal and spiritual development the enneagram model is said to give people “a sense of the typical shape of their self-limitations and self-distortions” and not only give them access to “the assets of personality types other than their own, but also to the kind of personal integrity that is liable to lead to union with God.”³ The website “Touched and Transformed” claims that use of the enneagram accelerates one’s spiritual transformation, enabling a person to “fully embrace” the Shadow (one’s dark side) and Light (one’s divine essence nature) within in order to “spiritually evolve.”⁴ Richard Rohr, claiming roots for the enneagram system in early Christian mysticism, writes, “The mystery of God’s revelation is hidden inside, and in each of us in a different, unique way (at least nine general God images). Rohr continues, “So Jesus became the Human One who believed the divine image in himself, who trusted it, followed it, and told us to do the same.”⁵

A Lutheran Response

We can easily become fascinated with self-studies and personality models because we are often fascinated with ourselves! Young people especially may become interested in programs such as the enneagram model as they explore their own personal growth and development toward adulthood. Even temporary fascination, however, must be approached with great caution. It can be helpful to look at oneself and try to improve one’s personality and relationships. But serious, inward-focused self-study done without professional help (pastors, counselors, psychologists) could become emotionally unhealthy and spiritually dangerous.

The enneagram could be a fairly harmless tool if used solely to investigate personality traits, but most advocates of the enneagram self-study model also make use of its spiritual aspects and refer to its supposed links with Islamic or Christian mysticism. These spiritual connections make the enneagram program spiritually deceptive and dangerous. Most traditions of mysticism involve an inwardly focused approach to spiritual growth. Through work, prayer, and meditation the mystic hopes to achieve upward spiritual movement and union with God. Some mystical traditions teach, as does the enneagram program, that human beings have within them a “divine spark” or a divine essence that can be reached through self-study and meditation. Holy Scripture, however, teaches that while human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) they do not share in the divine essence of the Creator. We are created beings and have no “divine spark” or divinity within ourselves. Even though we are created in God’s image, since the Fall our human nature is thoroughly and completely corrupted by sin. St. Paul quotes the Old Testament, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:10–11). As sinful human beings we are naturally inward-focused and selfishly turned in toward ourselves. God’s Word tells us what we will find when we look inside ourselves: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

² Leigh E. Conner, “The Use of the Enneagram in Family Ministry,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 7:2 (1993): 40.

³ Franz Jozef van Beeck, “Fantasy, the Capital Sins, the Enneagram, and Self-Acceptance: An Essay in Ascetical Theology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3:2 (Spring 1994): 194.

⁴ Benjamin Saltzman, “Transformational Coaching with the Enneagram” (2010), available online at <http://www.touchedandtransformed.com/?gclid=CILsuargzKECFRmfnAodqXeOdg>.

⁵ Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 48.

The view inside ourselves is not at all pleasant! We must certainly be aware of our sins and our need for repentance and the forgiveness found only in Jesus Christ. However, a constant inward focus, apart from the comfort found in God's Word, might easily lead to depression and despair. Even as Christians, self-study may lead us to see only our sins and failings and forget the forgiveness we have in Christ. In its spiritual form, the enneagram program claims to lead the individual to union with God, or perhaps to union with a "divine essence" within the self. Holy Scripture tells us that reconciliation with God is possible only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus Christ is not simply an ordinary human being who believed "the divine image in himself." Jesus is God in human flesh. He told His disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Reconciliation with God and spiritual transformation in our lives come not from within but *only* from outside ourselves, by the power of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ: "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

There is of course always room in our lives for personal growth and development. St. Paul tells us that in Christ we have put off the "old self" and that we are to "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). In Romans 12:2 the apostle Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Personal spiritual growth is best—and most safely—accomplished through the study of God's Word within the community of fellow believers. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can grow in faith, turning outward toward others in love and service. Through such study and service, by God's grace through faith, we are being "conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29).

For Further Reading

- McGinn, Bernard. *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters*. N.Y.: Crossroad, 2003.
- Petry, Ray C. *Late Medieval Mysticism*. Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957.
- Riso, Don, and Russ Hudson. *Discovering Your Personality Type: The Essential Introduction to the Enneagram*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Rohr, Richard, and Andreas Ebert. *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective*. New York: Crossroad, 2009.

Links and Websites

- www.enneagraminstitute.com
- www.enneagram.com
- www.touchandtransformed.com