Running head: INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The Nature and Consequences of Informational Differences

in Exoteric vs. Esoteric Spiritual Practices

Jonathan F. Doner

DP/DS

Author Note

Mail correspondence to: Dr. Jonathan Doner, DP/DS, 1052 Bridlewood Trail, Keswick, VA, 22947.

E-mail to: jfd@donersystems.com.

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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 (church, mosque, synagogue, 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 *strategies of information flow*. It is primarily concerned with the amount and type of information each style of practice generates and processes relative to a small set of general but relevant scenarios. It shows that each results 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, their sense of self, and their relation to their world.

2

The Nature and Consequences of Informational Differences

in Exoteric vs. Esoteric Spiritual Practices

Introduction

Styles of spiritual pursuit have been historically distinguished in a variety of manners. Schuon (1984) identifies two broadly different approaches, the *exoteric* and *esoteric* paths. The exoteric approach usually involves an ongoing participation in the practices and activities of an established religious community (church, mosque, synagogue, temple, etc.). Schuon regards it as the "husk" compared to the more individualistic and often ascetic esoteric "kernel" which is specifically oriented toward achieving transcendent spiritual experience.

In one guise or another, these two approaches can be found in every religious tradition. 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. The first is that of the *householder*. Here the practitioner follows the exoteric practice of karma yoga, the way of action, working a job, raising a family, and being a good member of the community. After completing these society-supporting duties, however, a person so inclined might become a *forest-dweller*, separating from society in order to pursue a more focused and undistracted esoteric yoga attuned to their personal inclinations. This might be *jnanna* yoga if the person is intellectually oriented, *bhakti* yoga for the person of feeling, or *raja* yoga for the reflective/experiential individual. Persons possessing a particularly strong commitment to the esoteric path might go even further, pursuing *sannyasa*, or total renunciation of family, home, possessions, status, and so forth.

In Christianity, the exoteric-esoteric distinction relates to the long tradition of characterizing spiritual paths as either active or contemplative. The 4th century monk, Evagrius,

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

contended (Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1954), "He who progresses in the active life diminishes passions; and he who progresses in contemplation diminishes ignorance" (p. 103). In the 14th century, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote (Anonymous, 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" (p. 71).

Many other significant references to the exoteric and esoteric paths can be found in the literature of different religious traditions. They are generally meant to aid and direct the practitioner in her or his own spiritual pursuit. They do not, however, provide an adequate basis for an objective understanding and analysis. The present purpose is not to follow these paths, per se; it is to analyze their nature. This requires a characterization of the paths that identifies their salient structural and functional attributes in a manner divorced from their actual religious intent. In this regard, three basic criteria are particularly relevant.

The first is that the approach should be unbiased in its characterization of the role each path plays in the establishment and growth of religious traditions. Most writers 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, p. 33).

4

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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.

Yet Schuon is certainly not alone in this bias, as evidenced by the earlier quote from the author of the *Cloud*. Despite its commonality, however, there is absolutely no objective criterion for this sort of evaluation. Insofar as both modes are consistent vital expressions of a tradition, then both should play equally important roles. Only prejudice places the esoteric path above the exoteric. A simple fact is that those following the exoteric path constitute the vast majority of every tradition. Without the exoteric path, religions would not exist. The present paper, therefore, characterizes the two paths in a manner that allows an understanding of their equally important contributions to the health and development of religious traditions.

The second criterion is that the approach must illuminate both the inter-relatedness and distinctiveness of the two paths. The exoteric and esoteric paths are, in fact, two sides of the single coin which constitutes religious pursuit. As the *Cloud* author rightly states, the two paths can never be wholly independent. 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 final criterion is that the characterization should be based on attributes of the practice, not the practitioner. 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. None uniquely correlates with any aspect of religious behavior. Consider the Hindu practice of

Advances in the Study of Information and Religion

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

associating different yogas with different psycho-behavioral tendencies. It is clear that, despite this differentiation, all four yogas could potentially be beneficial to an individual regardless of their presumed psychological nature. What matters most is the practice, not the psychology of the practitioner. Thus a method of distinguishing modes of practice is needed which derives from the practices themselves, not the presumed nature of the practitioner, but which can shed new light on both.

To fulfill these criteria, this paper presents an approach which conceptualizes the exoteric and esoteric paths on the basis of their differing *strategies of information flow*. It is concerned with the manner by which each path seeks, utilizes, and generates practice-relevant information.

Gregory Bateson defined information as *a difference that makes a difference* (Bateson, 1972). This succinctly identifies 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. Quantitative information can be regarded as a general measure of the complexity and diversity of the semantic information available in a given situation. High quantitative information means high complexity. Low quantitative information means greater redundancy and structure.

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

A basic contention of the present paper is that the exoteric and esoteric paths demonstrate substantial and critical differences in their relative strategies for creating and handling both semantic and quantitative information. It is further contended that these differing strategies have important consequences for the nature and purposes of each path.

Spiritual Paths and Information

A person follows a spiritual *path* by regularly participating in a related set of spiritual *practices*. In turn, a spiritual practice is understood as actions, feelings, cognitions, and experiences which realize, reflect, and manifest that which the practitioner considers to be of *ultimate concern* (Tillich, 1951). Various authors have tried to recast religious pursuit in less controversial terms, such as agency attribution (Atran, 2002), specialness, (Taves, 2009), or motivated meaning-making (Inzlicht, Tullett, and Good, 2011; see Park, 2005, for a general review). Though there is value in each, and perhaps even greater value in their combination, 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" (p. 1). It is undoubtedly the practitioner's faith that motivates their spiritual practice. Therefore it is to be expected that the overarching purpose of their practice will be to instantiate and express this ultimate concern.

The concepts of spiritual practice and information are linked within what can be termed a practice event or *scenario*. In a practice scenario 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.

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

For those that pursue an exoteric practice (i.e., exoterics), the source of information and the target of expression is (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 (i.e., esoterics), the source of information and the target of expression is (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.

Here we find the first major difference between the information strategies of the exoteric and esoteric paths. The esoteric strategy of receiving and responding to information within one's own internal consciousness is very different from the more common exoteric strategy of receiving and responding to information from the external world. 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. Furthermore, besides these differences in the source and target of the practices, exoteric and esoteric paths differ in terms of the semantic and quantitative information operative within their respective practice scenarios.

Informational Processes in Exoteric Practice Scenarios

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. Three are particularly important. These are the standard morality, the Good Samaritan, and the worship scenarios.

The Standard Morality and the Good Samaritan Scenarios

The standard morality scenario of reward and punishment constitutes the paradigmatic view of popular religion. In this scenario, a person receives information indicating circumstances in the world that are amenable to action based on their ultimate concern. This could be a physical condition as simple as seeing litter on the sidewalk. It might be a social condition such as becoming aware of a charity in need of funds. Or it might be a more complex psychological event such as dealing with an arrogant or insulting co-worker. The person then performs the actions which, to the best of their ability, are expressive of their ultimate concern. They dispose of the litter, or donate money, or show kindness to the co-worker. They perform these actions with the straightforward expectation that they will lead to beneficial experiences and circumstances. Since exoteric action 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 a good thing in the reasonable expectation of positive rewards and benefits for all involved, including themselves. These benefits may or may not be immediate, but they are assumed to accrue within the real world.

An age-old component of the standard morality scenario is the inverse corollary where negative actions, i.e., actions that are counter to the implications of the ultimate concern, are expected to result in real-world negative consequences. The results of attribution research indicate (for an overview, see Aronson, 1992) that various complications can arise depending on

whether actions are attributed to situational or dispositional causes. We expect punishment to be most severe for actions that are dispositional in origin (i.e., premeditated) rather than situational (i.e., the result of impulse or coercion). However, historically, people have always been evaluated as free agents capable of choice and volition, even where actions are the result of situational forces. The case becomes even more complicated if it is oneself performing actions that are counter to the ultimate concern. People tend to make more situational attributions of their own negative behavior (Aronson, 1992). In this regard, the concepts of mercy and forgiveness have always been an important component of the standard morality scenario, and it is significant that all traditions emphasize the extension of these beyond one's immediate self and family, as indicated in the example above. In fact, the showing of forbearance, forgiveness and mercy to others are among the most important expressions of the standard morality scenario.

The Good Samaritan scenario (from Wulff, 1999) derives its name from the biblical 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.

It is interesting that research in this area has revealed a complex relationship between religious belief and various forms of helping behavior, demonstrating that the former is not always a good predictor of the latter (Donahue and Nielsen, 2005; Hood et al., 2009). This serves to make an important point regarding all scenarios under discussion. That is that this paper is

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

examining the informational structure of scenarios that are consistent with the nature of both exoteric and esoteric styles of spiritual pursuit. It is not claiming that persons who think of themselves as religious necessarily engage in these scenarios, nor that they are more likely to do so simply because they claim to be religious. Rather, the point is that if someone does seriously follow an exoteric or esoteric path, then it will involve them in the sort of scenarios being examined, and it will result in the informational consequences consistent with each.

Implications of these two scenarios. The standard morality and Good Samaritan scenarios raise two important issues concerning exoteric practice.

First, these scenarios indicate the central role played by the exoteric path both in daily life and in the growth of a religious tradition. Though the two scenarios result in different kinds of benefits, both 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 scenario the benefits are more personal, satisfying cognitive and emotional needs, but nonetheless present. People would certainly not help others if the results were consistently painful and destructive for all concerned.

Considered from an evolutionary perspective, there is an inordinate "cost" to religious behavior. It consumes a great amount of time, energy, and resources which are not then available for activities more directly related to survival and reproduction. The consequences of the standard morality and Good Samaritan scenarios, however, indicate that the exoteric path creates significant benefits for both the individual and the group. This is supported by a growing body of research documenting the physical and psychological benefits of religious belief and practice (e.g. see Oman & Thoresen, 2005, for an overview). Consistent with the utilitarian perspective of evolution, the ability of a tradition to consistently provide beneficial returns should be a major

factor in its growth and development. Thus it is the exoteric path that determines the *efficacy* of a religious tradition. It demonstrates its value in the real world.

The second issue indicated by these scenarios concerns the general impact of an exoteric informational strategy. Though certainly several factors play a role in each scenario's manifestation, it is highly significant that information flow of itself can be considered an important determinant of the structure and consequences of a spiritual practice.

In being faithful to their ultimate concern, it is to be expected that the exoteric's actions in the two scenarios will lower the overall quantitative information with the context, regardless of the semantic information involved. In other words, the exoteric will seek to lower the situation's complexity, making it simpler and well-ordered. Here we have, in a nutshell, the general modus operandi of exoteric practice. Because of their sensitivity to the physical and social world, exoteric practitioners 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 speaking, those who follow an exoteric path face a constantly daunting task. As mentioned above, research is substantiating the psycho-biological benefits of religious belief. Yet this can obscure 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 many who have argued that one function of religion is to help people deal with the difficulties and uncertainties of life. However, in this world of instantaneous global

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

communication, we are constantly bombarded with information telling us just how bad everything truly is. 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, in and of itself, is not sufficient.

The worship scenario. Faith must be repeatedly strengthened and energized. This is an important function of the *worship scenario*. This scenario usually consists in the repetition, over a period of time, of three basic stages. One, a person receives information from the external world. Two, this information is processed relative to that person's ultimate concern. Three, the person then performs various actions intended to express, reinforce, motivate, and confirm the ultimate concern.

Informationally, it is the simplicity and clarity of this scenario which allows it to be effective. Regardless of the complexities and uncertainties of each person's daily life, within the context of worship, there is a large overall reduction and simplification of social information. Generally, insofar as interactions are within the context of ultimate concern, the usual complexities of social information are reduced both quantitatively and semantically. In the worship scenario, social processes are well-ordered and well-defined.

In fact, in all respects the worship scenario entails the focusing of semantic information and a general reduction of quantitative information. 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 preeminently 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.

And finally, perhaps the most important aspect of worship, considered within the present context, is that it allows the exoteric to participate to some degree in an *esoteric* practice. Significantly, the worship context is designed, at least in part, to encourage this experience. Various considerations indicate that this participation in the esoteric path is, in fact, one of the main sources of the rejuvenating, re-energizing, and even healing effects of worship. We have already noted that worship provides a context of highly focused semantic information and greatly reduced quantitative information. These are, in fact, the central factors structuring *esoteric* scenarios of spiritual practice. Therefore, the present paper contends that these factors, in and of themselves, are of extreme importance in producing the positive consequences of worship.

Informational Processes in Esoteric Practice Scenarios

The esoteric practitioner faces two essential tasks. Their primary goal is to make their attention to the ultimate concern absolute and unwavering. To achieve this, they must reduce the ongoing complexity of life to an absolute minimum. Consequently, 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.

This means the information scenarios defining esoteric practice are very different than the action-oriented scenarios of exoteric practice. The core of esoteric practice occurs within the conscious mind of the practitioner. Thus esoteric scenarios are experiential in nature. Two that are particularly important are the oneness scenario and the acceptance scenario.

The Oneness Scenario

This scenario represents the central purpose of the esoteric path. It requires that the practitioner clear her or his mind of all hindrances such that their conscious awareness becomes coextensive with the ultimate concern in its total manifestation. The esoteric seeks a direct communion, or oneness, with the ultimate concern. However, since the main source of information for the esoteric is their own mind, 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. For example, the practice can easily degenerate into rumination, daydreaming, or even sleep. The mind can also become distracted by information from the outside world, from the remembrance of past events, or from intrusive thoughts and images. These factors (and others) are the constant banes of all esoterics. They bring about a defocusing of the practice's semantic information and an elevation of the overall information-level of consciousness. This inevitably undermines the esoteric's efforts.

In fact, many of the techniques utilized in different forms of esoteric practice are designed specifically to help the practitioner overcome these difficulties. They use the repetitive production of practice-relevant information to decrease interference and promote concentration. These techniques fall into four primary categories: those based in visualization, those based in motion, those based in respiration, and finally, those based in vocalization. Virtually all traditions employ all forms in some manner and to some degree, but each tradition tends to emphasize certain modes more than others. Methods of visualization are important to Tantric Buddhist (Chang, 1963) and Kabalistic 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

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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, emphasized in every tradition's esoteric path, are practices utilizing vocalization. These can entail a variety of methods, including mantras (Suzuki, 1994), chants, and repetitive prayers such as the Prayer of the Heart (Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1951).

Regardless of the specific tradition or modality, however, 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. This total immersion has been described in various ways by different traditions. It is significant, however, that all such descriptions are indicative of an extreme minimization, if not elimination, of quantitative information. Additionally, the resulting semantic focus is so pointed that, paradoxically, all semantic information seems to vanish, resulting in a strongly spiritual experience devoid of information. Such experiences are generally described as transcendent.

Meister Eckhart said that a person should be so poor they possess nothing, not even God (Blakney, 1941). In *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Anonymous, 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" (pp. 61-62).

In the Zen Buddhist experience of *satori*, i.e., enlightenment, the practitioner experiences *sunyata*, the fundamental emptiness of conscious existence. D. T. Suzuki (1957) emphasizes,

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

"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? (p. 28).

And from the Tantric Buddhist 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. (p. 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" (p. 80).

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

"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" (p. 40).

Advances in the Study of Information and Religion

The Acceptance Scenario

The relation of the esoteric to the external world, especially the social world, has two primary facets. The first is relatively straightforward but the second is more complex in its ramifications. With regard to the 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. Such reentry into the world is not absolutely necessary, but as Campbell (1968) emphasized, 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 exoteric's world is readily understood.

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. This constitutes the acceptance scenario.

"Shunryu Suzuki (1999), using his unique expression *things-as-it-is*, 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 (2001), a Tibetan adept, stated, "All that appears and exists is all-encompassing purity" (p. 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.

The acceptance of *what is* as perfection is one of the most difficult aspects of the esoteric path for the exoteric to understand because it violates the fundamental mode of the exoteric path. Voltaire, for example, ridiculed Leibniz's position. Yet this acceptance is critical to the esoteric, because the esoteric path is not about changing the world but about radically transforming oneself.

The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, points out that losing oneself leads to a direct comprehension of the "divine perfection". He says (Blakney, 1941),

" …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 … [as] divine perfection? (p. 131).

So long as self or ego is operating, the practitioner is functioning relative to the information available in the everyday world. They are, in other words, functioning as an exoteric

not an esoteric. Exoteric action can be selfless or unselfish, but it does not involve the complete dissolution of self. An acting agent is always required by the exoteric scenarios. For the esoteric, however, the total elimination of distracting quantitative information and the complete focus on the semantic information of the ultimate concern brings about the experienced unity of self and ultimate concern. Such awareness transcends normal experience and reveals to the esoteric the fundamental perfection of *things-as-it-is*. Hence, the oneness and the acceptance scenarios are ultimately identical in their consequence.

Conclusions

The two main purposes of this paper have been first, to provide a characterization of the exoteric and esoteric spiritual paths in terms of objective criteria relating to strategies of information flow, and then to investigate the ramifications of this characterization for understanding the nature and relation of these two paths. Four primary conclusions can be derived from this analysis.

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. Despite the fact that both paths are expressive of the same ultimate concern, the degree to which their methods and consequences diverge is arguably greater than the differences between most religious traditions. These differences are so great that it is difficult for a single individual to easily pursue both. This is in fact an age-old problem and has been discussed by many authors. The Hindu solution is to associate the exoteric and esoteric paths with different stages of life. Though this paper began by emphasizing the practice over the practitioner, realistically the differences between the paths are such that the inclinations of the individual will inevitably interact with the constraints of each. Therefore, the person who is an

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

exoteric at heart might tend to shy away from the severe restrictions imposed by the esoteric path. And the person who is an esoteric at heart might be distracted and frustrated by the unrelenting complexity of the exoteric's world. Consequently, most individuals involved in spiritual practice will tend to concentrate their efforts within a single mode.

The second conclusion of this analysis is that the contributions of each path to the development of religious traditions are of equal value but are unique to each path. A religious tradition is an exoteric house built on an esoteric foundation. The critical roles played by the exoteric path are its demonstration of the efficacy of the religious tradition within the real world and its mandate 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. Religion seeks to illuminate the deepest nature of existence (Tillich, 1963). By experiencing this truth directly and unambiguously within the ultimate concern, the esoteric thereby gives fundamental support to the essential claims of the religious tradition.

The third conclusion of the present work is of particular importance. It is that the informational strategies of both the exoteric and esoteric paths are largely independent of the religious tradition of which the practitioner is a member. 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, Newberg and Waldman, 2009). This is not to deny the importance of the differing characterizations of ultimate concern employed by different traditions. Each provides its own unique religious insight. Nonetheless, it is very 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.

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The final conclusion is speculative but has far-reaching implications. The critical importance of information strategy can be taken to indicate that spiritual experience and understanding are not human constructions ex nihilo, but rather are based in patterns already resident within our brains, perhaps 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" (Urgyen Rinpoche, 2006, p. 78). Christian teaching claims that within us resides the kingdom of God. The present work has given a new perspective on this possibility. It indicates that ultimate concern is essentially resident within our brains as a hard-wired archetype, requiring only meaningful engagement with an exoteric or esoteric informational strategy to arise and develop within our conscious minds.

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

References

Allport, G. W. (1966). The religious context of prejudice. *Journal for the scientific study of religion, 5*, 447-457.

Anonymous (1978). *The cloud of unknowing* (Trans. by C. Wolters). London: Penguin Books.

Aronson, E. (1992). *The social animal* (6th ed.). New York: W. H. Freeman & Company.

Atran, S. (2002). *In gods we trust: The evolutionary landscape of religion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Blakney, R. B. (Ed.) (1941). *Meister Eckhart: A modern translation*. New York: Harper & Row.

Brianchaninov, I. (2006). *On the prayer of Jesus*. Boston: New Seeds Books.

Campbell, J. (1968). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chang, C. C. (1963). *Six yogas of Naropa & teachings on Mahamudra*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.

Cover, T. M. & Thomas, J. A. (1991). *Elements of information theory*. New York: Wiley & Sons.

d'Aquili, E. and Newberg, A. B. (1999). *The mystical mind: Probing the biology of religious experience*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Donahue, M. J. and Nielsen, M. E. (2005). Religion, attitudes, and social behavior. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 274-291). New York: Guilford Press.

Hill, P. C. (2005). Measurement in the psychology of religion and spirituality: Current status and evaluation. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 43-61). New York: Guilford Press.

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Hood, R. W. Jr., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (4th ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Inzlicht, M., Tullett, A. M., and Good, M. (2011). The need to believe: A neuroscience account of religion. *Religion, brain & behavior*, *1*, 192-212.

Kadloubovsky, E. & Palmer, G. E. H. (Eds.) (1951). *Writings from the Philokalia on prayer of the heart*. London: Faber & Faber Limited.

Kadloubovsky, E. & Palmer, G. E. H. (Eds.) (1954). *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*. London: Faber & Faber Limited.

Matt, D. C. (1995). *The essential Kabbalah: The heart of Jewish mysticism*. New York: Harper-Collins.

Newberg, A. and Waldman, M. R. (2009). *How God changes your brain*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Oman, D & Thoresen, C.E. (2005). Do religion and spirituality influence health? In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 435-459). New York: Guilford Press.

Park, C.L. (2005). Religion and meaning. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 295-314). New York: Guilford Press.

Rescher, N. (1967). *The philosophy of Leibniz*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Schuon, F. (1984). *The transcendent unity of religions*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.

Shabistari, M. (1974). *The secret garden*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company.

Shannon, C. E. & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

INFORMATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Shah, I. (1971). *The Sufis*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books.

Smith, H. (1986). *The religions of man.* New York: Harper & Row.

Suzuki, D. T. (1957). *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Suzuki, D. T. (1994). *The Zen koan as a means of attaining enlightenment*. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Company.

Suzuki, S. (1999). *Branching streams flow in darkness: Zen talks on the Sandokai*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Taves, A. (2009). *Religious experience reconsidered: A building block approach to the study of religion and other special things*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic theology, I*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tillich, P. (1957). *The dynamics of faith*. New York: Harper & Row.

Tillich, P. (1963). *Systematic theology, III*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Urgyen Rinpoche (2001). *Vajra Speech: Pith instructions for the Dzogchen yogi*. Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe.

Urgyen Rinpoche (2006). *Repeating the words of the Buddha*. Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe.

Wulff, D. M. (1991). *Psychology of religion: Classic and contemporary views*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Advances in the Study of Information and Religion

Biographical Sketch

Jonathan Doner is a research and consulting psychologist with a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. He has presented and published papers on the origin of intelligence, the nature and structure of spiritual and religious pursuits, the quantitative structure of visual perception, and the relation between Aikido and leadership. Dr. Doner is also a digital artist, having exhibited in various galleries in the eastern United States.