

EXOTERIC AND ESOTERIC:  
THE PUBLIC AND THE SECRET DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

The dominant “religions” of the present-time are, fundamentally, exoteric traditions that exist in order to serve social purposes—the purposes that are of interest to the State and to the human public collective as a whole. Exoteric “religion” is intended to inspire human beings to behave well socially—in other words, to behave in a manner that supports order and productivity in society. In one manner or another, exoteric “religions” have always been associated with this purpose.

In contrast to exoteric “religions”, esoteric “religions” (or paths, or Ways) have not been communicated to the public masses. That is why they are called “esoteric”—their teachings were supposed to be kept secret, and (thus and thereby) reserved for the few who were truly prepared to understand and rightly practice them.

Sufism, for example, is associated with the tradition of Islam—yet, many exoterically acculturated Muslims oppose Sufism because of its esoteric tendencies. Some “orthodox” Muslims even regard Sufism to be heretical—yet, Sufism is always there, fully within the total tradition of Islam. Sufi schools exist in all Islamic countries, and they often function quite openly, in direct coincidence with the otherwise exoteric tradition of Islam.

Likewise, in Christian cultures there are mystics—and, historically, the Christian mystics have been suppressed and even persecuted by the ecclesiastical “authorities” to whom they were subject. Some have even had to keep their writings secret. One such mystic, Teresa of Avila, is now a Doctor of the Catholic Church. Yet, in her lifetime, Teresa of Avila was very much suppressed and controlled by her ecclesiastical superiors.

Indeed, mysticism has always been treated with suspicion (and always made subordinate) by the exoteric “authorities”, in all times and in all traditions—and especially so in the West and in the Middle East. Gnosticism—which is an ancient form of esoteric mysticism, and, in some cases, of Spirituality—was suspect from the exoteric perspective (especially within the early period of Christian institutionalizing), because even Christian Gnosticism suggested a universal (and, therefore, not exclusively “Christian”) Truth. The Gnostic “Truth That must be Realized” is not merely a Truth about social behavior. Therefore, it was feared (among the exoteric Christian “orthodoxy”) that, perhaps, the mystical “experience” valued by the Gnostics would lead people out of the social domain and into ascetical (or, otherwise, libertine) practices— and make them so ecstatic (or, otherwise, grossly intoxicated) they would be unwilling or unable to work! Chronically, and even inherently, exoteric “religion” has concerns of this kind about esotericism in general— and, therefore, exoteric “religion” has, historically, always suppressed esotericism of every kind.

In India there is, historically, a great deal of esotericism. Traditionally, everyone in India has been aware that the intensive paths of esotericism were there, among them, and available to anyone who was willing to embrace the difficult requirements of esoteric practice.

Another characteristic of the society of India is that it has, traditionally, taken into account (and, thus, even justified) the fact that many people are poor. In traditional India, the fact of poverty was (and is) always accepted as part of the reality of human existence. Coincidentally, because possible poverty was presumed to be

 66. Gnosticism 

an integral and irreducible characteristic of human life, anyone (even if living in great wealth) could, as a matter of his or her commitment to esotericism, intentionally choose to be poor (and, thus, to renounce all “worldly” possessions—and even all “worldly” relations and “worldly” modes of “self”- identity). Thus, in traditional India, it was (and is) presumed that the social order would not miss a few thousand ecstatics who have put on robes and gone begging. Such a choice, it was thought, is acceptable— as long as it does not catch on like wildfire, such that everybody becomes an ecstatic!

In India, while most people are content with popular exoteric “religion”, a special allowance is usually made for those who become especially serious. Therefore, it is commonly accepted that some people find that living an ordinary life is not sufficient, and that they are discouraged with a life that is devoted merely to being productive in some conventional sense. However, because of the characteristic nature of traditional Indian social contracts (and the idealization of poverty as an obligation for all who would “professionally” leave the “world” and, thus and thereby, embrace an esoteric path), especially serious individuals are, generally (or in most conventionally organized esoteric schools), expected to become interested in an ascetical life (and thus to renounce, and dissociate from, the communal and familial social associations and social obligations that people in India are otherwise strongly expected to uphold).

Many traditions, both East and West, have an esoteric “back door”. In other words, esoteric possibilities are available to those who are most advanced or most serious, or who feel they have out-grown the more rudimentary aspects of “religious” practice. Such individuals may simply be prone to a more ecstatic (or mystical) disposition than the ordinary person—and, therefore, regardless of the exoteric social teachings and expectations that are generally associated with their tradition, they find their way into some circumstance or to some literature or to some teacher that points them beyond the merely exoteric form of the tradition.

Nevertheless, even in India, where there are many esoteric traditions, and where esoteric teachings and schools of practice have been rather openly known for many centuries, the highest percentage of people have not chosen to practice such things. The usual individual, East or West, is more inclined (and, generally, exclusively acculturated) toward “worldly” pursuits—although, in the general case, with some coincident exoteric “religious” orientation that involves one or another mode of “temple life” and (also) the practice associated with the conventional “religious” instructions on social morality that are given within the “orthodox” sphere of “temple life” under the influence of exoteric “religious authority”.