

Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues

reviewed by [Alexander Tsai](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues

Robert C. Roberts
Eerdmans

When his family was shopping for a church, Robert C. Roberts mulled over the different sermon styles, liturgies and worship music experiences and wondered, “How . . . does the apostolic tradition make its way into individual lives?” In this update of his 1982 book *Spirituality and Human Emotion* (Eerdmans), Roberts argues that emotions play a central role in this process. While many view emotions as “inscrutable psychological phenomena,” Roberts regards them as fertile territory for careful exploration. His aim is to encourage thoughtful reflection about the emotions to foster spiritual growth.

This may strike the reader as an unconventional approach to spiritual formation, which is typically viewed as more cognitive than emotive in nature. To understand the approach, the reader must begin by understanding Roberts’s carefully articulated definitions of *emotions*, *concerns* and *passions*. Central to his thesis is his definition of emotions as “concern-based construals,” or episodic, interpretive perceptions of the situation that are affected by what one cares about. As an example, he cites the joy the apostles felt when facing beatings and imprisonment in retaliation for promoting the gospel message. In his framework, their joy could be described as an emotion; it is based on the apostles’ concern for the kingdom of God, which imparts to them a uniquely Christian way of seeing the world “in a new focus and frame.” Because this concern is an overarching theme that is determinative of sufficiently long stretches of their emotional lives, they could be said to have passion for the kingdom of God.

Roberts devotes four chapters to exploring the core passion underlying all Christian emotions. He examines the human need for God through an illuminating dialogue between the writings of Leo Tolstoy and Sigmund Freud, and he shows how this desire for God entails a desire for a moral life of “perfect fellowship with God and neighbor in the promised kingdom.” In subsequent chapters, Roberts describes manifestations of this passion in the lives of believers: contrition, joy, gratitude, hope, peace and compassion.

So is spiritual formation primarily cognitive or primarily emotive? Given that Roberts assigns a primary role to emotion in this process, one would expect him to side with the latter. However, his framework seems to make emotion a “species of thought.” After all, emotions can be cultivated; to develop gratitude, a particularly Christian way of viewing how things impinge upon one’s life, Roberts writes, one ought to “*practice* seeing things this way. How does one practice seeing? By *looking*.”

Roberts is also careful to distinguish emotions from moods, which are affective states not subject to rational adjudication. Christian hope, as a construal of the future through the lens of faith, can underlie a believer's optimistic mood, but hope and optimism are not one and the same. A worship service can encourage moods, but "there is nothing peculiarly Christian about moods of exaltation and triumph." The danger is that believers may mistake the moods they experience for genuine expressions of Christian emotion.

The book is occasionally more ethical than psychological in content and therefore seems targeted to academics rather than ministers interested in the practical implications of pastoral care, but scattered throughout are precious flashes of wryness that make the book an enjoyment to read over all. And some pastoral implications of this framework are clear. Those who have a stake in the spiritual formation of their brothers and sisters in Christ can learn from *Spiritual Emotions* the difference between emotions and their vague simulacra. Pastoral staff and counselors can use the insights and guidance in this book to usher people under their care through experiences that are conducive to hope and contrition and toward becoming hopeful and contrite persons. As these emotions become more deeply etched into their character, they will eventually be able to more steadfastly maintain them even in unsupportive environments and situations.

As a physician currently completing my residency training in psychiatry, I hope to think more deeply about my patients' spiritual histories and about the role of emotion in the formation (and evisceration) of their spiritual lives. Robert's engagingly written book is a welcome addition to the dialogue between Christian spirituality and contemporary psychology. I hope it enjoys a wide reading.