

The Esoteric Experience: Positive or Negative?¹

Introduction

Western Esotericism, or occultism, has often been viewed with suspicion and mistrust by the public, police and academia. It is often represented by the media as being synonymous with Satanism, as depicted in movies like Roman Polanski's (1968) *Rosemary's Baby* or books such as Dennis Wheatley's (1972) *The Devil Rides Out*. Unfortunately this stereotype influences many parts of society including television censorship, for example the ITC report on acceptable viewing (Sancho, 2001), and the 1980's Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) hysteria, which was partly due to ignorance of Paganism and modern witchcraft (La Fontaine, 1998). Until recently many academics have also treated the academic study of occultism with suspicion. Bronislaw Malinowski (1925) commented:

'Even for those who do not share in that hankering after the occult, after the short cuts into "esoteric truth", this morbid interest, nowadays so freely ministered to by stale revivals of half-understood ancient creeds and cults, dished up, under the names of "theosophy", "spiritism" or "spiritualism", and various pseudo-"sciences", -ologies and -isms – even for the clear scientific mind the subject of magic has a special attraction.'

Even occultists themselves have made disparaging remarks about their own tradition, Arthur Edward Waite (1972) commented on magical grimoires, 'We shall see very shortly...that we are dealing with a bizarre literature, which passes, by various fantastic phases, through all folly into crime'. It is not surprising then that, according to the popular view, experiences from with occultism would be of spiritual evil. A general study of negative spiritual experiences made by Jakobsen (1999) found that spiritual evil can come from within or without a person, can be encountered in certain places or people, is described in numerous ways and can result in '...ice cold shivers, tingling scalp, sweating with terror, paralysed lips, vomiting from fear, shaking, rocking body, being unable to speak or move'.

In brief Western Esotericism includes the beliefs and practices centred around magic, astrology, and alchemy from the ancient period to the modern day. Antoine Faivre (Faivre & Needleman, 1992) has defined Western Esotericism by describing six characteristics, four essential and two non-essential to the definition. The first four are: *correspondences* between the microcosm and the macrocosm; *living nature*, the idea that the world or universe is alive or ensouled; *imagination and intermediaries*, the use of the imagination to access states or metaphysical worlds between man and the divine; and *the experience of transmutation*, the psychospiritual process of transformation often implicit in these ideas and experiences. The additional two characteristics are: *concordance*, the concept that all spiritual traditions originate from, and therefore contain aspects of, a single primordial wisdom tradition; and *transmission*, the ways in which this tradition is passed down through the centuries between initiates or adepts.

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In the academic arena, unlike the popular one, the term 'esotericism' is not usually synonymous with 'occultism'. In popular usage the latter may be used as a convenient catch-all but a more restricted use would tend to apply it only to those aspects of esotericism that involve practice rather than doctrine (Faivre, 1987). According to R.A. Gilbert (1993) the term 'occultism' was first used in English by Madame Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled*, 1877.

Methodology

The question asked by this study was simply: what kinds of spiritual experiences are reported by people involved with esotericism and occultism? Are experiences, and their outcomes, negative or positive? This approach was based upon that of William James, author of the seminal *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902), who advocated judging spiritual experiences by their fruits. The three traditions selected were Helena Blavatsky's *Theosophy*, G.I. Gurdjieff's *Fourth Way* movement, and Mathers' *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*. All three traditions were founded in the late 19th or early 20th centuries and still have followers today. Sources of written accounts of spiritual experiences were collected from published texts, the archive of the *Religious Experience Research Centre* (RERC), and from contemporary practitioners. The availability of occult and esoteric texts has increased greatly over the last few years making such material more easily accessible than ever before. Many of these texts contain autobiographical material relating to spiritual experiences. The RERC, founded by biologist Sir Alister Hardy FRS in 1969 and now housed at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, has an archive of over 6000 accounts of religious experiences from a diversity traditions. Contemporary accounts were elicited by e-mail requests, letters, online forums and my website www.esoteric-experience.org.uk. Groups and organisations were identified using the Internet. Requests for accounts did not indicate that the experiences would be categorised as negative or positive in order to avoid bias in the response. In addition an attempt was made to contact lapsed or ex-members of the three traditions in question.

Often a distinction is made between 'religion' as the doctrines, history, rituals, etc, of a tradition, and 'spirituality', the experiences and behaviour of people. This issue will not be debated here so the terms 'religious' and 'spiritual' experience will be used synonymously. 'Anomalous' experience (Cardena, Lynn & Krippner, 2001) may be a preferable term, encompassing a wider range of experiences, without prejudging what category they belong to. Whilst this term may not apply in some cultures where such experiences are viewed as part of normal everyday life, for the accounts collected here this term seemed appropriate. Most of the accounts were considered religious, spiritual or psychic by the experiencers themselves.

Three Esoteric Traditions

Founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB, 1831-1891) and Colonel Henry Olcott the Theosophical Society has as its principle aims the following:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

2. To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science.
3. To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.

The writings of Blavatsky and other prominent Theosophists form a large and complex body of ideas. Prominent among HPB's works are *Isis Unveiled* (1877), *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) and *Voice of the Silence* (1889). These works outline ideas such as; the seven stage spiritual evolution of the Earth, the seven-fold constitution of man, the existence of Tibetan Mahatmas who have reached the pinnacle of spiritual development and now work to aid mankind, the Ancient Wisdom Tradition which predates and supersedes both modern science and Christianity, and evidence from paranormal phenomena of a non-material aspect to the world.

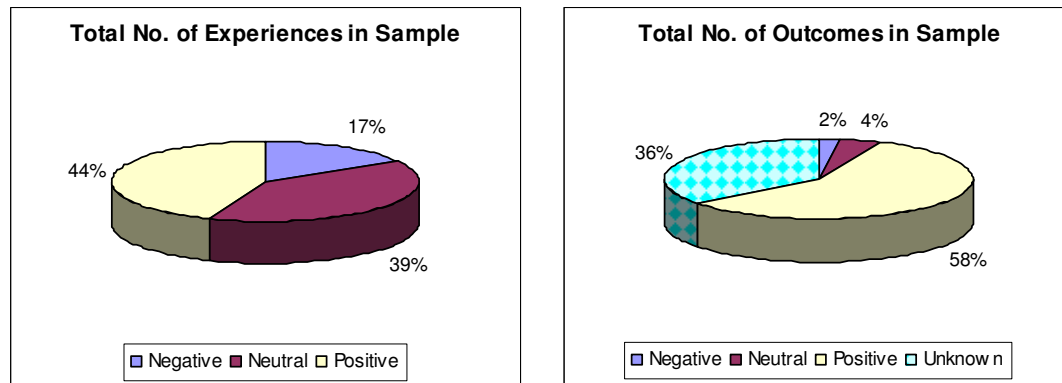
G.I. Gurdjieff published a number of books, the most significant being his *All And Everything* series, comprised of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (1950), *Meetings With Remarkable Men* (1963), and *Life Is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'* (1975). The whole of Gurdjieff's system focussed on waking up 'man the machine' and creating a single, permanent 'I' rather than the usual state of multiple, conflicting 'I's'. Two important techniques of the system were *self-observation* and *self-remembering*. Although the system is very psychological in nature it is also interwoven with certain ideas about the nature of man and the world. The process of 'waking up', known as 'the work', involves much physical, emotional and mental effort: represented by the 'moving', 'emotional' and 'intellectual centres' respectively. Gurdjieff described the physical way as the path of the fakir, the emotional way as the path of the monk and the intellectual way as the path of the yogi. In distinction, the Fourth Way utilises a balance and harmonisation of all three ways. Gurdjieff also taught of the four bodies of man and the universe; the physical body, the astral body, the mental body and the causal body, similar but not identical to the concepts in Theosophy. Gurdjieff used the octave as his way of understanding the creation of the universe (the *Ray of Creation*) and the process of awakening in man. These processes; the *Law of Three* and *Law of Seven* are summarised in the symbol of the Enneagram.

Probably the most famous occult society in history was founded in 1888 by S.L.M. Mathers (1854-1918), Dr William Westcott (1848-1925) and Dr William Woodman (1828 – 1891). The organisation they founded, and which had a massive influence on subsequent esotericism, became known as *The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*. As for the origins of the Golden Dawn Westcott claimed that he had discovered an old coded manuscript said to contain a number of mystical rituals which were subsequently expanded by Mathers. Westcott claimed that he had received authorisation from a German adept to found the Isis-Urania Temple of Die Goldene Dämmerung. Further temples were established in England, New Zealand and Paris. Notable members included scholar A.E. Waite, the poet William Butler Yeats, the actress Florence Farr, the author of supernatural fiction Arthur Machen, and the writer Allan Bennett. The Golden Dawn had a hierarchical degree structure based on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. The teachings of the Order included magic, alchemy and astrology. These were taught in theory in the outer order and put into practice in the inner order. The whole aim of Initiates in the Order was to '...extend the Consciousness in the direction of divine and superhuman things and, correspondingly

restrict the “Automatic Consciousness” of animal Appetites and desires.’ (King, 1987).

Results

The experiences and their outcomes were judged to be either positive, negative or neutral simply based on the language used by the experients to describe them. In many cases the subsequent outcomes were not recorded. Positive, negative and neutral experiences were found. Although a significant number of negative experiences are reported, the majority had positive outcomes.



Positive experiences included empathy with the tradition and inner knowledge, a sense of guidance or destiny, and the numinous, ‘There was a feeling of reverent awe’. Also reported was the concept of being on a spiritual journey, ‘I realised that the search for Truth mattered more than finding it’ (RERC, 001817), feelings of unity, a sense of Being and the Self, inner transformation, ‘A new kind of resurrection begins in me – I am invaded by the all-powerfulness of spirit’ (Anderson, 1962); and love and ecstasy, ‘I felt an invisible outpouring of love’ (Chapman, 1993). Altered states of consciousness were frequent including mystical type experiences, ‘I had a profound sense of a sudden major change of consciousness which manifested as frequent mystical-like experiences and a daily and pervasive feeling of numinosity’ (Regardie, 1971), and inner journeys, ‘...Kether, on the one occasion when I touched its fringe, appeared as a blinding white light, in which all thought went completely blank’ (Fortune, 1935).

Negative elements included physical danger; a sense of fear or oppression, ‘the atmosphere became positively oppressive, and we three could hardly breathe’ (Caldwell, 2000); and physical pain. There seemed to be a fear of psychic attack by some of the Golden Dawn members. Also, initiation and self-development are understood to be difficult paths to take; often the initiate would have to undergo unpleasant experiences to make further progress. Negative experiences also resulted from the unpleasant discoveries that people sometimes made about themselves whilst practicing self-observation, ‘You see your “flaws” very clearly, and your self-importance drops’ (Tart, 1992); and from the important role of suffering in Gurdjieff’s system.

Some accounts did not refer to positive or negative aspects and were therefore classed as neutral. Neutral experiences were mostly due to reports of paranormal phenomena. Such phenomena included unexplained scents, phantom bells, astral projection,

'precipitation' of handwriting, the mysterious appearance of letters, meetings with the elusive Mahatmas, and telepathy, 'On this occasion I not only heard *but I replied mentally* and G. heard me and answered me' (Ouspensky, 1949). One experient commented, 'I don't count it as a "spiritual" experience, more a psychic one, but certainly Esoteric'. Descriptions of self-remembering and self-observation were also largely neutral, 'When I was feeling *I*, I could neither think nor speak; even sensations became dimmed. Also, one could only remember oneself in this way for a very short time' (Ouspensky, 1949). Similarly, many Golden Dawn accounts consisted of long neutral descriptions of astral travel.

Conclusion

The relatively large proportion of positive experiences and positive outcomes provides evidence that esotericism, or occultism, does not simply result in experiences of spiritual evil. Although there are a significant number of negative experiences, these are often followed by a positive outcome. This highlights the role and importance of suffering in spiritual experience. Perhaps these kind of experiences are related to what James (1902) referred to as the religion of the 'twice-born' or 'sick soul'. The sick soul senses a radical 'wrongness or vice in his essential nature... which requires a supernatural remedy'. Furthermore an 'urgent wondering and questioning is set up, a poring theoretical activity'. James says, 'The process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before'. Negative experiences, for the sick soul, supply a wide range of experience, may be a 'key to life's significance' and 'open our eyes to the deepest levels of truth'. It should also be noted that there may be an inherent bias in people's willingness to report positive rather than negative experiences. Another possibility is that current members tend to provide positive accounts, whilst ex-members tend to provide more negative accounts. However, the percentages of positive, negative and neutral experiences from current and ex-members was found to be approximately equal.

There is no single experience that characterises the esoteric approach to spirituality. Theosophy tends to emphasise the importance of paranormal phenomena as evidence for a non-material aspect of reality. Fourth Way has a more psychological feel and accentuates self-reflection and meditative introspection. The Golden Dawn concentrates particularly on astral travel and other visions. Whilst different traditions emphasise different aspects of these experiences, it was found that the accounts are generally similar to spiritual experiences reported from other, more orthodox, traditions. There seems to be a fairly large proportion of positive experiences in Theosophy and Fourth Way and a smaller proportion in the Golden Dawn. The large number of neutral experiences in Theosophy are due to paranormal type experiences which were simply observed and reported. Nevertheless, these often led to positive outcomes for the experient, such as confirmation of a non-materialistic worldview. Research into paranormal experiences carried out by Rosemary Breen (2008) found that 70% of respondents claimed their experience had altered their attitude to life and death. The large percentage of neutral experiences from the Golden Dawn is due to detailed descriptions of various astral realms. These experiences may also serve to confirm a non-material worldview but it is also important to remember the

doctrine of 'as above, so below'; the Macrocosm reflects the Microcosm. Such experiences can therefore be personal, as well as cosmological, insights. The neutrality of these accounts was due to the dispassionate, almost clinical way in which they were described. This makes sense when it is remembered that the modern occult revival was attempting to approach religion in a 'scientific' way. Occult students were required to keep detailed journals of their experiments. Some accounts differentiated between 'psychic' and 'spiritual' experiences. Mostly these were seen as unrelated although there were one or two exceptions. The psychic or paranormal type experiences occurred in all three traditions but assumed the most importance in the séance-like phenomena of Theosophy. Anthony Duncan (1975) has suggested that in occultism psychic experiences are characterised by solemnity, darkness and fear, whilst spiritual experiences are characterised by love, light and joy. The latter all occur numerous times in the accounts surveyed but Duncan's characterisation of psychic experiences was not upheld.

Finally, many experients had actually been associated with more than one of the three traditions. Some of the accounts suggested that this spiritual eclecticism could be construed as a quest or journey, for example, 'I felt a concentration of force, a purging of the spirit, and a desire to go on with my quest' (Chapman, 1993). This may relate to Batson and Ventis' (1982) concept of quest religion.

In summary, esoteric or occult spirituality can be a source of positive experiences and outcomes. This is contrary to the popular conception of these traditions. Finally, there is no esoteric experience per se that can be characterised from the data. The experiences reported, whilst differing in emphasis, tend to be similar to accounts from other traditions.

Author



Michael J. Rush graduated with a BSc (Hons) in Biomedical Science in 1997, an MA in Religious Experience in 2008, and a PGDip in Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology in 2011. He has a long-standing interest in occultism and Western Esotericism. His article *On The Side of the Angels: Neuroscience & Religious Experience* was published as Occasional Paper #49 by the Religious Experience Research Centre. In 2010 his essay *If God Is A Delusion – Why Bother?* came joint third in *The Skeptic* magazine's Mary Evans essay competition. Mike is a committee member of the Alister Hardy Society and runs the AHS Chesterfield Group.

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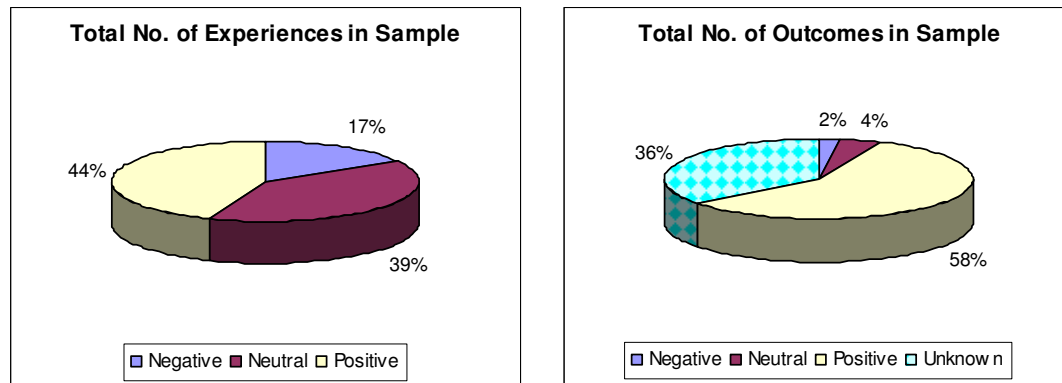
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Negative elements included physical danger; a sense of fear or oppression, ‘the atmosphere became positively oppressive, and we three could hardly breathe’ (Caldwell, 2000); and physical pain. There seemed to be a fear of psychic attack by some of the Golden Dawn members. Also, initiation and self-development are understood to be difficult paths to take; often the initiate would have to undergo unpleasant experiences to make further progress. Negative experiences also resulted from the unpleasant discoveries that people sometimes made about themselves whilst practicing self-observation, ‘You see your “flaws” very clearly, and your self-importance drops’ (Tart, 1992); and from the important role of suffering in Gurdjieff’s system.

Some accounts did not refer to positive or negative aspects and were therefore classed as neutral. Neutral experiences were mostly due to reports of paranormal phenomena. Such phenomena included unexplained scents, phantom bells, astral projection,

'precipitation' of handwriting, the mysterious appearance of letters, meetings with the elusive Mahatmas, and telepathy, 'On this occasion I not only heard *but I replied mentally* and G. heard me and answered me' (Ouspensky, 1949). One experient commented, 'I don't count it as a "spiritual" experience, more a psychic one, but certainly Esoteric'. Descriptions of self-remembering and self-observation were also largely neutral, 'When I was feeling *I*, I could neither think nor speak; even sensations became dimmed. Also, one could only remember oneself in this way for a very short time' (Ouspensky, 1949). Similarly, many Golden Dawn accounts consisted of long neutral descriptions of astral travel.

Conclusion

The relatively large proportion of positive experiences and positive outcomes provides evidence that esotericism, or occultism, does not simply result in experiences of spiritual evil. Although there are a significant number of negative experiences, these are often followed by a positive outcome. This highlights the role and importance of suffering in spiritual experience. Perhaps these kind of experiences are related to what James (1902) referred to as the religion of the 'twice-born' or 'sick soul'. The sick soul senses a radical 'wrongness or vice in his essential nature... which requires a supernatural remedy'. Furthermore an 'urgent wondering and questioning is set up, a poring theoretical activity'. James says, 'The process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before'. Negative experiences, for the sick soul, supply a wide range of experience, may be a 'key to life's significance' and 'open our eyes to the deepest levels of truth'. It should also be noted that there may be an inherent bias in people's willingness to report positive rather than negative experiences. Another possibility is that current members tend to provide positive accounts, whilst ex-members tend to provide more negative accounts. However, the percentages of positive, negative and neutral experiences from current and ex-members was found to be approximately equal.

There is no single experience that characterises the esoteric approach to spirituality. Theosophy tends to emphasise the importance of paranormal phenomena as evidence for a non-material aspect of reality. Fourth Way has a more psychological feel and accentuates self-reflection and meditative introspection. The Golden Dawn concentrates particularly on astral travel and other visions. Whilst different traditions emphasise different aspects of these experiences, it was found that the accounts are generally similar to spiritual experiences reported from other, more orthodox, traditions. There seems to be a fairly large proportion of positive experiences in Theosophy and Fourth Way and a smaller proportion in the Golden Dawn. The large number of neutral experiences in Theosophy are due to paranormal type experiences which were simply observed and reported. Nevertheless, these often led to positive outcomes for the experient, such as confirmation of a non-materialistic worldview. Research into paranormal experiences carried out by Rosemary Breen (2008) found that 70% of respondents claimed their experience had altered their attitude to life and death. The large percentage of neutral experiences from the Golden Dawn is due to detailed descriptions of various astral realms. These experiences may also serve to confirm a non-material worldview but it is also important to remember the

doctrine of 'as above, so below'; the Macrocosm reflects the Microcosm. Such experiences can therefore be personal, as well as cosmological, insights. The neutrality of these accounts was due to the dispassionate, almost clinical way in which they were described. This makes sense when it is remembered that the modern occult revival was attempting to approach religion in a 'scientific' way. Occult students were required to keep detailed journals of their experiments. Some accounts differentiated between 'psychic' and 'spiritual' experiences. Mostly these were seen as unrelated although there were one or two exceptions. The psychic or paranormal type experiences occurred in all three traditions but assumed the most importance in the séance-like phenomena of Theosophy. Anthony Duncan (1975) has suggested that in occultism psychic experiences are characterised by solemnity, darkness and fear, whilst spiritual experiences are characterised by love, light and joy. The latter all occur numerous times in the accounts surveyed but Duncan's characterisation of psychic experiences was not upheld.

Finally, many experients had actually been associated with more than one of the three traditions. Some of the accounts suggested that this spiritual eclecticism could be construed as a quest or journey, for example, 'I felt a concentration of force, a purging of the spirit, and a desire to go on with my quest' (Chapman, 1993). This may relate to Batson and Ventis' (1982) concept of quest religion.

In summary, esoteric or occult spirituality can be a source of positive experiences and outcomes. This is contrary to the popular conception of these traditions. Finally, there is no esoteric experience per se that can be characterised from the data. The experiences reported, whilst differing in emphasis, tend to be similar to accounts from other traditions.

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