

A Practical Theology Tool to Identify Subjective Individual and Group Spiritual Perspectives

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This article explains the adaptation of a social science method called “Q” into a practical theology tool which elicits the spiritual experiences and perspectives of individuals or groups; offering potential for deepening personal understanding of one’s inner life. Q-methodology uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques based on statements which are drawn from the literature about the subject and in consultation with key stakeholders—in this case, spirituality. The statements are then prioritized by participants using a grid and commenting on their choices. Sets of spiritual narratives emerge from the analysis and reflect participants’ key experiences of faith and life. This tool has a number of valuable uses including a transformational opportunity. The tool was developed for a specific cohort (Anglicans in the Western Cape, South Africa); however, it is readily transferable to many other cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS spirituality assessment tool, Q-method, spiritual perceptions

Reason for the tool development

This spiritual perception assessment (SPA) tool was developed to “deepen understanding” of how individual Anglicans in the Western Cape, South Africa “perceive their lived experience of faith” (Schneiders, 2011: 16) not “concentrating on faith itself but on the reaction faith arises in Christian consciousness” (McGinn *et al.*, 1985: xv-xvi). This article does not explore the definition of spirituality further to the latter phrases by Schneiders and McGinn. In addition, neither the complex context of Anglicans in South Africa is included, nor all findings in the original study; the latter can be found in Hennessy (2013). This article is concerned with the development of a SPA tool derived from Q-method. The tool may be useful for many pastoral and practical theology situations.

There are many sociological and development studies (Donner, 2001: 24-49) using Q-method.¹ These are frequently used to elicit deeply held perceptions of individuals. It has been used for a study in religion (McKeown and Thomas, 1988: 55) but no study of spirituality using Q has been identified to date.²

The SPA tool assumes that “humans are social beings” and that “perceptions of spirituality exist within a relational context”, and that “even highly abstracted concepts such as spirituality are often personalized in the process of meaning-making” (Peck, 2009: 16). This is very important for this study as the SPA uses statements to elicit what is perceived as important to individual participants about their own spiritual or inner life. Another assumption underpinning the statements is that God can be revealed in every aspect of our lives, including all relationships and experiences if we are open to this.

There are a number of psychological measurements of spirituality. Three examples are: the Index of Core Spiritual Experiences called INSPIRIT (Peck, 2009: 22);³ the Mysticism Scale (MScale) (Peck, 2009: 23); and the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) (Hall and Edwards, 2002). Some use quantitative measures and others qualitative.⁴

Q-method is particularly vigorous as it uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to capture subjects’ opinions and perceptions on a particular topic (McKeown and Thomas, 1988: 12). The capture of people’s perceptions is useful for this study, as people have different inner life experiences and may find it difficult to articulate what they perceive about them.

The following three principles underlie a Q-study (Du Plessis, 2009: 140):

- What is the range of communicated (verbalized) perceptions?
- What are the prevalent variations?
- How do these variations logically relate to each other?

Q-Method procedure

There are four stages in Q-methodology:

1. A set of statements⁵ are developed from the context of the study—in this instance, Anglicanism in the Western Cape South Africa
2. Participants sort the set of statements into a normal distribution grid. This sorting process gives subjective meaning to the statements, and reveals individual subjective viewpoints (Smith cited in van Exel and de Graaf, 2005: 1).
3. Each sorted grid is analysed using case-wise factor analysis.
4. The results are interpreted.

Each stage will be described and explained in turn.

¹ 1500 bibliographic studies cited in 1986 by Brown (McKeown and Thomas, 1988: 11) and 22,000,000 Google references in January 2012.

² One study identified is “The Elusive Concept of Civil Religion” discussed in McKeown and Thomas (1988).

³ The INSPIRIT questionnaire clarifies the degree to which spirituality is a central aspect of life.

⁴ The three tools referenced by Peck could possibly have been used in this research instead of or as well as Q-methodology. These tools though would have needed adapting to the South African context.

⁵ These are statements to be agreed with or disagreed with and are not questions to be answered.

Stage 1: Collecting the statements

The most challenging part of designing a Q-sort is the selection and construction of the set of statements, which is called a *concourse* in Q-methodology (Donner, 2001: 27). The *concourse* is compiled from a range of sources (e.g. relevant literature, interviews, focus groups, or observation etc.). In this study, the *concourse* was derived from the literature and from interviews.⁶ The *concourse* should contain a representative sample of components of the subject being studied (van Exel and de Graaf, 2005: 7). The statements also need to be broad enough to enable classification of responses and so provide insights for the researcher when the sort is complete. The literature of Christian spirituality is very wide-ranging and some selectivity was necessary. The focus of the selection was kept to aspects relevant to the Anglican Church in the Western Cape, at the time of this study.

The process of selection was iterative:

- A draft collection of statements was collated from the literature.
- These were discussed with the UK interviewees who knew the context, and then amended for the second draft.

The second draft was discussed in interviews with nine Anglican theologians in the Western Cape, South Africa, and then adapted to ensure linguistic clarity, comprehensive coverage of topics and relevance for contemporary South African behaviour and understanding. For example, “Finding God in Silence” was changed to “Time with God”. They also suggested statements on complex issues in the local church including attitudes to gender in the church, gender orientation and also views about ancestor worship. From this process, 39 statements were finally selected and formulated according to Q-methodology recommendations (Donner, 2001).⁷ A simple framework based on the three elements of spiritual development suggested by von Hügel in 1899 (1961) and described by Hughes (2008) was adapted for this study. The three elements are: the church, critical thinking and action, and an inner spiritual life, all of which should be in balance. With this in mind thirteen statements were selected to reflect each element. The statements are not comprehensive because they are a tool to help individuals begin to perceive and articulate what matters to them in their inner spiritual life. The set of statements was piloted in the Western Cape, South Africa.

A sample of five of the final set of thirty-nine statements is shown in Table 1. There are two columns in this table. The first shows the source of the statements and the second provides the actual statement. The number of each statement is randomly allocated. To keep the participants stimulated and alert during the sorting and prioritizing process half the statements have been rephrased into the negative; these are in italics below.

⁶ Interviews took place with three knowledgeable stakeholders in the United Kingdom and seven in the Western Cape South Africa; these interviewees were Anglican theologians who were or had been deeply immersed in the culture of the Western Cape and the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA). These theologians suggested statements and their wording based on their knowledge of the current theological and social context in the Western Cape South Africa. The full list of statements is not included in this article and many of the statements referred to in this article have been truncated from the original ones.

⁷ Thirty-nine statements are frequently used by Q-method researchers (Spurgeon *et al.*, 2012: 2)

TABLE 1
THE SOURCE OF FIVE STATEMENTS

Source: Literature Review or Interviews	Statement- <i>italics explained above.</i>
Macqueen (2011) Kretzschmar (2012: 149) Storey (2012: 9)	3. <i>Spreading the message of Christianity and God's love to those trying to survive in poverty 20 years post apartheid is pointless.</i>
South African theologians Kourie (2008) Pilot study	5. The Church should embrace homosexual relationships.
Von Hügel (1961)	8. My own personal inner experience is as important as sermons or Bible reading.
Hughes (2008) De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004) Storey (2012)	13. <i>The teaching in my church rarely links with my everyday experiences and life.</i>
Hughes (2008: 11) Rakoczy (2006) Otto (1958)	29. The pain and joy I experienced in South Africa before the collapse of apartheid were necessary, for they have led to a deeper understanding of God.

The P-set

Q-method permits small opportunistic samples from people involved in the discourse, or subject matter that is being studied. This is because the focus of the study is on subjective views and therefore does not need to be representative of the population (van Exel and de Graaf, 2005: 3; Du Plessis, 2009: 151). Nevertheless, the sample should be diverse, for example in terms of gender and age, so that a wide range of views are included (Du Plessis, 2009: 151). The focus of Q-method, however, is on the views of the respondents, rather than which respondent belongs to which social group.

Stage 2: The Q-sort task

Participants were chosen by their church leaders to participate.⁸ Each participant was given an information sheet about the study and all the correct research procedures were followed to ensure anonymity. A step-by-step instruction sheet was provided to assist the Q-sort process. Participants were then given a blank grid (Figure 1) and a set of cards, each containing one statement; each with a randomly allocated number on the reverse of the card. The study participants manually sorted and prioritized the statements, which ranged from those perceived to be most desirable to those perceived to be least desirable. All of the statements were then placed on the grid in prioritized order.

Throughout the process the participants worked independently, reading the statements and considering them in relation to their own experience of faith. Then, as suggested in the Instruction Sheet, each made an initial sort of the statement-cards into three piles as follows:

⁸ The church leaders knew that the study was about perceptions of the inner life and what was expected of participants. They chose people to participate whom they believed would have enough experience to sort and prioritize the statements.

[illegible]

FIGURE 1 The Grid

1. Those statements with which I disagree or are very unlike my own experience;
2. Those statements with which I agree or are very like my own experience;
3. Those statements with which I neither agree nor disagree (do not relate to my own experience).

Each pile was then further refined according to the extent to which the participant agreed or disagreed that each statement matched their own experience. The statements were then placed in an appropriate cell on the grid, from -5 (strongly disagree) to $+3$ (strongly agree). Therefore, the two statements with which the participant most strongly disagreed were allocated to the two cells labelled -3 (least like my own experience); the three statements with which the participant disagreed slightly less were allocated to the three cells labelled -2 and so on. Because the grid in this study complies with a normal-distribution format, a prescribed number of statements had to be allocated to each part of it (Spurgeon *et al.*, 2012: 2).⁹ Once all the statements had been allocated, the participant was asked to check them and re-organize as necessary. When the participant was satisfied, the number on the reverse of each statement-card was transferred into that cell in the grid. An example of one participant's completed Q-sort is provided in Figure 2.¹⁰

On completion of the card-sorting task, each participant also considered the statements that they chose for each pole (*least agree* and *most agree*) and recorded their reason for their selections.

Information was provided only about the sorting process; no attempt was made to influence the participants' decisions and therefore the potential for bias was minimized.

⁹ To facilitate the sort, each of the 39 statements was printed on a separate card (business card size) with its random number on the reverse.

¹⁰ Each participant copied sorted card numbers from the large grid onto a separate normal distribution grid on a blank A4 sheet.

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
3	37	15	19	31	18	27
10	20	23	6	38	5	35
	26	2	13	30	39	
	16	17	12	24	32	
	22	11	33	9	14	
	29	34	21	4	28	
		7	36	1		
			25			
			8			

FIGURE 2 An example of one participant's completed Q-sort (Least agree Neutral Most agree)

Stage 3: The Q-analysis

The prioritized statements were subjected to statistical analysis using a propriety statistical package to identify consensus items, contention items, and distinct subgroups of participants who shared similar perspectives. Meaning was then inferred from these results.

The sorts that are most typical of a given factor are automatically highlighted during analysis. It is the researcher's role to interpret each factor, or the participants' perspective. Sense is then made of these perspectives or stories by reference to participants' reasons for their prioritization and published research and literature.

The results of the analysis

Using the statistical analytical method mentioned above, eight factors with eigenvalues of > 1 were obtained. Thirty-nine (of 57) participants loaded onto the factors, and none loaded onto more than one. The fact that no participant loaded onto more than one factor confirmed that there were no confounding factors (Akhtar-Danesh, cited in Merrick and Farrell, 2012: 498) and that all eight factors can be considered to be discrete and unrelated. One of these eight factors is shown in Table 2 (below) as an example.

Table 2 has six columns. The first column indicates the factor number; the second column shows the factor-labels,¹¹ given by the researcher in an attempt to capture the core theme of the factor after considering the distinguishing statements (statistically significant statements).¹² The third column shows the number of respondents loading on to each factor. The fourth column is the percentage variance.¹³ The fifth

¹¹ In Q-methodology the labels for each factor (or story) are provided by the researcher to reflect the essence of that factor or story, which is indicated by the concurrence statements loading onto the factor.

¹² "A distinguishing statement depends on the number of Q-sorts defining a factor and the standard deviation of the Q-sort distribution" (Du Plessis, 2009: 172).

¹³ Percentage variance reflects how far the factor varies from the mean.

TABLE 2
STRUCTURE OF FACTOR WITH THEIR LABELS (THE STATEMENTS REFLECTED IN THIS TABLE HAVE BEEN TRUNCATED FROM THE ORIGINAL)

Factor	Factor Label	Number of respondents loading onto Factor	Percentage Variance	Defining statements (significant at $P < 0.05$ Asterisk * $P < 0.01$)	Z-score
1	The Living Church	11	14	5. The Church should embrace homosexual relationships	0.998
				29. The pain and joy I experienced in SA before the collapse of apartheid were necessary for they have led to a deeper understanding of God	-0.220
				8. My own personal inner experience is as important as sermons or Bible reading	1.655
				3. <i>Spreading the message of Christianity and God's love to those trying to survive in poverty 20 years post apartheid is not pointless*</i>	2.025

Each participant has different viewpoints or likes and dislikes. Different statements load onto a specific factor as result of these different viewpoints: if a significant number of these viewpoints or prioritized statements cluster together, or correlate in the statistical analysis then they could become factorized (van Exel and de Graaf, 2005: 1).

column shows the defining statements that are significant at $p < 0.05$; those with an asterisk are significant at $p < 0.01$. The sixth column records the Z-scores associated with each statement and, therefore, its importance to the factor.

For ease of understanding, negative statements in Table 2 that also have a negative Z-score (i.e. a double negative) have been converted back into a positive one; these statements are italicized.¹⁴ Where a negative statement has a positive score the text has not been changed.

The statements, together with the Z-scores and the narratives or comments recorded by the participants that clustered to that factor, inform the interpretation for each factor.¹⁵ Through this process, very rich spiritual narrative emerges as discussed in the next section.

Factor one: Labelled as “The Living Church”¹⁶

Four distinguishing statements and 11 participants loaded on to Factor One; the latter accounted for 14% of the variance. The characterizing statements, together with participants’ narratives/comments, suggested a personal belief in spreading the Gospel to all, even those still in chronic poverty more than 20 years after the demise

¹⁴ Statement number 8 in Factor One, *My own personal inner experience is not as important as sermons or Bible teaching* has a Z-score of -1.655. This is an example of conversion from negative to the positive. It has been converted back to *My own personal inner experience is as important as sermons or Bible reading* and the Z-score has also been changed from -1.665 to +1.665. The Z scores can be interpreted -3 to -1 is strongly disagree to disagree with the statement, 0 is neutral and +1 to +3 means agree to strongly agree with the statement

¹⁵ As mentioned previously, each participant was invited to make comments on his/her reasons for placing statements on either -3 or +3 on the grid.

¹⁶ As mentioned in footnote 11.

of apartheid.¹⁷ The statements also indicate a positive belief in the importance of both the participants' inner faith experience, and to daily studying the Word to which they attach importance. They value discussing and praying about biblically-inspired faith issues and for those in need, as the following comments show:¹⁸

It is of utmost importance to read the bible. How can you learn about God if you do not read about Him? (43)

Being part of a bible study group is a faith family, in which I can comfortably share and discuss biblical faith aspects. We grow through these relationships. (23)

I am my brother's keeper so awareness of others in prayer is a way of asking the Holy Spirit to take care of those in need. It [prayer] does matter and provides another opportunity to grow to be like Him. (35)

Personal inner experience and the awe and wonder of God's creation are valued as highly as the study of the Word and prayer for others:

My own personal experience is just as important to me as sermons and bible reading. (18)

I feel so strongly that we as humans are a part of God's created world. ... God's awesome magnificence is all around. (1)

Be still and know that I am God. In solitude and in the countryside of God's creation I find the awareness of God's being. (35)

There is a strong belief in the Eucharistic sacrament:

The Eucharist is central to the Anglican way of worship and so it is central to my worship of our Lord. (23)

Relationship with God and God's love for all is emphasized by the comments:

My relationship with God is the essence of my spirituality. (5)

My belief that God's grace is found in all people is a fundamental of my faith. (50)

The statement "Embracing those in homosexual relationships in the church" was significantly supported (Z-score 0.998), based on the belief in God's love for all:

Homosexual relationships that exist in love must be embraced... Licentiousness is a sin. But to love someone and then to demonstrate this in a mutual trusting relationship is by no means a wrong. God is Love. (43)

Interestingly, there is also some criticism of both the leaders of the formal church, the congregation and themselves in their attitudes to others:

The majority of people in the church have a lot to say about what others should and shouldn't do but when it comes to helping others they are too busy. (31)

¹⁷ Throughout this paper, the words *narrative* or *comment* are used interchangeably, when reporting on the qualitative data provided by the participants to explain the reason for their prioritized statements. The narratives/comments used in each factor were those written by the participants who loaded onto that factor. All narratives/comments are in small font. The significant statements are not.

¹⁸ The numbers in brackets at the end of each comment indicate the number allocated to the research participant.

There are few Anglican leaders for whom I have respect left. (31)

I never really make time to help others and always seem to be too busy with my own personal issues. (11)

It was surprising that the response to Statement 29 (Z score = 0.220) suggested that the pain and joy of the apartheid years does not seem to have had an impact on the faith development of the participants in this factor. Perhaps this is because of the length of time (20 years) that has elapsed since apartheid collapsed.

This factor identifies participants who were the “living church”—the label given to this factor. They knew and practised the disciplines required to grow spiritually, learning about scripture, praying, questioning, debating issues, and applying the gospel to critical questions in their lives, the church, and society in South Africa (Foster, 1999: xvi). This led to a connectedness with the world (Perrin, 2011: 449) through letting go of prejudice (such as embracing homosexuality in the church), compassion for the vulnerable and believing significantly in spreading the gospel to those in poverty (McCarthy, 2000: 199). Although this suggests a proximity to the poor, as described by Storey (2012: 9), it is unclear whether this was also translated into the alleviation of poverty.

Clearly members of this group are thinking critically. The essence of this perspective corresponds to, and can be explained by, von Hügel’s second element. They were also growing spiritually from learning opportunities and continual experiential learning, which Hawkins claims is maximized when church leaders encourage those situations which foster growth (Hawkins, 1997: 79). They had moved into a place of faith community support, possibly originally stimulated and nurtured by church leaders. Foster describes how this type of learning leads to a sense of the “numinous” or the presence of God (Foster, 1999: xvi). This is supported by the participants’ strong awareness of personal inner experiences that mattered to them significantly. They communicated with and sensed God through beauty, nature, and music and this was even more important than their deep and committed biblical study and intercessory prayer. They took time out in silence to be still with God and the Eucharist was central to their faith.

The above shows movement towards von Hügel’s third element, which is further demonstrated through their strong connection with the symbolism and mystery of the Eucharist, an essential principle of the Anglican spiritual tradition encompassed in the Book of Common Prayer (Rowell, 1999: 131).

These participants appear to be balanced Christians living their faith in a manner integrated with their daily lives. They think critically about what their faith means, obediently study the word, have an awe of God, and translate all this into non-judgmental, positive relationships with family and others. They also have a contemplative aspect to their spirituality.

Conclusion

The development of Q-methodology as a practical theology tool to elicit deeply held perceptions about spirituality is discussed in this article. Details of the method used to develop the Q-sort tool for this study and the data collection in the

field were described. In the final part of the article a narrative is shown that emerged from the statistical and qualitative analytical results of one of the eight factors. This narrative is shown to be an extraordinarily rich and accessible description of the spirituality both individually and collectively of the group of participants who loaded on to the factor.

This tool has a number of valuable uses. The participants themselves reflected on the transformational nature of the prioritizing and sorting process of the statements, which is helpful to the individual enabling one to interpret and articulate their spiritual life. This in turn frees them up to discuss it with others both individually and in the group setting, encouraging mutual understanding and tolerance. In a broader context this information may be helpful in focusing the development of the spiritual life in a faith setting and their mission.

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