

The Integral Esoteric

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Summary

Esotericism is examined from an integral perspective. Distinct strands within the tradition are seen to represent not only different ideas but different levels of consciousness. This has ramifications for inter-group relations, and some recommendations are offered in this regard. The role of esotericism as a whole in the emerging synthesis between the various traditions is also briefly addressed.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the trans-himalayan worldview, as presented primarily by Theosophy and Alice Bailey, through the lens of an integral analysis as it has been expressed by Ken Wilber¹ and others in the integral movement. Put very simply, an integral perspective attempts to integrate all quadrants and all levels (AQAL for short) of consciousness operating in a field of human endeavour. “All quadrants” refers to the subjective and objective perspectives in both the personal and collective hemispheres.²

“All levels” refers to the different evolutionary stages of development of consciousness, each level of which transcends and includes the previous level: for example egocentric, ethnocentric, world-centric, and universe-centric perspectives. An individual or collective is said to be at a certain stage when their consciousness is stably centered at that level of development.

Through these different levels of consciousness development (which correspond to the initiations) are a variety of lines: for example ethical standards or emotional intelligence, which may also vary so that an individual may have a relatively high stage of development overall but a low level of development along a certain line, or vice versa.

A further distinction is that of states of consciousness. These are usually divided into three called gross, subtle and causal after the eastern traditions and corresponding to waking, dreaming and deep sleep. A fourth state, non dual awareness, is sometimes referred to as distinct from and inclusive of the other three. States can be experienced at any stage, which will have an effect on the way the experience is interpreted.

An integral perspective aims to be “synthetic” in that it includes all the different perspectives that arise from differential development of consciousness within a system by looking from outside the whole with a gaze that embraces all the parts. This perspective might be valuable as a way of aiding synthesis within the esoteric community as well as integrating esotericism within the global development of consciousness. When we look intra-systemically we see that esotericism has a personal “inner quadrant”: our individual subjective experience gained through meditation and inner inquiry (individual here could mean either a person or an individual group with its own coherent inner life). It also has a collective inner quadrant which on one level would be the ashram and on another the collective astral desire-forms and manasic thoughtforms that have been built up over time. We also have a personal objective quadrant—our bodies, our work in the world, our practices, service work and so

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forth—and a collective objective quadrant. This latter would include for example the Theosophical literature we study as well as the organizations we form, our e-groups, and so on.

At the different levels or stages of conscious development there are individuals and groups who emphasize one or more of these quadrants *over* the others but for an integral perspective they need to be balanced. This does not mean that an individual or group must be perfectly balanced within their own system but if they are *integrally informed* they will balance themselves within the greater whole and place equal *value* on all quadrants even while emphasizing one. An example of this might be one individual or individual group who places extra emphasis on subjective meditative work while another places extra emphasis upon practical service in the physical world sharing with each other their respective strengths. The emphasis can also shift in different groups over time. We can also see that there are groups who are emphasizing one or other stage of consciousness and that there is differentiated “line” development.

Some groups are working primarily identified with the astral level where they are in touch in their subjective work with the astral projections of Masters and in their objective work with integrating and healing the emotional body. Other groups are primarily identified with the mental plane where the study of the teaching and the development of the abstract mind are emphasized while still others are consciously working as part of the ashram and so on.

Let us take the first two groups mentioned as there is often cleavage between these two stages (an outer expression of Moon- and Earth-Chain humanity) and it is a good example of the value of an integral perspective.

One of the things that comes with being identified with a stage of consciousness is that “you do not know what you do not know” or, worded another way, you are not capable of viewing your world from a higher level of development when you are identified with a lower level. You can be made aware that there

are other levels however. Consciousness at a higher stage of development however can identify with the lower level if it has been transcended and *included*. A pathology of the development process is that it is possible to transcend and repress.

An individual or group at the level of astral identification for example (which we are told is the majority of humanity³) cannot *help* being at that level and indeed it is the *right* level to be at. Those who are on the mental plane can not assist the development of those on the astral therefore by using the mind to *judge* them and label them *glamoured*. This is merely stating the obvious and only serves to repulse these individuals and groups and temporarily elevate the judging group in its own subjective appraisal. We all know of cases or stages on our own journey where the mind has been used to judge and repress the emotional and the physical bodies rather than to include them. The mental stage is a higher level of development and is therefore in a position to sacrifice itself in *agape* or inclusion of the lesser level. Earth-Chain humanity may need to develop *manas*, but it is equally true that Moon-Chain humanity⁴ (which includes most esotericists) needs to develop the love principle and learn to “go out in aid.”

Synthetic Viewpoint

Another factor when one is at a stage of development that is not integral is that all other levels are viewed as less than the level one is on. So, from the mental perspective, buddhic experiences are often repressed along with emotional ones or lumped together as “glamour.” It seems that it is not possible to repress a lower level without simultaneously cutting oneself off from its higher counterpart.

An integral perspective asserts that no one perspective can be wrong 100 percent of the time; or worded another way, no partial perspective can be 100 percent right. All perspectives have something to offer the whole, even though they are not all equal in the value of the gift they bring. Let me use a provocative example of a couple of actual groups within the Theosophical tradition. I could have used any number of examples or kept it totally abstract,

but I have used these groups as an example of poles of a particular dynamic and not because I assume I really know much about their actual inner reality as experienced by those inside them.

On the one hand we have the Share International group⁵ that has coalesced around the teachings of Benjamin Crème. These teachings undoubtedly owe much of their origin and context to the Bailey teachings, although they have been added to by the direct inner experience of the group founder who believes that the Christ is already here and living in London. This belief is often derided by those who are familiar with the full scope of the teachings as presented in the Bailey books, and the Crème group is viewed as a distortion of the teachings that is misleading the gullible. Another perspective is that the group is an offshoot of the same family of teaching and is serving a different segment of the market. Certainly from the public perspective the Bailey and Crème groups seem to have much more in common than that which separates them.

On the other hand we have the Theosophical Society, many of whose members regard Alice Bailey's teachings in exactly the same way as the Bailey group regards the Share International group: as a distorted offshoot from the main line of Theosophical teachings. Once again from the public's perspective there is little to distinguish them from each other, or for that matter Anthroposophy, Rosicrucianism, and a number of other esoteric groups. Of course the "Bailey perspective" is that its teaching provide an extension of the core Theosophical work, just as Crème would no doubt say that he has extended Bailey's work. For those outside the thoughtform, Theosophy is

likewise viewed by other esoteric traditions as a pseudo-religion⁶ and a distorted offshoot of the great non-dual traditions of India.

I am not arguing for the relative value of Crème's teaching or Theosophy. My tradition is based on the work of Alice Bailey, and therefore I tend to take the corresponding perspective on things. But to be integrally informed is also to be aware that one's perspective is not absolute, and how it is held will determine the types of relationships that are experienced with other individuals and individual groups. Of course pathology can be present on every level and no one is asked to support

points of view they do not agree with but to hold their disagreements within an integral framework. One does not have to believe that the Christ is living in London to appreciate for example the good work the Crème group does in promoting the sharing of financial resources. The beliefs (inner quadrant) also shape the behavior (outer quadrant), as I imagine a group is more likely to be generous if they believe the Christ is "here" rather than due to arrive in a

decade or two or not at all. It is probably not so important whether the Christ is present on the monadic, buddhic, mental, astral or physical plane as whether he is present in the hearts and minds of those having the debate.

Similarly, the exact date that signifies the start of the Aquarian Age is perhaps no more important than the arrival of an Aquarian spirit. In the realm of absolute truth nothing ever arose, and all that did is One; so clarity of thought is properly balanced with humility and compassion for differences, not only of perspective but also of capacity.

All traditions and religions struggle with integrating the different levels of consciousness

Authentic and integrated human beings are aware of themselves as centres through which the greater good can flow through into their environment without their necessarily knowing what that good might be. [But they] know is that the source of their contribution lies deeper: in their essential nature which is not separate from the essential nature of all others.

that exist within them. Witness the current tensions between the Muslim and Christian communities. Arguably people at similar “levels” between these religions have more in common than people at different levels within the same religion.

A useful inquiry when holding other groups in heart and mind might be: “Is this group making a positive contribution to humanity as a whole, given the stage of development they (and humanity) are at, and given that I may not be correct in my analysis of their state of development?” When we approach groups within a larger whole (or sub-personalities inside our own psyche) with an attitude of appreciative inquiry into their contribution (even those which may only be 1-percent useful and not 51-percent) then their value is revealed to us and we are seeing from an integral perspective. This does not mean we must open ourselves to other ideas without discernment or place equal value on all perspectives. Similarly, when we approach other groups in relationship, we can value our own unique gifts and offer them as a living, embodied contribution rather than pointing out the deficiencies in others in the hope that they will see us as the solution.

Another useful awareness is to be cautious whenever it looks like we, or our group, are actually in the centre of the larger system in which we form a part. This is not to say that we may not have our time in the centre of a bigger system, in the same way that an instrument may have a solo role in an orchestra, or that we should not consider ourselves the centre of our own universe. Just not *the* universe which has no centre, or rather whose centre is everywhere. It is this tendency for consciousness to believe that the place from which the consciousness is emerging is its real centre. This is what had us believe earth was the centre of the universe or that our physical bodies are the centre of (and produce) our awareness. In the above example, one of the things that the groups mentioned tend to have in common is that they all believe that the other two groups are inherently less valid than they are, and this attitude of subtle criticism creates cleavage.

Which leads us to looking at the place of the Alice Bailey esoteric community within the process of global awakening we call the Externalisation of the Hierarchy and the Reappearance of the Christ. When we place ourselves at the centre, we may believe that we have the most advanced teaching on the planet and that for “occultism to win the day” everyone must be made aware of the occult world view, the existence of the Masters, and the immanent reappearance of the Master of all Masters, the Christ. And from the perspective at the centre of this tradition there is some validity in this view. When we step out of our tradition into an integral perspective it becomes quite obvious that the great majority of humanity will never learn the particular language of our tradition; nor do they need to, any more than they need to know precisely how the signal arrives at and is deciphered by their television receiver in order to watch the six o’clock news. Most will never become Buddhist or Christian or know the inner teachings of the kabbalah either. It is a small step to consider the possibility that many of the “truths” that we take as self-evident within our tradition are not held as true by other traditions or other stages of consciousness and therefore are an essential part of the way we see the world but not necessarily the way the world IS. If we cannot hold the different perspectives of our related traditions in integral embrace, how will we extend it to those who do not believe in the existence of the human soul at all?

Place of Esotericism

Esotericism as a movement belongs on the inner side of the four quadrants as it has primarily a subjective focus. Theosophy was founded as an antidote to the prevailing materialism of the late nineteenth century, which was collapsing everything into the outer hemisphere and seeing all human experience, including consciousness, as something that evolved out of matter. An integralising direction for esotericism would be truly to attempt to embrace those materialistic traditions that view human civilization as developing from the outside to the inside and discover the partial truths that lie within that approach. In the world of becoming, consciousness is evolving,

and the driving force of that evolution emerges from both parents in the spirit /matter duality. Evolutionary changes in matter (the personality/humanity) are themselves forcing changes in consciousness (the soul/Hierarchy) and this spirit of evolution from the material side is sometimes lost in the esoteric approach. Esotericism might also benefit from a more tantric embrace of the sexual energies and the lower chakras in general.

Esotericism also exists at a number of development levels or stages. In the spiral dynamics model,⁷ these stages would range from the blue meme (conformist and conventional) through to the turquoise meme (construct aware and global systemic). For it to benefit from an integral approach, a greater appreciation of the contributions, limitations and benefits of each of these levels would be required.

Lower stages, while less developed from a consciousness perspective, are equally divine; all notes are needed on the flute, whether it is a chakra system or different worldviews within the human family. Each level also has its inner and outer dimensions which play out in the tension between the outer body of teaching that is approached through study and the direct inner experience which is approached via meditation. This tension is no different than that which existed, for example, between the Catholic Church and the Gnostics. It is a healthy tension unless one hemisphere tries to dominate the other, in which case we get the Inquisition, on one hand, or the loss of a coherent structure or *corpus Christi* through which gnosis can be expressed, on the other.

Authentic and integrated human beings are aware of themselves as centres through which the greater good can flow through into their environment without their necessarily *knowing* what that good might be. They may add value through one of their vehicles—their philosophy, their emotional empathy or physical activity—but what they do know is that the source of their contribution lies deeper: in their essential nature which is not separate from the essential nature of all others. An authentic tradition is the same.

The New World Religion or an integral spirituality is emerging for those with eyes to see in at least three ways:

Through Evolution. This approach focuses on refining the form of one's particular tradition to make it more translucent, more inclusive and more fitted to the evolutionary time we are in. New forms, more refined forms are also being created and outdated forms are dying out (although not without a fight).

Through Unity. This approach is for those who are identified with their tradition but also have the urge to come together with people from other traditions and build trans-tradition relationship and appreciation. Many umbrella groups are at work in this area.

Through Synthesis. In this approach individuals and individual groups drop identification with their tradition and rest their identity in that which the particular tradition they have followed has revealed at the centre of their own—and all—*being*.

All paths lead eventually to the same place, to be in one's tradition but not *of* it, for a tradition is part of the beautiful multicolored garment of God that may one day be light filled and transparent enough so that we may glimpse... our own original face.

Conclusion

We are told that Planetary Purpose is an energy held within the crown of the planet. It may be expressed through a mental proposition but is not that proposition. The Plan changes and so do the ideas through which the Plan expresses. Similarly Truth (with a capital "T") is an energy that clothes itself in many philosophical presentations but in itself does not need to be promoted or defended. What is eternally real cannot be threatened, only veiled, and any outer teaching must lead eventually to a "self-tearing" that reveals the naked source of all teaching.

There is only one universal life and there is ultimately only one "earth school" in which we contact that one life through the uniquely flavored veil of this particular planet and solar system. Whether or not we consciously form

part of the centre we call Humanity, Hierarchy or Shamballa, on some level we are all three and that which operates through them.

The integral vision is a way of seeing the world that is integrative and inclusive. We have looked at its value within the field of esotericism. Is there also a way in which the esoteric worldview has value and power in considering the integral movement? That question is addressed in a forthcoming article: “The Esoteric Integral.”

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- ¹ Ken Wilber. *A Brief History of Everything*, 2nd edition. ISBN 1-57062-740-1.
www.integralnaked.org.
 - ² For a brief introduction see:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AQAL>.
 - ³ Alice Bailey. *Esoteric Psychology*, II. Lucis, 1942, p. 364.
 - ⁴ Alice Bailey. *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*. Lucis, 1925, p. 1146
www.shareinternational.org.
 - ⁶ See for example: Rene Guenon. *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*. Sophia Perennis, 2001.
 - ⁷ www.spiraldynamics.com.