Magical thinking as a socio-psychological phenomenon of spiritual life in the early 21st century

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Abstract. The paper considers the phenomenon of magical thinking as a cognitive-emotional distortion of a person’s perception of objective reality from the standpoint of the doctrine of esotericism. The author analyzes esotericism as a sociocultural and psychological phenomenon. The question of understanding life, finding subjective meaning, understanding and determination of a person’s place in reality and beyond the space that the understanding is able to catch is the main question of philosophy, where esotericism is a specific direction in the process of world perception. In modern society such global events as the pandemic, military conflicts, natural and technogenic disasters influenced the position of a person in terms of understanding of his role in current circumstances. The paper analyzes the transformation of a common vision of a person’s position and role in an objective space, the formation and spread of magical thinking as a result of experiencing the helplessness of a person in large-scale events, an insufficient level of readiness for difficulties and a reduced level of personal responsibility for their contribution to current events. The author considers the esotericism doctrines and their influence on the formation of the worldview of a modern person.

1 Introduction

The problem of world perception appeared with the advent of the humankind and still remains relevant. The life experience of an individual forms a value system that determines the trajectory of movement and the level of inclusion in social interaction. The person incorporated in the society is guided by the requirements, which, in the conditions of global and rapid changes often exceed the abilities and capabilities of a person. The rhythm of socio-political and material and economic changes that entail the change of values does not allow fully understanding what is happening and building an individual life trajectory. The semantic vacuum destabilizes the psycho-emotional state of a person, affects the stable developed forms of behavior. Currently, the study of esotericism as a special cultural-historical and psychosocial phenomenon has become more intensive. The aspects of its study are quite diverse: psychological, ethnographic, cultural, social, historical, political, theological, etc. Besides, an important place belongs to its sociocultural and psychological study addressing specific problems and tasks. Esoteric doctrines, which existed in almost all religious traditions, play a significant role in the system of spiritual culture of the humankind. In this regard, the issue of correct interpretation and systematization of the spiritual experience of the humankind associated with esotericism, the mechanism and conditioning of human choice in situations of decision-making and recognition of a share of personal responsibility, becomes relevant. The choice of actions is dictated by the motive of a person. It is the system of values that is the foundation for the formation of the motivational structure and orientation of an individual, which determines the quality of existence. The concept of the “meaning of life” is fundamental, includes, among other things, the importance of searching for and organizing the use of tools of existence [1], and finding the meaning is a solution to life problems and tasks, understanding the meaning of one’s existence, according to Confucius it has practical value: knowledge of objective reality allows, using personal experience, adapting to various kinds of changes.

2 Materials and Methods

In psychology, the questions of the meaning of life are studied by foreign scientists – A. Maslow, K. Rogers, V. Frankl, E. Fromm, S. Folkman, and others; in Russian science – B.G. Ananyev, V.G. Aseev, L.I. Antsiylova, A.A. Bodalev, L.I. Bozhovich, D.A. Leontyev, T.V. Stolin, S.L. Rubinstein, V.E. Chudnovsky and others. Freud, Adler and Jung outlined the main ideas within the framework of psychodynamic theory: the problem of the meaningfulness of involuntary actions and the relationship with relevance and personal history (Freud); mutual agreement of behavior, orientation and meaning of life (Jung), determination of mental processes and

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society (Adler). Thus, the meaning is the integral formation and a derived structural element. For humanistic psychology (E. Fromm, A. Maslow, K. Rogers, V. Frankl and others) the meanings lie in self-actualization and realization of abilities. E. Fromm explores the nature of existential dichotomies pointing out the awareness and acceptance of responsibility for one’s life as a central element in solving vital problems. In the book *Man for Himself*, E. Fromm points out the expediency of a holistic approach in considering the meaning and self-realization of a person from the standpoint of psychological knowledge, philosophical ethics and sociology, since the motives of behavior are determined by values, and the meaning of life in the aspect of dichotomous existence for a person become available through creative life [2]. The author of the paper explores the problem of the meaningfulness of life as the main factor in the formation of the Self-image: a combination of rational and emotional ideas about oneself in conditions of complete inclusion in social relations, where rationality is the ability to think critically relying on objectively existing facts [3].

3 Results and Discussion

The end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries is the time of the crisis of European consciousness. The success of natural science and the rise of positive sciences caused a response from public consciousness, so the 19th century contrasts positivism with intuitivism and the philosophy of life, irrational worldview and the revival of mysticism. At the turn of the 19th-20th centuries Europe was experiencing a mystical renaissance, and the mysticism of the end of the century was increasingly painted in eastern tones. Theosophy began to develop under the influence of philosophical and religious concepts of Brahmanism, Hinduism, Buddhism. Relying on identical moments common to various faiths, theosophy tried to create a kind of universal religion of a new type synthesizing the achievements of the natural sciences with philosophical and religious postulates. In a science-like form, theosophy tried to approach the rationalist-thinking 19th century and thereby make it easier for the neophyte to comprehend its foundations [4]. Esotericism researcher M.V. Rozin writes, “Esoteric thought and religious thought have always gone hand in hand. But if religious teachings speak of cathedral salvation and God, then esoteric ones speak of an individual path of salvation and other, alien, realities. The origins of the esoteric thought are lost in the teachings of Zarathustra, Christ, Buddha, Mahomed, in the sacraments of the ancient Egyptians, in the Gnostic teachings of the first centuries AD. The rise of esoteric culture dates back to the beginning of our century with the activities of E. Blavatsky, G.I. Gurdzhiev, D. Krishnamurti and others” [5]. There were three waves of interest in esoteric knowledge in the history of the 20th century. First of all, this is the creation of the Theosophical Society by E.P. Blavatskaya and the Anthroposophical Society by R. Steiner. In Russia, it was the doctrine of G. Gurdzhiev; in Germany – Anthroposophical Society and the Life Force movement. The second wave of esotericism occurred in the 1960s of the 20th century with the beginning of a specific social movement, which spread in one form or another, which is found in all countries and cultures, without having a single organizational structure. In the 1960s, there was an interest in “certain something”, not necessarily eastern, but lying beyond understanding. Thus, this led to the interest in shamanism (including the books of K. Castaneda), a large number of psychotherapeutic systems appeared that were somehow associated with various archaic layers and reproduced all kinds of rites of secondary initiation, shamanic and other primitive rituals. At the same time, the transpersonal psychology of C. G. Grof arose, which was also largely based on these practices of archaic culture. Occult and esoteric systems of the second wave were directly related to psychological, psychotherapeutic systems. In our opinion, attention should be paid to the idea of synthesizing various forms of world perception, which “makes its way” in the European mentality from the second half of the 19th century. One of the options for its implementation was theosophy. E.P. Blavatskaya made another attempt to discover part of the esoteric knowledge of the ancient mystics of the European scientific community, she also organized the Theosophical Society, which activities, as well as the Roerichs’ Living Ethics Society, continue to this day. The Theosophical Society aimed to lay the foundation for a universal brotherhood, to promote the study of the oldest works, especially Brahmanic, Buddhist and Zoroastrian philosophy. E.P. Blavatskaya wrote of the Theosophical Movement and its ideas: “The Theosophical Movement was a need of the era. It developed naturally relying on its potential, and not on any external influences... It turned to certain human instincts and aspirations and carried an exalted ideal of perfection, which inevitably faces the first – but by no means genuine – interests of society, which are doomed to a constant struggle with it... Accepting with gratitude the new achievements of scientific thought, which help to reveal theological delusions, and, adopting the methods and tenets of science, theosophists are trying to save the precious grains of truth contained in each of them from the wreckage of various cults. Rejecting the theory of miracles and the supernatural, they seek to trace the kinship of all members of the family of world religions to each other and their shared coherence with science...”[6]. *The Secret Doctrine* is written under the epigraph: “There is no religion above Truth”. Analyzing Egyptian, Chaldean, Hindu, Christian, Zoroastrian, Gnostic, Buddhist and other sacred primary sources, E.P. Blavatskaya points to the unified essence of all religions and philosophies, seeks to unite them with a harmonious worldview system – the Secret Doctrine. Highlighting the esoteric (secret) and exoteric (external) parts in each religion, E.P. Blavatskaya considered their hidden side, trying to clear it of the socio-historical shell, layers of dogma and distortions of time [7]. According to M.V. Rozin, at the beginning of our century esotericism diverges into two different streams. One – to the idea of a superman; the other – to the idea of transforming life...
itself, revealing esoteric abilities and reality in an ordinary person. The dilemma here is this: either a complete departure from ordinary life and culture, a departure from a person, or the transformation of ordinary life and person “here and now”. Rudolf Steiner is a representative of the second, opposite, line of development of modern esotericism. For Steiner, a genuine esoteric world is a spiritual world where a person goes morally improving himself already in this ordinary world. The spiritual world significantly affects the latter. The esoteric person, who has become a spiritual being, not only solves esoteric problems in the spiritual world (spiritually being improved, preparing for incarnation into a new body), but also participates in the spiritual acts of this world. According to R. Steiner, “behind the visible world there is an invisible, hidden so far for external feelings and related thinking, and a person through the development of napping abilities in it can penetrate into this world”. R. Steiner considered the “greatest” mystery of the evolution of the world that a person, the only one in nature, is able to reflect on his own consciousness, “objects and events perceived by a person are in a space on a row with space outside a person, inside him there is also a kind of spiritual space, an arena of spiritual realities and events” [8]. *Mystery Studies*, a propaedeutic of esotericism by R. Steiner, is focused on the search for truth, as well as spiritual penetration into the future. For our study, the views of G. Gurdzhiev seem relevant. His doctrine qualified in the West as the “Russian mysticism”. It includes the elements of yoga, Tantrism, Zen Buddhism, Sufism and Christianity. As an answer to the question about the relationship of his system of self-development to Christianity, G. Gurdzhiev said: “I do not know what you know about Christianity. It takes a long time and a lot to say to clarify what you mean by this term. But for the benefit of those who already know, I will say that this is esoteric Christianity” [9]. A person, from the point of view of G. Gurdzhiev, “is a machine, although a very complex and confusing machine, unlike other machines, and he has the opportunity to know that he is a machine. A person can study himself, and his study can give the keys necessary to achieve another, higher level of existence, at which true will is possible. But this study, like the study of any other complex system, can take a long time and requires perseverance and attention” [9]. “A person” is a proud word, writes G. Gurdzhiev, but we must ask ourselves: what kind of person? Undoubtedly, not the person who is annoyed by trifles, who pays attention to minor things and is captured by everyone around him. In order to have the right to call oneself a person, it is necessary to be, and this being comes only through knowing oneself and working on oneself in directions that become clear through knowing oneself” [8]. To study more deeply the types of esoteric teachings, it is worth considering the views of G. Gurdzhiev’s student P.D. Uspensky. The theoretical activity of P.D. Uspensky was in line with the theosophical movement of E.P. Blavatskaya. P.D. Uspensky shares the belief of Theosophists that art is a means of directly introducing man to “eternal truths”, world secrets and unknown human possibilities. He joined the study of the so-called “fourth dimension”, the thought of which embodied the desire of many scientists, philosophers, mystics and occultists to break through in the field of new knowledge [10]. P.D. Uspensky created an original psychological and occult system, largely following those currents in Western psychology that developed ideas about improving the world and human being by transforming consciousness. P.D. Uspensky perceived the teachings of G. Gurdzhiev on the structure of the Universe, which has a certain center in the Absolute, as creating many worlds, including the Earth. According to Gurdzhiev’s teachings, the earthly world in the universal structure is much distant from the Absolute and is not directly related to it, therefore it is strictly subordinate to mechanical laws characteristic of rough and dense matter. Human consciousness is the way out of the rule of earthly laws and the only opportunity to develop towards the Absolute by improving the possibilities inherent in consciousness. G. Gurdzhiev proposed a specific path for human development in the process of special psychophysical training. The process of human development is considered by P.D. Uspensky as the simultaneous growth of cognition and being, while understanding is an “arithmetic mean” between them. The imbalance in the development of being and cognition leads to a lack of mutual understanding between people; people who have equal knowledge and are equal in being understand each other unconditionally. The harmonious development of being and knowledge of man is the only possible way to complete “objective understanding” and man himself must work on his being, purposefully changing it, guided in relations with people by the main principle “you can understand others just so much as you understand yourself and only at the level of your being” [10]. Based on his understanding of human being, P.D. Uspensky reveals the incompatibility of the immoral and aesthetic. Aesthetic, belonging to the sphere of higher dimensions and accessible only at the highest levels of spiritual development, testifies to the high level of development of existence of a person who is alien to vices, unworthy thoughts, and even to actions. P.D. Uspensky writes: “It is widely accepted, albeit tacitly (and sometimes not tacitly), that a person can indulge in lies, be selfish, unreliable, unreasonable, perverse – and still be a great scientist, philosopher or artist. Of course, this is completely impossible. Such incompatibility of different features in someone’s existence, considered a sign of originality, actually means weakness. You cannot be a great thinker or artist with a perverse or unstable mind” [10]. The slogan put forward by P.D. Uspensky: “A person must sacrifice his suffering” means that he must abandon self-love in inaction, from spiritual laziness, which in negative emotions finds justification. It should be noted that the interest in the teachings of G. Gurdzhiev and P.D. Uspensky is completely natural in Russia. It can be explained mainly by the fact that Gurdzhiev’s teachings give some attempt to find a spiritual practice acceptable to a modern person living in the conditions of modern civilization. Undoubtedly, his theory of spiritual shocks aimed at awakening consciousness and his comments regarding the state of mind of modern man are also
noteworthy. Exploring esoteric teachings, we cannot help but consider the ideas of the Russian esoteric Daniil Andreev, who is one of the most striking figures of esoteric thought. The origins of the philosophy of D.L. Andreev can be found in the works of V. Solovyov, the internal connection with which D.L. Andreev felt all his life. Vladimir Soloviev is a “great spiritual man”; it was from him that D.L. Andreev took the spirituality. He also repeatedly addressed the works of S. Bulgakov, P. Florensky, and Seraphim Sarovsky [6]. Without a doubt, R. Steiner’s influence on him is noticeable, which sees the main goal of the esoteric life of an invisible in a spiritual person penetrating into the world, and the creator of Russian theosophy E.P. Blavatskaya. Some researchers believe that the “Rose of the World” repeats much of what can be read from E.P. Blavatskaya or R. Steiner, in the books of J. Boehme or A. Dante, not to mention the esoteric literature of Freemason [11]. The description of worlds outside human perception is the main content of the philosophical work of D.L. Andreev.

Truth performed for D.L. Andreev in the guise of the process of transcendental knowledge of these worlds. The world known to man is only a small part of the global collection of multidimensional inhabited worlds. According to D.L. Andreev, “it is necessary to understand that man is a creature in the grandiose chain of other creatures, it is more perfect than many, but also insignificant than many, and each of these beings has autonomous value without regard to its utility for man” [6]. The experience of history brings humanity to understand the obvious fact that dangers will be prevented and social harmony achieved not by the development of science and technology, not by the overdevelopment of the state principle, not by dictatorship of a “strong man”, not the pacific organizations of the socialdemocratic type coming to power, swung by historical winds either to the right or to the left, from powerless beauty to revolutionary maximalism, but by recognizing the urgent need for a single path: establishing untainted, incorruptible, highly a certain authoritative instance over the world fed through the prism of time is based on the dualistic delineation of nature and spiritual freedom of man, in his individual existence, choice and the development of self-awareness. Serova N.V. explores the problems of temporal existence as a factor in the transformation of the perception of reality [14].

4 Conclusion

The initial semantic certainty of existence affects the choice of the formation of either a critical or esoteric (magical) thinking of a personality. In the psychological aspect, the effect of magical thinking should be considered as a consequence of cognitive distortion. The esoteric culture was initially developed under the slogan of the desire for “esoteric synthesis” capable of combining the whole set of heterogeneous spiritual teachings into a single universal spiritual culture capable of ideologically ensuring the development of the planetary community as a single whole. The formation and development of cultural studies, religious studies, philosophy, sociology of culture led to the fact that esotericism began to be considered as one of the components of modern spiritual life caused by social transformations.

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