

Varieties of Theosophical Experience^{*}

A few years ago I wrote a dissertation on spiritual experience in the Western Esoteric Traditions. This was for the MA in Religious Experience at the then University of Wales, Lampeter[†]. I was particularly interested to examine the nature of both the experiences and their outcomes. Were they positive or negative, and did they differ from spiritual experiences from other traditions? I used three sources of accounts of spiritual experiences: the published literature, the archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre at Lampeter, and accounts submitted to me by contemporary Theosophists. The importance of experience was emphasised by HPB, 'But book learning...will always prove insufficient even to the analytical mind...unless supported by personal experience and practice'¹ and the *Voice of the Silence* states, 'But even ignorance is better than Head-learning with no Soul-wisdom to illuminate and guide it.'²

I did not attempt verify the reported phenomena but took a phenomenological approach to the sources. 44% of the total accounts I collected from Western Esotericism were from people who identified themselves as Theosophists. 48% of their experiences were positive (as described by the experiencers themselves). 42% of their experiences were neutral, mostly due to basic descriptions of phenomena such as premonitions and spiritualistic or magical type occurrences. The remaining 10% were negative experiences and included experiences of physical pain or danger, mental discomfort, or fear. Annie Besant explained that as someone begins to develop their sensitivity to astral influences they will occasionally be, 'assailed by a quite inexplicable and seemingly irrational dread' and, 'the uneasy dread of an invisible something, the feeling of a presence of "not being alone"' due to hostility of the unseen elemental world towards humans³. It is worth mentioning that even the negative experiences could often result in positive outcomes, for example around physical healing, spiritual guidance, bereavement or confirmation of a spiritual worldview. However, what follows is a brief summary of the positive experiences of Theosophists.

There were 35 accounts which could be classed as positive experiences from Theosophy. All of these experiences also had positive outcomes, apart from five where the outcome was unknown. Positive elements included: empathy with Theosophy and inner knowledge, a sense of guidance or destiny, awe and reverence, the feeling of being on a spiritual journey, love and ecstasy; and feelings of unity.

Secret knowledge, HPB warned, is a two edged-sword, 'Arcane knowledge misapplied, is sorcery, beneficently used, true magic or WISDOM.'⁴ Some Theosophists spoke about a sense of inner knowledge or empathy with the teachings of Theosophy. William Kingsland wrote, 'Theosophy struck a chord to which my inmost nature immediately responded...Underneath all this appeal to my rational faculty was an indefinable feeling - which so very many others have also experienced - that I was not now contacting this knowledge for the first time, that I was only

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recovering in my outer consciousness what was already familiar to my inner self.⁵ Rudolph Otto's concept of the *numinous*⁶; a sensation of awe, overwhelming power, energy and 'wholly otherness', also seems to appear in experiences of some Theosophists, 'There was a feeling of reverent awe' says one account. Other Theosophists drew attention to the sense of guidance they experienced. Such guidance could be referred to an external impersonal destiny, 'This "sense of Destiny" is still with me – I suppose some people would call it "guidance" but that implies a personal "guide" which is no part of the experience.' Or a more personal guidance, '...an odd conviction that I had been taken under the wing of something greater than I knew...' Some Theosophists attributed such examples to Karma or the influence of the Higher-Self. Besant taught that various forces could influence us; the higher part of man's makeup could be experienced as 'an imperiously compelling force'⁷, and a person's own habit of thought can have long-term, unforeseen results⁸. Another source of guidance could be the Mahatmas themselves such as when HPB was writing *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, '...the things I write are dictated to me, that sometimes I see manuscripts, numbers, and words before my eyes of which I never knew anything.'⁹ Some Theosophists viewed their life as an ongoing spiritual journey. This account begins with distress and ends with a new-found spiritual freedom, '... I realised that the search for Truth mattered more than finding it. At lowest ebb, apparently beyond help, I reached into the numinous and gained a spiritual freedom that others seem to envy.' It is also interesting to note that a number of accounts begin with a distressing situation. This is referred to by Besant, 'The lives of a disciple are generally lives of storm and stress, in order that the qualities which are normally evolved in a long succession of lives in the three worlds may in him be forced into swift growth and quickly brought to perfection.'¹⁰ Or, in the words of *The Voice of the Silence*, 'There is but one road to the Path; at its very end alone the "Voice of the Silence" can be heard. The ladder by which the candidate ascends is formed of rungs of suffering and pain; these can be silenced only by the voice of virtue.'¹¹ The spiritual journey can be made in various ways. The experience above was a journey through different religions but such a journey can be understood in a two-fold sense: that of the ultimate evolution of the Macrocosm back to its origin; and that of the evolution of the individual, the Microcosm, towards either Liberation or Mahatmaship. It also seems that the corresponding states of consciousness can be experienced by the individual through meditation as taught to members of the Inner or Esoteric Section of the Society, 'These seven planes correspond to the seven states of consciousness in man. It remains with him to attune the three higher states in himself to the three higher planes in Kosmos. Before he can attempt to attune, he must awaken the three "seats" to life and activity. And how many are capable of bringing themselves to even a superficial comprehension of Atma-Vidya (Spirit-Knowledge), or what is called by the Sufis, Rohanee!'¹² HPB lists the seven states of consciousness as: (1) waking, (2) waking-dreaming, (3) natural sleeping, (4) induced or trance sleep, (5) psychic, (6) super-psychic, and (7) purely spiritual.¹³ Ultimately, according to HPB, the journey is an evolutionary one and cosmic in scope as each individual's higher-self or Monad returns to its origin, 'Behold! Thou hast become the light, thou hast become the Sound, thou art thy Master and thy God. Thou art THYSELF the object of thy search: the VOICE unbroken, that resounds throughout eternities, exempt from change, from sin exempt, the seven sounds in one, the VOICE OF THE SILENCE.'¹⁴ However, although the goal of the seeker's spiritual development is union with the divine origin, HPB and the *Voice of the Silence* make it clear that the path of the Mahatma is far nobler, 'Sweet are the fruits of Rest and

Liberation for the sake of Self; but sweeter still the fruits of long and bitter duty. Aye, Renunciation for the sake of others, of suffering fellow men.’¹⁵ Some Theosophists have had experiences which may be classed as mystical. William James defined mystical experiences as passive, transient, noetic and ineffable¹⁶, qualities which are present in the following account:

‘On one occasion I seemed to tap into the very power of the Universe. I was aware at once of the infinite might of it and at the same time of the incredible all embracing love at the centre of it... I saw something too of the shattering glory of the very life at the centre of all being. In these moments of ecstasy one knows these things beyond question. Saying them in words is almost meaningless and surely not very convincing.’

Besant commented on the ineffability of such experiences, ‘Words can give no idea of the exquisite beauty and radiance shown in combinations of this subtle matter, instinct with life and motion. Every seer who has witnessed it, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, speaks in rapturous terms of its glorious beauty, and ever confesses his utter inability to describe it; words seem but to coarsen and deprive it, however deftly woven in its praise.’¹⁷ HPB stated that ecstasy was the only way that the divine could make its essence known to the finite Self, via the higher spiritual Self, whilst also denying that mere physical means could be used to induce it¹⁸. The *Voice of the Silence* suggests bliss is the aim and result of union, ‘If through the Hall of Wisdom, thou would’st reach the Vale of Bliss, Disciple, close fast thy senses against the great dire heresy of separateness that weans thee from the rest.’¹⁹ Perhaps these examples belong to HPB’s category of *Buddhic* consciousness with its ‘beautiful inspirations of art, poetry, and music, high types of dreams, flashes of genius’ or even *Auric* consciousness where, ‘The memory of this consciousness must be stored in the *heart*, “the seat of the Buddhi.”’²⁰ Unity with one’s surroundings, nature, other people or the divine is another common characteristic of religious experiences²¹. The following account of a unitive experience covers not only other people and nature but also philosophical knowledge:

‘I was lifted right out of myself into a state far beyond any such pallid description. I realised, as a living experience as an incontrovertible fact of nature, and not just intellectually, a sense of utter unity with my friends, with the rest of the audience, and with all humanity and nature. With this went a sense of total rightness and peace in all things, and a deep understanding of, and oneness with, philosophical principles previously taken on trust; henceforth they could never be doubted for a moment.’

The experiencer also refers to profound knowledge which he cannot now recall and the impact of the experience after forty years. He suggests it may have been an example of Richard Bucke’s *Cosmic Consciousness*²². The *Voice of the Silence* makes explicit the goal of union, ‘When the six are slain and at the Master’s feet are laid, then is the pupil merged into the ONE, becomes that ONE and lives therein’²³ and ‘now thy Self is lost in SELF, thyself unto THYSELF, merged in THAT SELF from which thou first didst radiate.’²⁴ HPB’s translation of a selection from the ‘Golden Precepts’ was probably aimed at a minority of Theosophists, ‘Therefore it has been thought better to make a judicious selection only from those treatises which will best suit the few real mystics in the Theosophical Society, and which are sure to answer

their needs.’²⁵ Charles Leadbeater also made a similar distinction, ‘Just so, there is a religious devotion which thinks mainly of what it will get for its prayers and lowers its worship into a species of bargaining; while there is also the genuine devotion, which forgets itself absolutely in the contemplation of its deity.’²⁶

Some accounts differentiated between ‘psychic’ and ‘spiritual’ experiences. Mostly these were seen as unrelated although there were one or two exceptions. Very few of the Theosophical accounts actually contained references to terminology or ideas from Theosophical works. In the discussion above I have endeavoured to relate the experiences to ideas and terms from HPB, Besant and Leadbeater, in order to put them into context. However, it is important to note that the experiencers themselves, on the whole, did not do this. The reason for this may be due to the fact that anyone who agrees with the three objects of the Theosophical Society may join. Briefly, these objects are: the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity; the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science; and the study of Nature and the powers latent in man. These three objects do not necessitate acceptance of the whole body of knowledge set forth, for example, in *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. Rather, what people seemed to get from Theosophy is an environment sympathetic to their beliefs and experiences and which does not judge them. This centres mostly on the phenomena as evidence for a non-material world and life-after-death. A minority of people have more mystical experiences, which Theosophy also allows for. It also seems to suggest that there are certain spiritual experiences, or elements of them, which are common to people regardless of whichever spiritual tradition they follow.

Author Information

Michael J. Rush, BSc, M.A., P.G.Dip., is Vice Chair of The Alister Hardy Society for the Study of Spiritual Experience. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to mikerush@virginmedia.com.

¹ Quoted in Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *Helena Blavatsky*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley 2004, P36.

² Blavatsky, H.P. *The Voice of the Silence*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena (1889) 1992, P25.

³ Besant, Annie. *The Ancient Wisdom*, pp71-71.

⁴ Blavatsky, H.P. *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. II, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena (1887) 1988, P588.

⁵ Caldwell, Daniel. *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky*, Quest Books 2000, P341.

⁶ Otto, Rudolph. *The Idea of the Holy*.

⁷ Besant, Annie. *The Ancient Wisdom*, P131.

⁸ *ibid*, P288.

⁹ Caldwell, Daniel. *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky*, Quest Books 2000, P305.

¹⁰ Besant, Annie. *The Ancient Wisdom*, P328.

¹¹ Blavatsky, H.P. *The Voice of the Silence*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena (1889) 1992, P15.

¹² Quoted in Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *Helena Blavatsky*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley 2004, P156.

¹³ *ibid*, P168.

¹⁴ Blavatsky, H.P. *The Voice of the Silence*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena (1889) 1992, pp21-22.

¹⁵ *ibid*, P43.

¹⁶ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp380-382.

¹⁷ Besant, Annie. *The Ancient Wisdom*, P124.

¹⁸ Blavatsky, H.P. *The Key To Theosophy*, P10.

¹⁹ Blavatsky, H.P. *The Voice of the Silence*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena (1889) 1992, P8.

²⁰ Quoted in Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *Helena Blavatsky*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley 2004, P174.

²¹ Hardy, Alister. *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, P35 & P58.

²² Bucke, Richard. *Cosmic Consciousness*, Penguin, London/New York (1969) 1991.

²³ Blavatsky, H.P. *The Voice of the Silence*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena (1889) 1992, pp10-11.

²⁴ *ibid*, P20.

²⁵ *ibid*, Pxi.

²⁶ Leadbeater, Charles. *The Other Side of Death*, P251.