The nature and consequences of informational differences in exoteric versus esoteric spiritual practices

Jonathan Doner, Ph.D.
Keswick, Va
jfd@donersystems.com

Abstract

Two broadly different approaches to spiritual practice exist within virtually every religious tradition. Though the specific characterization and evaluation of these different practices vary among authors, their general nature is reasonably clear. The *exoteric path* represents the more conventional approach to religion involving ongoing participation in the practices and activities of an established religious community (synagogue, church, mosque, temple, etc.). Alternatively, the *esoteric path* tends to be more individualistic and mystical in orientation. Within a given tradition, the two approaches are never in opposition to each other but can nonetheless involve complex, bivalent inter-relations. The present paper examines these two forms of practice in terms of their informational characteristics. It is primarily concerned with the amount of information each style of practice generates and processes within a small set of general but relevant contexts. It shows that the two styles of practice result in highly characteristic differences in the generation and processing of information. In addition, the paper argues that important consequences of these differences concern how they both reflect and impact the practitioner’s religious faith and their sense of self.

Introduction

Historically, different styles of spiritual pursuit have been distinguished in a variety of manners. Hinduism, for example, identifies spiritual practitioners both in terms of life-stage and psycho-behavioral tendencies (Smith, 1986). As an adult, a person of religious bent might be expected to follow three stages. They spend most of their adult life as a “householder,” working a job, raising a family, and being a good member of the community. After completing these society-supporting duties, a person so inclined might become what is termed a “forest-dweller,”
separating themselves from society in order to pursue a more focused and undistracted spiritual practice. The most committed of these might go beyond even this to the stage of *sannyasa*, or total renunciation of family, home, possessions, status, and so forth.

Hindu tradition holds that the method by which a practitioner pursues spiritual understanding should relate to that person’s psycho-behavioral tendencies. These are grouped into four basic styles which have a remarkable similarity to the categories of the Myers-Briggs. A person might be considered intellectual, emotional, action-oriented, or reflective/experiential. For each there exists a particular path or *yoga* attuned to that style, *jnanna yoga* for the intellectual, *bhakti yoga* for the person of feeling, *karma yoga* for the person of action, and for the reflective/experiential individual there is *raja yoga*, the “royal road”.

In the Christian tradition we find this four-fold division simplified to two basic paths. The anonymous author of *The cloud of unknowing* wrote (Wolters, 1978),

… there are two ways of life in Holy Church. One is the active, the other is the contemplative life. Active is the lower, contemplative the higher. … These two ways of life are linked and though they are different, each is dependent upon the other. … A man cannot be fully active except he be partly contemplative, not fully contemplative … without being partly active. … Active life is careful and troubled about many things, contemplative [life] sits peacefully with one. (pg. 71)

In more recent times, Frithjof Schuon has made a similar distinction. Drawing on the earlier work of Rene Guenon, Schuon (1984) applies the terms *exoteric* and *esoteric* to the active-contemplative dichotomy. He sees the exoteric as “fundamentally the point of view of individual interest considered in the highest sense” (pg. 7). This is the “husk” compared to the esoteric “kernel”. Only the esoteric is capable of perceiving the transcendent unity of the Absolute. Consequently, “esotericism is reserved, by definition and by its very nature, for an intellectual elite necessarily restricted in numbers.”
Though these conceptions of the exoteric/esoteric distinction are interesting theologically they suffer from several difficulties relative to an objective analysis of spiritual practice. First, they are unabashedly elitist in their evaluation of the two modes. Exotericism is seen as inferior to esotericism. Schuon condescends that the “exoteric aspect of a religion is thus a providential disposition that, far from being blameworthy, is necessary in view of the fact that the esoteric way can only concern a minority, especially under the present conditions of terrestrial humanity” (Schuon, 1984, pg. 33). Apparently, God has created exotericism so that the multitude of us simple folk will have something to do while He personally communes with the esoteric few.

It should be clear that there are absolutely no objective criteria for this sort of evaluation. If there are multiple modes of religious practice, and if we can assume that these are “genuine” in the sense that they are consistent, vital expressions of a tradition, then only prejudice would evaluate one above the other. Consequently, the present paper seeks to characterize the two paths in a manner that provides a basis for understanding their equally important contributions to the health and development of religious traditions.

A second and more critical difficulty with existing exoteric/esoteric distinctions is that they are based on essentially theological criteria. This results in analyses that are largely subjective, vague, and post hoc. It is critical that differentiations be based on objective, clearly definable criteria. Beginning with Allport’s postulation of extrinsic vs. intrinsic foundations for religious belief (Allport, 1966), many subsequent researchers have attempted to dissect religious belief and behavior into a set of logically defined categories (see Hill, 2005). As Hood, Hill and Spilka (2009) point out, however, regardless of the logic underlying these dimensions, empirical work consistently shows all such dimensions to be interdependent. One is as good as another for explaining religious behavior. Consider again the Hindu categorization of different psycho-
behavioral tendencies. Despite this, it seems clear that all four yogas could potentially be beneficial to an individual regardless of their presumed psychological nature. What matters is the practice, not really the supposed psychology of the practitioner. It can be concluded that what is needed is a method of distinguishing modes of practice which derives from the practices themselves, not the presumed nature of the practitioner, but which does have critical consequences for both. To this end, the present work develops an understanding of the exoteric and esoteric modes in terms of the manner by which they seek, utilize, and generate practice-relevant information.

From the outset, however, as the Cloud author rightly states, we must acknowledge that the two paths can never be wholly independent. Rather, let us say that they are two sides of the single coin which constitutes religious pursuit. However, as we shall see, neither are they easily merged. An inevitable tension must exist between them, and the demands of each force individuals to largely choose one path or the other as their dominant mode.

**The basic nature of the two paths**

First, we conceive of a *spiritual practice* as actions, feelings, cognitions, and experiences which realize, reflect, and manifest that which the practitioner considers to be of *Ultimate Concern*. Various authors have tried to recast religious practice in less controversial terms such as agency attribution (Atran, 2002), specialness, (Taves, 2009), or motivated meaning-making (Inzlicht et al, 2012). Though there is value in each, and even greater value in their combination, all of these attempts fail to capture that which is truly central to religion, its *ultimacy*. Religion is about ultimate agency, ultimate specialness, and ultimate meaning. As Tillich (1957) says, “Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned (pg. 1).” And insofar as it is the practitioner’s faith that
motivates their spiritual practice, that practice must instantiate and express the practitioner’s Ultimate Concern.

In general, a spiritual practitioner receives information from a source or sources that inform, support, motivate, and confirm their practice. They express their practice through actions which are meant to enhance, stimulate, support, transform, or restructure some target relative to their Ultimate Concern. Therefore, the first major claim of the present paper is that the exoteric and esoteric paths differ in terms of their source(s) of information and the target(s) of their expression.

For those that pursue an exoteric practice, the source of information and the target of expression are (almost) always the external world. The exoteric is one who structures their spiritual practice primarily through information received from the physical and social world, and in turn expresses their spiritual practice primarily through actions which generate and restructure information in the physical and social world.

Contrariwise, for those that pursue an esoteric practice, the source of information and the target of expression are (almost) always the practitioner’s internal consciousness. The esoteric is one who primarily structures their spiritual practice according to information manifesting within their personal internal consciousness, and in turn expresses their spiritual practice primarily in terms of actions which are meant to generate and restructure information within their personal internal consciousness.

Thus we have distinguished the exoteric and esoteric paths as divergent informational strategies. Though any given spiritual practice will necessarily involve both strategies to some degree, it is apparent that the demands and ramifications of each will be quite different. Within this context, therefore, it is important to clarify what is meant by information.
Gregory Bateson defined information as *a difference that makes a difference* (Bateson, 1972). This definition succinctly indicates the two main forms of information, *quantitative* and *semantic*, that are relevant to the current context. An analysis of differences alone produces the notion of quantitative information as it is elaborated in Shannon’s information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Cover & Thomas, 1991). An analysis of the difference the difference makes leads to the notion of meaning and hence semantic information. With respect to spiritual practices, the conceptual content of a tradition and therefore of a given practice constitutes its semantic information. Quantitative information, however, is independent of content. Quantitative information derives from the variety and relative frequencies with which different distinctions are made, regardless of the meaning of those distinctions.

To use a prosaic example, as you stand before the display of paper towels at your favorite market, semantic information relates to the fact that these are paper towels and not cans of soup (or whatever), and also to the different qualities of the different brands. Quantitative information relates simply to the variety of available brands and the relative numbers of each on the shelves. The greater the number of brands and the more equal the number of each that is available, the greater the quantitative information. If few brands are available, or if there are many examples of one brand and very few of the others, then the display will be highly redundant. Redundancy means there is very little quantitative information.

Though these two kinds of information are different, they can interact. For example, a large amount of quantitative information can interfere with semantic information. The high information in most modern supermarket displays resulting from a huge variety of options can create bewilderment, decreasing the ability to functionally process the semantic information and determine which brand to buy. On the other hand, if only one brand is available, this high
redundancy can negatively affect one’s semantic evaluation of both the value of the brand and the market.

So much for supermarkets; what about spiritual practices?

We have defined a spiritual practice as actions, feelings, cognitions, and experiences which realize, reflect, and manifest that which the practitioner considers to be of Ultimate Concern. We can then ask how such a practice might be impacted by the choice of exoteric vs. esoteric informational strategies.

**Informational processes in exoteric practice**

For the exoteric, cognitions, feelings, and experiences are being induced and structured by information from the physical and social world. In turn, the actions of an exoteric, which are meant to express their Ultimate Concern, will do so by generating consequences within these realms. Regardless of the specific religious tradition of which the practitioner is a part, it is apparent that this sort of informational flow can result in only a limited set of scenarios. We can identify three in particular.

The first can be called the standard morality scenario of reward and punishment. It constitutes the paradigmatic view of popular religion. In this case, a person receives information indicating circumstances in the world that are amenable to action based on their Ultimate Concern. The person then performs those actions to the best of their ability, having the straightforward expectation that the consequences of those actions will in turn result in experiences and circumstances which are beneficial to them. Since all of this takes place relative to the person’s Ultimate Concern, the scenario does not involve crass self-centeredness, materialism or dominance and control. Rather, it is simply the case that the person “does good”
in the reasonable expectation of positive rewards and benefits for all involved, including themselves.

This scenario has an inverse corollary resulting in negative consequences. As most often applied, it involves a person observing others performing actions which are counter to the dictates of the Ultimate Concern. In this case, they fully expect these others to be negatively impacted by subsequent consequences. As the results of attribution research indicate (Aronson, 1992), the situation becomes more complicated if it is oneself performing actions that are counter to the Ultimate Concern. Nonetheless, the fear of negative repercussions is an age-old component of the standard morality scenario.

A second scenario is often referred to as the Good Samaritan (Wulff, 1999), deriving from the New Testament story where one individual selflessly comes to the aid of another. This story is emblematic of the concepts of service and charity which are central to the moral structure of virtually all religions. This scenario is derivative of the standard morality scenario except that it is generally assumed that the help-provider does not receive any material reward for her or his actions. Nonetheless, it is clearly a product of the exoteric flow of information. The acting person receives information from the social world indicating need and then acts in accordance with their Ultimate Concern to positively transform the situation.

The third scenario is different from the first two and constitutes the paradigm of worship. In worship an individual receives information from the external world, generally but not necessarily within a social setting. This information is processed relative to the person’s Ultimate Concern. In turn, the individual performs various actions intended to express, reinforce, motivate, and confirm the individual’s Ultimate Concern.
Before analyzing the scenario of worship in greater detail, two main points can be made concerning all three scenarios relative to the nature of exoteric practice. The first is, though what constitutes a benefit may differ from one scenario to another, *all three are supported and maintained over time by their stimulation of beneficial outcomes.* In the first scenario these are assumed to be largely material, financial, and social. In the second they are more personal but nonetheless present. People would certainly not help others if the results were consistently painful and destructive for all concerned. In the third scenario, the process and outcome of worship is again presumed to be beneficial for the individual. This area in fact represents a major focus of current research on the effects of religion. Though not necessarily focusing on worship *per se,* a growing body of research is documenting the physical and psychological benefits of religious belief and practice (e.g. see Oman & Thoresen, 2005, for an overview).

Earlier it was emphasized that both the exoteric and esoteric paths have equal status in the preservation and growth of religious traditions. In these scenarios we see indications of the importance of the exoteric path. It helps perpetuate a tradition by demonstrating its *efficacy.* To the seeming dismay of many scientists, religion continues to be a major foundation of human existence. From an evolutionary perspective there is an inordinate “cost” to religious behavior in terms of the time, energy, and resources devoted to it that are not going toward activities more directly related to survival and reproduction. The consequences of the scenarios mentioned above, however, indicate that the exoteric path creates significant benefits for both the individual and the group.

The second point to be emphasized is that each of the above scenarios is a logical outcome of the interrelation of a person’s Ultimate Concern and an exoteric informational strategy. This is not to deny the role of other factors in each scenario’s manifestation, but it is
significant that information flow alone can be considered an important determinant of the structure and consequences of a spiritual practice.

In each of the first two scenarios, it is logical that the general consequence of the exoteric’s action would be, regardless of the semantic information involved, to lower the overall quantitative information. In other words, the person would seek to lower the situation’s complexity, making it simpler and more well-ordered. Here we have, in a nutshell, the general *modus operandi* of exoteric practice. Given the exoteric’s sensitivity to the physical and social world, they are constantly immersed within high levels of information, complexity, and uncertainty. Therefore their primary efforts will be to make the world better, i.e., simpler, clearer, more well-ordered, and more functional. Generally, this is the only type of response which would be consistent with their Ultimate Concern. Only in special cases, such as dealing with social injustice, might they be moved, as a way of forcing change, to actually increase the complexity of a situation. Yet even in the face of grave injustice, some of the greatest figures of history (Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. leap to mind) acting out of unwavering faith to their Ultimate Concern, nonetheless chose peaceful paths aimed at lowering the overall uncertainty.

Not all people can be heroes, but all those who follow an exoteric path face a constantly daunting task. Recent workers have emphasized the psycho-biological benefits of religious belief, but few clearly grasp the incredible demands placed on individuals who try to live lives that are true to their Ultimate Concern. It is not easy to make the world better, even at the most local level. It is a significant question as to what it is that gives people the determination, perseverance, and energy to continue to do so despite constant setbacks, complications, misunderstandings, and failures. Surely the successes, when they occur, are reinforcing. But there must be something else. There are those who have argued that one function of religion is to
help people deal with the difficulties and uncertainties of life. However, in the modern world especially, we are constantly bombarded with information telling us just how screwed up everything truly is. Suddenly my iPhone beeps and informs me that on an island in the South Pacific I have never heard of, 170 people have just died due to a volcanic eruption. What is a person to do? How can a person maintain a faithful exoteric practice in the face of the world’s constant tragedy and misery? Faith in an Ultimate Concern alone, in and of itself, is not sufficient.

Rather, that faith must be repeatedly strengthened and energized. This is the role of worship. Three aspects of the worship scenario are particularly important in the present context. First, it almost always takes place within a social context. Consequently, regardless of the complexities and uncertainties of each person’s daily life, within the context of worship, everything is shared. No one stands alone. Second, worship is a ritualistic process. Both the information available within the situation and the actions available to individuals are greatly simplified relative to daily existence. Hence the overall quantitative information within worship is highly redundant. What is more, the semantic information of the worship context is highly focused. In daily life, the exoteric must constantly regenerate semantic information relevant to their Ultimate Concern through their own efforts. Within the worship context, however, this information is provided for them in a highly focused and organized manner. Worship is all about receiving well-organized information relevant to one’s Ultimate Concern and participating in ritualized activities meant to instantiate, strengthen, and re-energize that Concern.

The third relevant consequence of worship is that it allows, indeed requires that the exoteric, to a certain extent, participate in an esoteric practice. Of course the degree to which this actually occurs will depend on the individual. What is significant, however, is that the worship
context is designed, at least in part, to make this happen. Why should this be the case? Of what value is esoteric practice to the exoteric? A full answer to this question is beyond the present work, but many considerations indicate that this participation in the esoteric path is one of the main sources of the rejuvenating, re-energizing, and even healing effects of worship. We have already noted that overall worship provides a context of highly focused semantic information and greatly reduced quantitative information. The present paper would argue that these factors alone are of extreme importance in producing the positive consequences of worship.

**Informational processes in esoteric practice**

As we turn then to a consideration of esoteric practice, we find that these are in fact its defining attributes. Esoteric practice entails an extreme focusing of semantic information and an extreme reduction in quantitative information. These are carried out to such extremes, in fact, that semantic information virtually vanishes and quantitative information is reduced to zero.

Meister Eckhart said that a person should be so poor they possess nothing, not even God (Blakney, 1941). In *The cloud of unknowing* (Wolters, 1978), the author states that as the person mentally reaches out to God, they will,

Find only darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing. … Do what you will, this darkness and this cloud remain between you and God, and stop you ... from seeing him in the clear light of rational understanding. … For if you are to feel him or to see him in this life, it must be in this cloud, in this darkness. (pg. 61-62)

In the Zen Buddhist experience of *satori*, the practitioner experiences *sunyata*, the fundamental emptiness of reality. D. T. Suzuki (1957) emphasizes,

Buddhist *sunyata* does not mean vacancy. …It is Absolute Emptiness transcending all forms of mutual relationship, of subject and object, birth and death, God and world, something and nothing, yes and no, affirmation and negation. (pg. 28)
And from the Tantric tradition, the great Bodhisattva Shantideva (2006) said,

“There is nothing”—when this is asserted,
No thing is there to be examined.
How can a “nothing,” wholly unsupported,
Rest before the mind as something present?
When something and its nonexistence
Both are absent from the mind,
No other options does the latter have:
It comes to perfect rest, from concepts free. (pg. 237)

Suzuki (1957) quotes Meister Eckhart as he echoes this notion from a Christian perspective,

Neither the One, nor being, nor God, nor rest, nor blessedness, nor satisfaction is to be found where distinctions are. Be therefore that One so that you may find God. And, of course, if you are wholly that One, you shall remain so, even where distinctions are. (pg. 80)

In their practice, the esoteric faces two primary tasks. First, they must reduce the ongoing complexity of life to an absolute minimum. Second, they must make their attention to the Ultimate Concern absolute and unwavering. Both of these are extremely difficult. What, then, is the purpose of the esoteric path? Just as we discussed three scenarios that derived from the informational strategy of the exoteric, we can identify two primary scenarios that can be seen as consequences of the esoteric path.

The first is the avowed purpose of that path, which is for the individual to clear their consciousness of all hindrances such that their conscious mind becomes coextensive with the Ultimate Concern in its total manifestation. The esoteric seeks a direct communion with the Ultimate Concern. However, since the main source of information for the esoteric is their own minds, and since that same mind is the main target of all actions by which the esoteric expresses their practice, their practice is subject to several potential difficulties. The most general and most
important of these is that the practice can degenerate into rumination, daydreaming, or even sleep. These are the constant banes of all esoterics, especially early in their practice. A second related difficulty is that mind becomes distracted by information from the outside world, either immediately in the present or through the remembrance of past events. All of these (and more) can result in a defocusing of the semantic information of the practice and an elevation of the overall noise-level of consciousness. High quantitative information within the mind can result from myriad internal and external processes and is the primary enemy of esoteric practice.

In fact, many of the techniques utilized in the different forms of esoteric practice are designed specifically to help the practitioner overcome these difficulties. These techniques fall into four primary categories: those based in visualization, those based in vocalization, those based in motion, and finally, those based in respiration. Methods of visualization are important to Tantric Buddhist (Chang, 1963) and Kabbalistic techniques (Matt, 1995). Movement is used extensively in certain Sufi traditions (Shah, 1971) and is common in Native American and Aboriginal practices. Breathing techniques are extremely important in Hinduism and Buddhism. They are also present in certain Christian traditions, especially Orthodox practices (Brianchaninov, 2006), but are generally viewed as adjunct not primary. By far, the most common techniques, present in virtually every tradition’s esoteric path, are practices utilizing vocalization, for example koans and mantras (Suzuki, 1994) or repetitive prayer such as the Prayer of the Heart (Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1951).

However, regardless of the specific tradition or modality, all of these techniques are based on the creation of a highly repetitive and therefore highly redundant information flow within the mind of the practitioner. This reduces distracting information to a minimum, and
promotes the total immersion of the practitioner within the semantic focus of the Ultimate Concern.

A second scenario of the esoteric path concerns the relation of the esoteric to the external world, especially the social world. This issue actually has two primary facets, one that is easily understood and one that is very difficult. First, as noted several times, the esoteric and exoteric paths are not totally exclusive. We have already discussed how the exoteric must take on a bit of the esoteric in the course of worship. Likewise, the esoteric must become exoteric in their orientation as they attempt to describe or teach others about what they have learned in the course of their practice. Such discourse requires sensitivity to others and their needs, an awareness of circumstances and the ability to tailor one’s words in accordance with these concerns. Both Buddha and Christ are often cited as being preeminent in this regard. Such reentry into the world is not absolutely necessary, but as Joseph Campbell (1968) emphasizes, the hero quest is never complete until the hero returns to the everyday world to bestow upon the people the fruits of their labors (usually with disastrous consequences!). This aspect of the relation of the esoteric to the world is readily accepted.

Nonetheless, when we consider the second facet of this issue we come to see just how far apart these two paths can be. As stated above, it is the primary mode of the exoteric to try and make the world better. When they perceive limitations and difficulties within their world, it is an inherent aspect of their practice for exoterics to try and improve the situation. This is not the case in the esoteric path. Rather, the nature of esoteric practice is such that the goal of the practitioner is not to improve the world but to accept it completely, just as it is, as an already perfect expression of the Ultimate Concern.

Shunryu Suzuki (1999) said,
Our effort in Zen is to observe every thing as-it-is. … We must treat things as part of ourselves, within our practice and within big mind. Small mind is the mind that is under the limitations of desires or some particular emotional covering or the discrimination of good and bad. So, for the most part, even though we think we are observing things-as-it-is, actually we are not. Why? Because of our discrimination, or our desires. The Buddhist way is to try to let go of this kind of emotional discrimination of good and bad, to let go of our prejudices, and to see things-as-it-is. (pp. 28-30)

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, a Tibetan adept, stated (Kunsang, 2001), “All that appears and exists is all-encompassing purity” (pg. 11). Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the great German philosopher, argued cogently (Rescher, 1967), that when we truly understand the nature of God, we must come to the conclusion that we live in the best of all possible worlds—for which he received a great deal of criticism. The acceptance of what is as perfection is one of the most difficult aspects of the esoteric path for the exoteric to understand. And rightly so; it violates the fundamental mode of the exoteric path. Yet it is critical to the esoteric because the esoteric path is not about changing the world but about radically transforming oneself.

Meister Eckhart again (Blakney, 1941):

I say that if the soul is to know God, it must forget itself and lose itself, for as long as it is self-aware and self-conscious, it will not see or be conscious of God. But when, for God’s sake, it becomes unself-conscious and lets go of everything, it finds itself in God, for knowing God, it therefore knows itself and everything else from which it has been cut asunder, in the divine perfection. (pg. 131)

And finally, in four beautiful lines, the Sufi Mahmud Shabistari (1974) summarizes the essence of the esoteric path:

Go and sweep clean the mansion of thine heart,
Garnish the dwelling place of the Beloved;
When thou departest he will enter in,
And show his face to thee whose self is gone.
Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to provide a characterization of the exoteric and esoteric spiritual paths in terms of objective criteria relating to strategies of informational flow, and to then investigate the ramifications of this approach for understanding their nature and their relation. We can draw four primary conclusions from this effort.

First, though it is apparent that the two paths are not independent and have several points of relation, the radical differences in their informational strategies result in radical differences in their nature and pursuit. These differences are so great that it is difficult to see how anyone could easily pursue both. The exoteric at heart will tend to shy away from the constraints imposed by the esoteric path, and the esoteric at heart will be frustrated and dismayed by the unrelenting complexity of the exoteric’s world.

Second, we have emphasized the equal value of both paths. An important value of the exoteric path is its demonstration of the efficacy of the religious tradition within the real world and its call to make the world a better place. The esoteric, however, purposefully avoids involvement in the world, and far from trying to change it, seeks to accept it as it is. What is the value in that? Space does not allow a full discussion of this question, but one point can be made. Insofar as religion is about Ultimate Concern, and insofar as Ultimate Concern is always conceived to be the core and true nature of existence, it is the role of the esoteric to perceive this truth directly and unambiguously, thereby giving fundamental support to the essential claims of the religious tradition.

The third conclusion of the present work is that, most importantly, the informational strategies of both exoterics and esoteric are largely independent of the religious tradition of which the practitioner is a member. This is not to deny the importance of the differing
characterizations of Ultimate Concern employed by different traditions. Each provides its own unique insight into the nature of the Absolute. Nonetheless, it is surely significant that the general form by which an individual engages in the practice of a tradition is determined largely by their choice of exoteric or esoteric strategies of informational flow. This conclusion is consistent with recent work in the neurophysiology of religious experience demonstrating that meditative practices result in similar sorts of neural responses regardless of religious orientation (e.g. Aquili & Newberg, 1999).

The final conclusion relates to the previous one. Given the importance of information strategy, perhaps spiritual experience and understanding are not human creations, but rather are already resident within our brains, even within our genes. The sort of informational patterns discussed in this paper are not then so much products of traditions, but are rather like actuators or releasers, stimulating the brain to formulate that which it already contains. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche says, “The reason it is possible for us to reach enlightenment is because the enlightened essence is already present within us” (Kunsang, 2006, pg. 78), as is, according to Christ, the kingdom of God. It is certainly profound to consider this possibility; that indeed the Ultimate Concern is already resident within our brains, requiring only meaningful engagement with an exoteric or esoteric informational strategy to arise and develop within our conscious minds.


