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Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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Aleister Crowley and Islam

Marco Pasi

Although Islam played an important role in the life of the English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), scholars have not given much attention to the subject so far.¹ Crowley’s relationship with Islam can be examined from two different angles, which could be called genealogical and cultural. On the one hand, one could simply wonder about the influence that Islam, as a complex of doctrinal, ritual, symbolic, mythical, and literary traditions, may have had on Crowley. This would not necessarily imply explicit and direct references to Islam by Crowley, since influence can sometimes follow silent paths. To give just one example, we could find structural similarities between Islam and Thelema, the new religion founded by Crowley, which would be strongly suggestive of a particular influence of one over the other, even if we do not know precisely which sources determined such influence.

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On the other hand, one could focus on how Crowley constructs a particular image of Islam, how he perceives it and understands it. Here, we would not be concerned so much with Islam as a historical phenomenon, but rather with the particular function that Islam, as an imaginative construction, had in Crowley's thinking. This construction then becomes the support for a vision that goes beyond the historical and concrete reality of Islam, being an idiosyncratic, subjective, and psychological reality. And yet, even while being subjective, this reality is not isolated from the outside world; it remains in a constant dialectical relationship with the cultural and social context in which Crowley happened to live and operate.

It seems to me that the second aspect is related to the problem of Orientalism, as it was originally posed by Edward Said in his famous book with the same title.² Said suggested that the essentialized idea of "the Orient" was very much the product of the European imagination, independent of whether it was based on a particular social and cultural reality. In this sense, we might see Crowley's perception of Islam, so clearly influenced by ideas and biases that were circulating in late nineteenth-century Britain, as a particular case of the cultural processes described by Said in his book. Said's critique of Orientalism, however, has been the object of a vast debate since the late 1970s.³ The idea that Orientalism was functional to the construction of a sentiment of cultural superiority, and that it was an ally of the colonial establishment or of an imperialist agenda, has been criticized by several authors as being overly simplistic. It is certainly possible to see cases where visions of the Orient have played other roles in European culture. Crowley is exemplary here, because he represents, much like his hero, the Victorian explorer Richard Burton, a use of Orientalism for subversive purposes, or, in other words, "as a source of inspiration for Europeans who sought to challenge or enrich their own society," rather than to reinforce the values of the establishment.⁴

To return to the genealogical and cultural aspects of Crowley's relationship with Islam, it can be easily seen that the distinction between the two is purely abstract and artificial. In reality, the two levels constantly intersect and interact with each other. But I believe that, from a purely pragmatic point of view, the distinction will be useful here. For this reason, I will first address the presence of concepts and structures in Crowley's work that have a clear or at least very likely origin in Islam. This will allow us to evaluate the extent to which Crowley had an interest in and was influenced by Islam. If we can ascertain that this interest and influence was there and was quite significant, then we will have to move to the next

question, which is why this was so. In order to answer this question, a look at how Crowley perceived Islam and constructed his own personal vision of it on the basis of the suggestions offered by the cultural environment in which he moved will help to clarify the issue.

THE DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF ISLAM

During much of his life, Crowley traveled a great deal, and he repeatedly visited countries with a predominant Muslim presence. Therefore, his knowledge of Islam was not exclusively, or even primarily, based on books, but was also derived from personal experiences and direct observations.

The first place of this direct contact was India, which Crowley visited several times between 1901 and 1905. This is when he discovered yoga and Buddhism, thanks to his friend and former fellow member of the Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn, Allan Bennett (1872–1923). In India, the presence of Islam was also very important. It should be remembered that this country, as a British colonial domain, at the time still included predominantly Muslim regions, which would later separate from India at the time of independence and subsequent partition, in 1947, and had also many Muslims in other predominantly non-Muslim regions. The second place was Egypt, for the first time in 1902, on his return from a long trip around the world; then twice in 1903 and 1904, during his honeymoon with his first wife, Rose Kelly. The third place was the Chinese province of Yunnan, which had a significant Muslim minority, and which Crowley traversed during a long journey on foot and on horseback in 1906. Finally, the fourth region visited by Crowley was the Maghreb, more particularly Morocco and Algeria several times between 1907 and 1914, and Tunisia between 1924 and 1926, after being expelled from Italy by Mussolini.

The motivations that led Crowley to travel and sometimes reside for some time in these countries are diverse, and one should not think that it was always sheer curiosity or sympathy for the Muslim world. For example, his main reason for spending long periods in Tunis between 1924 and 1926 was simply that life in Tunisia was much cheaper than in Europe, and especially in England. At a time when Crowley had run out of money and no longer had significant financial resources, the cost of living inevitably played an important role in this kind of choice. Very probably, the same reasons also explain why Crowley picked Cefalù, in Sicily, as a place to set up his Abbey of Thelema in 1920.

Crowley's sojourns in Egypt in 1904 and in Algeria in 1909 are of particular importance, since Crowley saw them as crucial moments in his spiritual or initiatory career. It was in Cairo that Crowley "received," in April 1904, the *Book of the Law*, which would later become the fundamental text of his new religion.⁵ On the other hand, the significance of the 1909 trip to Algeria lies in the exploration that Crowley, accompanied by his disciple Victor Neuburg (1883–1940), made of the Enochian magic system of John Dee (1527–1608).⁶ Crowley attributed great initiatory value to this series of magical operations.

Especially in the travels of his youth, that is to say until the trip to Algeria in 1909, Crowley seems to follow both the already well-honed model of the Victorian explorer and that of the modern tourist, which had by then developed well beyond the classic "Grand Tour" of Europe, and which, especially for English and French travelers, broadened its scope to include the vast spaces of colonial empires. In this context, it is no wonder to see Crowley's direct experience of exotic cultures as colored by the prejudices of the imperialist and colonial ideology of England at the time. The manner in which Crowley interprets the things he sees during these travels is not linear, but rather follows idiosyncratic paths. Early in his life Crowley had developed an extremely negative attitude toward Victorian culture, which had shaped him during his childhood and adolescence. Travel experiences and encounters with other cultures thus become an opportunity to develop a comparative perspective, which then turns into a tool to radically criticize his own culture.

We have here a first key for understanding Crowley's relationship with Islam, but also with the other religious traditions he encountered during his travels. His appreciation of these religious traditions must be seen within the broader context of his critique of Christianity and the values of Victorian society.⁷ I will return to these "cultural" aspects of Crowley's relationship with Islam later in this chapter. But first I would like to move to the seemingly simpler question of the influence of Islam on his religious system: Thelema.

THELEMA AND ISLAM

As I said earlier, the key event of Crowley's spiritual life took place in Cairo in the spring of 1904, during his long honeymoon trip with his wife Rose.⁸ At first sight, when we consider the relation between Thelema and the geographical and cultural context in which its revelation took place, we

would rather think of connecting it with the religion of ancient Egypt and its long-lasting legacy.⁹ The symbolic and mythical universe of Crowley's new religion is in fact largely inspired by Egyptian ancient religious traditions, which was far from being uncommon in the occultism of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe. The symbolic and aesthetic imagination of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, in which Crowley had been initiated in 1898, drew much inspiration from ancient Egypt, and the Egyptian gods were very present in its rituals and teachings.¹⁰ From this point of view, Crowley's new religion was built on the same mythical and symbolic ground as the Golden Dawn and could even be considered as an expansion of it. It is the god Horus who commands Rose to announce to her husband that a message of cosmic importance will soon be transmitted to him. Significantly, the recognition of the imminence of this message takes place in the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo, when Crowley discovers, through his wife, a stele depicting the priest Ankh-ef-en-Khonsu, who had lived in Thebes between the end of the twenty-fifth and the beginning of the twenty-sixth dynasty (around 725 BC), and of whom Crowley came to believe to be a reincarnation. The very text of the *Book of the Law* presents itself literally as a message sent by Egyptian divinities (Nuit, Hadit, Ra-Hoor-Khuit) to announce the beginning of a new era, the Æon of Horus. This is all quite evident to those who take a look at the basic aspects of Crowley's religion. But, if we observe things a little closer, we realize that Thelema shows interesting analogies with Islam as well. The context of Egypt as the country where the "revelation" of the *Book of the Law* occurred can then take on another meaning. We see that Crowley, during his sojourns in Egypt, is interested not only in the ancient traditions of this country's multi-millennial past, but also in the contemporary living presence of Islamic culture.

So what are the similarities between Thelema and Islam? The first and perhaps most obvious one concerns the very revelation upon which the structure of Crowley's new religion is built. The primary foundation of both Islam and Thelema is a book revealed by a divine source to a man, who is selected by this source as the means of this extraordinary transmission and thus acquires the role of a prophet. This means also that the book is not a collection of texts written at different times by different men, as may be the case in some other religious traditions, but is a relatively compact text, which is supposed to include all that is essential in the religion of which it is the foundation. At the same time, both the Quran and the *Book*

of the Law do not have a narrative structure, such as the Torah or the New Testament, but rather an aphoristic one, and follow no apparent thematic or chronological order.¹¹ Furthermore, because both texts are believed to have a direct divine origin, they are considered to be immutable and should be preserved from any alteration or modification.¹²

In the very manner of the transmission of the text, we can also see interesting analogies. According to Islamic tradition, the origin of the Quranic revelation lies in communications that the Archangel Gabriel, as a messenger of God, makes to Muhammad during a series of spiritual retreats beginning in 610. From that moment, Gabriel communicates to Muhammad verses that would eventually be collected together and would constitute the Quranic text. We have a similar situation with the revelation of Thelema, since the text of the *Book of the Law* is dictated to Crowley by a preterhuman entity named Aiwass. The analogy goes even further if we consider that Crowley at some point came to believe that Aiwass was also, like Gabriel for Muhammad, an “angel,” or more precisely his own “Holy Guardian Angel.”¹³

These analogies should not obscure differences. While Muhammad receives the verses that are dictated to him but does not transcribe them himself (in the early period the verses were mostly handed down orally among his followers, and were transcribed in a definitive form only after his death), Crowley directly writes the text down as it is dictated by Aiwass. From this, another difference derives as to the duration of the composition of the text: the revelations of the Quranic verses continue for 23 years in the life of Muhammad, while the revelation of the *Book of the Law* takes place during three days, from April 8 to 10, 1904, in sessions of one hour on each day. The length of the two texts is therefore also very different: more than 6000 verses for the Quran, 218 verses for the *Book of the Law*.

Despite these obvious differences in format and size, the purpose of both books is the same: to bring a new religious message to the whole of humanity, a universal message that renders all previous religious revelations obsolete. It is a message that is in continuity with some of these earlier revelations, whose existence and validity are acknowledged, but which it now claims to surpass and supersede. This aspect will become even clearer when I discuss Crowley’s notions of the Æons and of the Magi.

Apart from the way in which the revelation takes shape, there are some other affinities from the point of view of religious practice that seem to indicate an influence of Islam. There is, for example, the aspect of daily prayers (*ṣalāt*), which is one of the five pillars of faith in Islam. Every

Muslim believer is required to recite prayers a number of times at fixed times of the day (for Sunnis: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and dusk). A similar practice can be found in Thelema with the “greetings of the Sun,” which Crowley describes in “Liber Resh,” one of the texts of instructions that are meant to accompany and complement the *Book of the Law*.¹⁴ According to this text, Thelemites are supposed to “greet the Sun” four times a day with gestures and ritual words. The moments when this should be done (dawn, noon, sunset, midnight) partly correspond to those of the Islamic *ṣalāt*.

In other cases, we have not just a significant similarity, but a direct and clear reference to Islam. For instance, we find in Thelema the notion of *qibla*, the direction in which one must position oneself during certain ritual practices, which is clearly derived from Islam.¹⁵ While Muslims should direct their prayers toward Mecca, Thelemites should orientate themselves, while performing some particular rituals, toward the property Crowley owned in Scotland as a young man, Boleskine House.¹⁶ In some texts Crowley draws an explicit connection to the Islamic *qibla*: “Remember that your ‘East,’ your Kiblah, is Boleskine House.”¹⁷ Interestingly enough, this does not apply to the greetings of the Sun described in “Liber Resh,” which simply follow the cardinal points according to the time of the day (dawn/East, noon/South, sunset/West, midnight/North), but rather to other rituals. One of them is the “Ritual of the Mark of the Beast,” given in “Liber V vel Reguli” and described as an “incantation proper to invoke the Energies of the Æon of Horus.”¹⁸ During the performance of this ritual, the magician has to place himself in the direction of Boleskine at different moments. Another significant example is the Gnostic Mass, which is the most important communal ritual of Thelema, still regularly performed today in the Gnostic Catholic Church affiliated to the Ordo Templi Orientis and in other Thelemic organizations.¹⁹ In this case, the “shrine or High Altar” of the ceremony is placed in the direction of Boleskine, as with the *mihrab* in a mosque.²⁰

Related to the notion of Thelemic *qibla* is an interesting reference to the Kaaba in the *Book of the Law*. The Kaaba is the cubic building at the center of the Great Mosque of Mecca, which serves for the exact orientation of the Islamic *qibla* and around which millions of Muslim pilgrims circumambulate every year while performing the ritual duties of their pilgrimage. A verse in the *Book of the Law* mentions a similar place for Thelema: “Establish at thy Kaaba a clerk-house: all must be done well and with business way” (III:41). This verse is part of a series where

instructions are given to the prophet of Thelema, namely Crowley himself, about the publication of the *Book of the Law*. The verse seems to mean that Crowley should establish some sort of administrative place (a “clerk-house”) as a center for the future spreading of Thelema. Because of the identification of Boleskine as the Thelemic *qibla*, it would be reasonable to assume that Boleskine is also the place referred to as the “Kaaba” in the verse. This is probably how Crowley originally understood it himself. But other interpretations were possible. In 1918, due to Crowley’s by then very precarious financial situation, the estate of Boleskine had to be sold.²¹ He then came to the conclusion that the Thelemic Kaaba should not necessarily be located there and that the “modern centralized business organization” he thought the verse was referring to could also be established elsewhere, at “any convenient headquarters.”²² With this interpretation, the notion of Thelemic “Kaaba” was effectively disassociated from a particular place, which made the difference from its Islamic model even more evident.²³

Apart from these similarities and specific borrowings, we can also observe in Crowley’s writings and in the founding texts of Thelema a more elaborate discourse on Islam, especially in the context of what we might call—to use Henry Corbin’s term—the “hierohistory” of Thelema.²⁴ We must remember that, for Crowley, the religious history of humanity is divided into several great periods, called “Æons.”²⁵ According to Crowley, we are now living at the end of one of these periods, the Æon of Osiris, which saw the birth and development of authoritarian religions. These are especially the great monotheisms, where God is perceived as a paternal figure. The societies that have developed in the framework of these great religions have emphasized the concepts of restriction, authority, or—as is especially the case with Christianity—sin. All this is going to change with the new, emerging Æon. It is indeed Horus, the son of Osiris, who defies the authority of the father and inaugurates an era based on the primacy of individual freedom. According to Crowley, Thelema is the religion that embodies the spirit of this new era. It will replace, over time, the religions of the Æon of Osiris and will become the dominant religion of humanity for the next 2000 years.

The doctrine of the Æons is complemented by that of the “Magi,” which shows similarities to Édouard Schuré’s (1841–1929) notion of the “Great Initiates,” or, more generally, to the traditional chains of wise men of the *Prisca Theologia*.²⁶ For Crowley, the Magi, understood as high initiates, have regularly appeared in history in order to announce a new

spiritual message. They have therefore played a crucial role in the evolution of humanity.

We could see here a possible analogy with the Islamic notion of prophets and divine messengers (*rusul* and *anbiyā*), of whom Muhammad is considered to be the “seal,” bringing their series to an end.²⁷ But, even if I would not exclude the possibility of an influence of this doctrine on Crowley, here again we should not lose sight of some significant differences. Generally, from an Islamic perspective, prophets and messengers are always sent by the unique and only God, so that various human communities can receive his message through their mediation in different times and places. This goes on until a final message is brought forth through Muhammad. For Crowley there is no single God at the origin of the Magi’s revelations.²⁸ As we have seen, the *Book of the Law* presents itself as being a communication from a number of Egyptian gods. But, more generally, the prophets and the great spiritual teachers of humanity, or Magi, are supposed to be sent by a hidden organization that, from a higher dimension of reality, oversees the destiny of humanity: the Great White Brotherhood, whose members are also referred to by Crowley as the “Secret Chiefs.”²⁹

Furthermore, Crowley does not seem to believe that he is the prophet of a final revelation, in the same sense as Muhammad is considered by Muslims to be the “Seal of the Prophets.” On the contrary, Crowley thinks that at some point another Æon, that of Ma (or Ma’at), the Egyptian goddess of justice, will follow that of Horus, and will presumably be based on a new revelation.³⁰

As can be expected, given the occultist context to which Crowley belonged, religious revelation is for him closely related to the idea of initiation. In fact, it must be remembered that “Magus” is not understood here in the generic sense of “magician,” but rather in a specific, technical sense, as the penultimate degree of the initiatory system of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which Crowley adopted with some modifications when he created his own initiatory order, the *Argentum Astrum*, or A.:A.:³¹ It belongs therefore to the summit of this system, which is reserved for the small elite of the most advanced adepts.

In the system of the A.:A.: there is only one degree above the Magus, namely the “Ipsissimus,” which appears to be the final stage in the process of divinization of the adept.³² The idea that, in order to be a religious prophet or leader, one has to reach a particular initiatory grade may appear peculiar, and it was Crowley who introduced it into the original system of

the Golden Dawn. But it is interesting to see that a similar idea had also emerged in an Islamic context, even if far away in time from Crowley. We could find in fact something similar with the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwan al-Safa'*), a secret group of philosophers active in the city of Basra during the tenth or eleventh century AD, authors of the important encyclopedic work, *The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*. The Brethren had their own hierarchical system of ranks, similar to initiatory degrees. The fourth rank was at the top of the system, consisting of “prophets and philosophers,” which in the past had included, among others, pagan masters such as Socrates and Pythagoras.³³ In order to become a “prophet” one would have to reach the summit of this initiatory structure, as is the case for the Magi in the A.:A.:.

According to Crowley, the list of Magi includes the following names: Lao Tzu, Gautama, Krishna, Dionysus, Tahuti (Thoth), Moses, and Muhammad.³⁴ To this list, Crowley obviously also adds his own name, since he considers himself as having reached the rank of Magus and therefore as possessing the required status for founding a new religion.³⁵

Each of these Magi would have uttered a “Word” in which his spiritual message would have been encapsulated, as in a kind of cosmic magical formula.³⁶ In his *Liber Aleph*, written in 1918, Crowley claims that Muhammad’s Word was, at least apparently, “ALLH,” on which the “Doctrine of the Unity of God” is based.³⁷ Crowley, however, interprets this doctrine in his own peculiar way, and this is a crucial point for understanding his perception of Islam.

Crowley seems to think that there are two different levels of interpretation of the core message of Islam. The apparent one, which is good enough for the common believer, is that there is indeed a transcendent, almighty God, and that no other God exists. But then there is also a hidden one, according to which there is no such God, “for God is Man.”³⁸ In other words, for Crowley the only God that really exists is the individual human being, who can discover his divine nature and reach a god-like condition at the end of a long initiatory journey.

According to Crowley, “[Muhammad’s] Will was to unite all Men in One reasonable Faith: to make possible international Cooperation in Science.”³⁹ That would be the actual purpose of the “Doctrine of the Unity of God.” The real, if hidden, message of Islam would then not be radical monotheism, but a form of radical humanism, on the basis of which humanity would be able to unite in order to achieve scientific and cultural progress. And, Crowley adds, if there is a religious community that has

completely misunderstood the real meaning of Muhammad’s message, that is the Christians, who followed “the Great Sorcerer of Nazareth” (i.e., Jesus) and were thus unable to perceive Muhammad’s “true Self of Glory.”⁴⁰

Peculiar as it may seem, this interpretation of Islam has its own historical and cultural roots, which I will try to elucidate later in this chapter. What is important to note here is that the distinction between two levels of interpretation of the core message of Islam—one apparent and the other hidden—has its counterpart in a similar distinction Crowley makes for Muhammad’s Word as a Magus. We saw that, according to Crowley, Muhammad’s Word was “ALLH.” But this Word hides in fact another, which is the real one: “Nevertheless, behold, o My Son, this Mystery. [Muhammad’s] true Word was LA ALLH, that is to say: (there is) No God.”⁴¹

What Crowley is doing here is clear enough: he is taking only the first two words of the *shahāda*, the Islamic profession of faith (“[I bear witness that there is] no god but God [and that] Muhammad is the messenger of God”) and is obliterating the rest.⁴² As a result, we find the idea that Muhammad’s true message was not that there is a unique God, but rather its opposite, that there is *no* God. And, as we have seen, this is based on an apparent paradox: there is no God simply because God is Man.

Significantly, Crowley’s interpretation of Muhammad’s message comes back again elsewhere in his works, but applied this time only to Thelema. This seems to imply a very interesting continuity between Islam and Thelema. In his “Liber Oz,” first published in 1941, Crowley presents a sort of declaration of human rights based on Thelemic principles.⁴³ Here, the formula “There is no God but Man” features prominently in the text, but this time without any explicit reference to Muhammad or the Islamic *shahāda*. However, considering Crowley’s speculations about Muhammad’s “true Word” in *Liber Aleph*, it becomes difficult not to see an implicit connection which is also confirmed elsewhere in Crowley’s writings. For instance, in one of his comments to the *Book of the Law*, he calls Muhammad a “forerunner” of Thelema.⁴⁴

Crowley’s interpretation of the *shahāda*, negating God’s existence and replacing it with a mix of freethinking atheism and radical humanism inspired by occult beliefs, is obviously quite heterodox from a mainstream Islamic perspective. But it resonates with ideas that were circulating widely in Western progressive milieus in Crowley’s times. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is an author that comes immediately to mind, with his

proclamation of the death of God and his search for the *Übermensch*.⁴⁵ And it is indeed remarkable that, in a modern Islamic context, we find philosophical reflections combining Nietzsche with the *shahāda* in ways that may be suggestively juxtaposed with Crowley's line of thinking.

This is for instance what we can see in the work of Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the celebrated Muslim poet, philosopher, and political activist from pre-partition India who is an almost exact contemporary of Crowley. In his poetical work *Javid-Nama* (1932), written in Persian and partly inspired by Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Iqbal imagines traveling through the celestial spheres and meeting and conversing with important personalities of the past, mostly Islamic.⁴⁶ One of them, however, is not Islamic: it is Nietzsche, whose thought had a profound influence on Iqbal. The encounter with Nietzsche is important for the reflections it generates about the *shahāda*, and more specifically about the possible contrast between the two parts "There is no god" and "but God," on which there was already a long tradition of mystical speculations even before Iqbal.⁴⁷ Reflecting on how the two parts of the *shahāda* could be applied to the thought of the German philosopher, Iqbal observes that "'no' and 'but' are of the stations of the Self," and that Nietzsche "remained fast in 'no' and did not reach 'but.'"⁴⁸ In other words, he got stuck in the first half of the sentence, the apparent negation of God, and could not move on to the second one, the affirmation of the uniqueness of God, because "his eyes desired no other vision but man; fearlessly he shouted, 'Where is man?'"⁴⁹

We find an uncanny resemblance here between Crowley and the Nietzsche portrayed by Iqbal: a resemblance that is not casual, but points to a cultural climate that Iqbal had observed in Europe and that he wanted to address from his own particular perspective. For him, as a Muslim reflecting on the problems of modernity, the inability to reach the "but" of the *shahāda* is a crucial flaw, and yet he acknowledges the tragic grandeur of Nietzsche's vision, even comparing him to the Persian Sufi al-Hallaj (857–922).⁵⁰ For Crowley, as for Iqbal's Nietzsche, the negation of God is a necessary step toward the affirmation of Man, which is a moment of universal emancipation, liberation, and progress. Crowley's emancipatory, if evidently partial, interpretation of the basic tenets of Islam is perfectly consonant with his idea that Islam is a virile religion for free men, as opposed to Christianity, which is a religion for the "slaves." Nietzsche's shadow can be easily perceived here, and makes a comparison with Iqbal's discussion of his ideas quite intriguing.

In spite of all these evident examples of positive appreciation by Crowley, we should not forget that, from a Thelemic perspective, Islam remains a religion born in an age that has now come to a close and that has been superseded by a new one. In the third chapter of the *Book of the Law*, the religions of the previous era, the Æon of Osiris, are attacked rather violently. Islam is not spared: “I flap my wings in the face of Mohammed & blind him,” says the god Horus.⁵¹ But in one of his comments on the *Book of the Law*, Crowley explains that this verse implies no harsh judgment on Islam, as is the case with Christianity:

Mohammed’s point of view is wrong too; but he needs no such sharp correction as ‘Jesus.’ It is his face—his outward resemblance—that is to be covered with His wings. The tenets of Islam, correctly interpreted, are not far from our Way of Life and Love and Liberty. This applies especially to the secret tenets. The external creed is mere nonsense suited to the intelligence of the peoples among whom it was promulgated; but even so, Islam is magnificent in practice. Its code is that of a man of courage and honour and self-respect; contrasting admirably with the cringing cowardice of the damnation-dodging Christians with their unmanly and dishonest acceptance of vicarious sacrifice, and their currish conception of themselves as “born in sin,” “miserable sinners” with “no health in us.”⁵²

Two points need to be noted here. The first one is that Crowley stresses the particular position of Islam with respect to the general condemnation of pre-Thelemic religions, as found in the *Book of the Law*. Some older religions are worse than others: Christianity, for instance, is defined by Crowley as an “unmanly” religion in comparison to Islam. We find here again a characterization of Christianity that has an evident Nietzschean flavor.

Secondly, we find here again the distinction between the “outward resemblance” of Islam (represented, by way of a synecdoche, by Muhammad’s face) and its “secret tenets” which we had already encountered in *Liber Aleph*. The idea that religions have different teachings or doctrines for different levels of understanding obviously has a long history in Western culture, and is in fact at the very origin of the concept of esotericism.⁵³ But it is especially during the early Enlightenment that its political implications were drawn and brought to their radical consequences. This led some European intellectuals, such as John Toland (1670–1722), to believe that the core message of Islam could be found in its esoteric traditions, that this message actually coincided with these intellectuals’

ideal of true religion (Deism, in Toland's case), and that it could be used to undermine the perceived aberrations of Christianity.⁵⁴ Keeping this pattern in mind, we find that Crowley's perception of Islam, and its subversive use toward cultural and religious criticism, could also be seen as a twentieth-century continuation of a much older intellectual tradition. I will return later to these two points.

Before moving on to the cultural aspects underlying Crowley's idea of Islam, it is important to note that themes inspired by Islam and the history of the Middle East are also found in the structure and rituals of the *Ordo Templi Orientis* (OTO), the occultist organization founded by Theodor Reuss (1855–1923) in the years around 1910.⁵⁵ Crowley was invited by Reuss to join the order in the same year, and succeeded him as international leader after his death in 1923. Quickly enough, Crowley came to see the OTO as an important tool for the propagation of his new religion.

The story of the OTO rituals is complicated and has not yet been completely elucidated.⁵⁶ What needs to be said here is that Crowley wrote and then kept revising the rituals at various moments during the 1910s. However, his work originally was not meant for the OTO, but for another fringe Masonic body: the Antient and Primitive Rite of Masonry, which was then led by John Yarker (1833–1913), with whom Crowley came also in contact in 1910. Yarker was at the center of a vast Masonic network, attracting persons particularly interested in esoteric and exotic forms of Freemasonry. His Antient and Primitive Rite was a synthesis of Scottish Freemasonry (the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite) and the so-called Egyptian rites of Memphis and Mizraim.⁵⁷ Reuss was also part of Yarker's network, and collaborated closely with him.

It was under Yarker's impulsion that Crowley began to work on the rituals of the Antient and Primitive Rite.⁵⁸ Significantly, this work started during his second trip to Algeria, in December 1910, on which he was accompanied again by his disciple Victor Neuburg.⁵⁹ Crowley notes in his autobiography that he had brought with him "in the desert the rituals of Freemasonry, those of the Scottish, Memphis and Mizraim Rites," and that a "plan had already been mooted for [him] to reconstruct Freemasonry."⁶⁰ In 1912 Reuss appointed Crowley head of a newly created branch of the OTO for all English-speaking countries, and in 1913 Yarker died. The "plan to reconstruct Freemasonry" therefore took a different course, and the rituals Crowley later produced were meant for the OTO.⁶¹

The setting of the initiation rituals of the Minerval (a preliminary degree) and then of the first three degrees (I, II, and III) of the OTO is

located in the Egyptian desert, with the Muslim military leader and sultan Saladin (1137–1193) playing the role of the initiating master.⁶²

This reference to one of the most important Muslim leaders from the period of the Crusades is obviously significant in the context of an occultist order inspired by the neo-Templar tradition.⁶³ The fact that the organization in question is defined as the Order of the “Eastern” Temple is reminiscent of legends on the contacts and possible influences of Islam on the Templar knights. Rather than emphasizing the Christian identity of the latter, Crowley, with these references to Islam and Arab culture, seems to give an image of the Templars as builders of bridges between different religious and spiritual traditions. When Crowley became the leader of the English-speaking branch of the OTO in 1912, he took the mystical name of “Baphomet,” the famous idol that the Templars had been accused of worshipping and which was used as a charge in the trial against them.⁶⁴ Although Crowley does not refer to an explicit connection, it is also interesting that, as had already been suggested in medieval sources and as most historians today seem to accept, “Baphomet” is in fact a corruption of “Mahomet,” implying a secret, heretical adoption of Islamic beliefs by the Templars.⁶⁵ It is not so surprising then to find an Islamic leader such as Saladin having the main role in these rituals, or, as we will see, the Sufi martyr al-Hallaj being mentioned as an inspiring model.

It is also a very significant coincidence that, right after his 1910 trip to Algeria, Crowley wrote a drama, “The Scorpion,” whose plot is set at the time of the Crusades.⁶⁶ In the story a Knight Templar, Sir Rinaldo de la Chapelle, seduces Laylah, the newly wed wife of an Arabian Emir, Said Omar. In spite of her married condition, Rinaldo tries to seduce her, while explaining to her that their love might be the beginning of a new era of peace and understanding between Christians and Muslims. They end up making love, but their encounter remains brief and their love impossible, even if a child is eventually born from it. After a series of vicissitudes, the story ends in disaster forty years later, with Laylah killing her own son and being burnt at the stake as a witch by the Christians. At that moment, Rinaldo recognizes her and joins her in the flames out of love. The drama, which does not seem to have attracted much attention by commentators so far, may not be Crowley’s literary masterpiece, but clearly shows his interest in the Knights Templar as a symbol of religious and cultural transgression in the context of their encounter with Islam. And, as a prefiguration of the OTO rituals he was beginning to write at this time, the drama

ends with the sudden apparition of a child who turns out to be none other than the future Saladin.⁶⁷

We should also note the relatively unexpected role played in one of the OTO rituals by al-Hallaj. In the ritual for the initiation to the III degree al-Hallaj appears as a symbolic equivalent of Hiram Abif, the legendary architect of Solomon's Temple, whose myth of murder and resurrection is at the core of the ritual for the degree of Master Mason in Craft Masonry.⁶⁸

It is important to note that the conspicuous presence of themes related to Islam and the Middle East in the rituals of the OTO is not just an idiosyncratic brainchild of Crowley's. It is in fact part of a broader context of Islamophilia that had spread, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the esoterically oriented Masonic milieu that I have already mentioned and from which the OTO emerged.⁶⁹ It was through this Masonic network that Crowley got in contact with Abdullah Quilliam (1856–1932), an Englishman who had become the most prominent public advocate of Islam in Britain after his conversion in 1887. Quilliam does not seem to have been particularly interested in Islamic mysticism and did not play any particular role in the introduction of Sufism to Western audiences, but he certainly had a long-standing interest in Freemasonry and joined several fringe Masonic bodies, including Yarker's Antient and Primitive Rite.⁷⁰ There is no indication that Crowley and Quilliam ever had a close relationship, but they collaborated with each other when the succession to Yarker as head of the Antient and Primitive Rite had to be handled after his death in 1913.⁷¹

I do not think, as Patrick Bowen suggests, that Crowley "became more and more fascinated with the Islamic world" as a result of these encounters,⁷² since it should be clear by now that his fascination with Islam had begun earlier and had more distant roots. But surely Crowley's involvement in this Masonic networks helps to understand some aspects of his own Islamophilia and the role it played in the production of the OTO rituals.

Another interesting example of the presence of themes derived from Islam in the history and structure of the OTO is the fact that, in a series of letters written at the end of his life, Crowley explains to his American disciple Grady Louis McMurtry (1918–1985) that he sees his successor at the head of his magical organizations and in the propagation of the Thelema as a "Caliph."⁷³ This is easily explained by way of an analogy with Islam: Muhammad was not only the prophet of Islam, but also the political leader of the Islamic community, and his successors took the title of

“Caliph,” from the Arabic word *khalīfa*, meaning successor. Similarly, Crowley considered himself the prophet of Thelema and the leader of the Thelemic community, and could therefore give the same title of Caliph to his successors. In the 1970s, McMurtry revived the OTO, which, apart from a few exceptions, had virtually ceased all activity after the death of Crowley’s direct successor, the German Karl Germer (1885–1962). In order to do that, McMurtry relied on those letters and adopted the title of “Caliph” that Crowley had mentioned to him. This explains why the revived OTO was called, at least for a time, “Caliphate OTO,” also to distinguish it from other competing branches that existed at the time. The reference to the Caliphate was later dropped and would certainly be less convenient to use today, as it might easily lend itself, after the proclamation in 2014 of the “Caliphate” of the Islamic State (Daesh), to unpleasant associations.

THE CULTURAL ASPECTS AND BURTON’S MODEL

The close analysis I have carried out so far allows us to see a clear Islamophile aspect in Crowley’s work and ideas, an aspect that had remained largely under-appreciated until now. How can we better understand the cultural context of this Islamophilia? I would suggest that, in order to give an answer to this question, we should begin by looking at a Victorian author who was an inspiring model of primary importance for Crowley: Sir Richard F. Burton (1821–1890).⁷⁴

Explorer, secret agent, diplomat, translator of Oriental texts (*The Thousand and One Nights*, the *Kama Sutra*),⁷⁵ writer, polyglot, Burton combined his many talents and his strong personality with an uncompromising critical attitude toward contemporary British culture and society.⁷⁶ Crowley’s admiration for Burton is immense and quite explicit,⁷⁷ but his connection with him goes beyond the mere reading of his works. It must be noted that there was also a more personal and direct link, through his friend and mentor Oscar Eckenstein (1859–1921).⁷⁸ Eckenstein, an Englishman of German Jewish origin, was a railway engineer and an experienced alpinist, having participated in a major expedition to the Himalayas in the early 1890s.⁷⁹

Crowley met Eckenstein in 1898. The two became friends out of their common passion for high mountains and began to practice mountaineering together, first in the Alps, then in Mexico in 1900. In 1902, Crowley

took part in an expedition organized by Eckenstein to conquer the summit, still virgin at the time, of K2, in the Karakoram. The attempt failed, but Crowley's admiration and friendship for Eckenstein were unaffected, making him one of the few persons about whom Crowley never modified his admiring and respectful opinion. But Eckenstein had, besides the mountains, another passion: Richard Burton. It is quite possible that Eckenstein had met Burton personally, but if this ever happened, no trace of it can be found in the many biographies that have been devoted to the British explorer. What is certain is that Eckenstein devoted a real cult to Burton and put together a very important collection of papers, documents, and books related to him, which was given after Eckenstein's death to the Royal Asiatic Society and remains today the most important collection of Burtoniana kept in a public institution.⁸⁰

It is very significant that Crowley dedicated his autobiography, his famous *Confessions*, not only to Eckenstein and Bennett, but also to Burton.⁸¹ The dedication shows that these three persons were perceived by Crowley as spiritual fathers who had marked him deeply in his youthful years. But Crowley's tribute to Burton goes further, since he also gives him, like Muhammad, the title of "Saint" of his Gnostic Catholic Church.⁸²

It would be difficult to understand Crowley's interpretation of Islam without putting it against the background of Burton's influence. The analogies between Burton and Crowley are numerous and significant, and they are to a large extent based on a conscious attempt by Crowley to follow in Burton's footsteps. There was, of course, the love for traveling in and exploring exotic countries, which was sparked by a deep-seated curiosity about non-European cultures. But it must be noted that this curiosity, for both Burton and Crowley, did not content itself with simple observations from the outside: it also moved toward an identification with the observed culture. On some occasions, this may have depended on the need to avoid being perceived as a non-Muslim while traveling. The most obvious example of this situation is the famous pilgrimage of Burton to Mecca in 1853, a pilgrimage that the British explorer could not carry out without disguising himself, while traveling, as a pious Muslim.

But this is not the only reason. There seems to be also the will to see the world with the eyes of the other, which sometimes leads to discoveries beyond the reach of an emotionally distant, neutral observer. This method may help one to relativize one's culture of origin. For Crowley, as for Burton, the direct contact with Islam leads to a questioning of the superiority of European culture over the populations subjected to colonial

domination, which was practically taken for granted in England and other European countries at the time. On the other hand, Crowley also seems to attribute a spiritual meaning to the practice of shifting identities and disguising himself. The true magician is one who has seen everything, felt everything, experienced everything from the most diverse points of view. In order to do that, he has to divest oneself of his own personality and take on a new one.⁸³ This explains why Crowley so enthusiastically adopted Burton's practice of "cultural crossdressing," while also giving a new esoteric meaning to it.⁸⁴

Crowley sometimes follows Burton's example to the tiniest detail. During his stay in Egypt in 1904, the same one during which the *Book of the Law* was written, Crowley decided to take on the identity of a Persian prince.⁸⁵ This was the same disguise Burton had chosen at the beginning of his journey to Mecca, while on his way to Egypt.⁸⁶ But even if the immediate source of Crowley's idea is found in Burton, it should be noted that other authors of the Victorian era had experienced the practice of disguise in an Islamic country. Before Burton, the most significant case was undoubtedly that of Edward William Lane (1801–1876), who lived for a long time in Cairo and became the author of a famous study on contemporary Egypt.⁸⁷ Lane had already had the idea of dressing as an Egyptian Muslim, not as the result of a conversion, but rather in order to better understand the customs and religious traditions of the Egyptian population. A deep and direct knowledge of the social and religious reality of Egypt was gained through the experience of total immersion in such reality. This allowed him to enter places, whether physical or cultural, that would otherwise be inaccessible to a non-Muslim European man.⁸⁸

Said discusses the camouflage strategy of Westerners living in Oriental lands, and rightly points out that one should not forget its ambiguities and complex psychological presuppositions.⁸⁹ On the one hand, such a strategy was based on the intention to deceive the people one observed in order to obtain practical knowledge about their culture and customs. This eventually flowed into publications that could easily be used by colonial institutions for their own purposes. On the other hand, this process was accompanied by an obvious and sincere sympathy for the religious traditions and culture of the observed people. This was the case with Lane and Burton, and it was clearly also the case with Crowley. With the latter, however, the ambiguity was even more complex, since he was obviously much less involved than Burton in the colonial establishment of his day,

and so could present his behavior not as a professional necessity or obligation, but more trivially as a *divertissement*.

In his autobiography, Crowley describes his disguise as a Persian prince during his stay in Cairo in 1904 in this way:

I was not for a moment deceived by my own pretext that I wanted to study Mohammedism [*sic*], and in particular the mysticism of the fakir, the Darwesh and the Sufi, from within, when I proposed to pass myself off in Egypt for a Persian prince with a beautiful English wife. I wanted to swagger about in a turban with a diamond aigrette and sweeping silken robes or a coat of cloth of gold, with a jeweled talwar by my side and two gorgeous runners to clear the way for my carriage through the streets of Cairo.⁹⁰

Crowley is certainly aware of Lane's and Burton's precedents, but he presents his behavior in Cairo as a simple narcissistic joke, minimizing its intellectual or religious dimension. But one must always be wary of Crowley's mocking attitude, which often conceals more stratified intentions. It is indeed only a page later that Crowley returns to his motivations during his stay in Cairo with a different tone:

As to my study of Islam, I got a sheikh to teach me Arabic and the practices of ablution, prayer and so on, so that at some future time I might pass for a Moslem among themselves. I had it in my mind to repeat Burton's journey to Mecca sooner or later. I learnt a number of chapters of the Koran by heart. I never went to Mecca, it seemed rather vieux jeu, but my ability to fraternize fully with Mohammedans has proved of infinite use in many ways.⁹¹

As we will see, this sheikh taught Crowley more than just basic notions of Arabic language and Islamic ritual practices. For now, it is important to note that this immersion in Islam, which seems to have been much more serious than the preceding passage would have suggested, occurs just before the revelation of the *Book of the Law*. I have already pointed out that, with respect to the similarities between Thelema and certain aspects of Islam, this proximity does not appear quite so trivial. Moreover, after this first learning process, Crowley claims to have exploited his knowledge of the religious practices of Islam during other travels to Muslim countries, which may well help in understanding the similarities between Islam and Thelema we have seen. This is the case, for example, with an episode from his first trip to Algeria in the company of his disciple Victor Neuburg, in 1909:

On one occasion, in fact, a quarrel in a coffee shop having developed into a sort of small riot, and knives being drawn, I walked into the scrimmage and drew sigils in the air with the ring while intoning a chapter of the Koran. The fuss stopped instantly, and a few minutes later the original parties to the dispute came to me and begged me to decide between them, for they saw that I was a saint. I habitually observed the prescribed five prayers of the orthodox Mohammedan, and increased my reputation for piety by constantly reciting the Koran as I walked and performing various other practices proper to the highest class of dervish.⁹²

It is remarkable to see how Crowley, in this episode, does not really use his practical knowledge of Islam in order to become less conspicuous as a Westerner, as had often been the case with Burton's practice of camouflage, but rather to dramatically impress the local population and show them the extent of his mastery of their own spiritual traditions. The episode of course also gives an indication of Crowley's interest in Sufism and Islamic mysticism, to which I will return.

Another point of contact between Burton and Crowley is how their perception of Islam mixes with their interest in sexuality. It is too easy to interpret this interest as a manifestation of lascivious and pornographic curiosity. There is also a political and cultural dimension that is at the center of Burton's and Crowley's concerns, and which has been, especially in the case of Crowley, so frequently missed by critics. The interest in sexuality is only another aspect of their dissatisfaction with Western culture and Christianity, and more particularly with the form that sexuality has taken on in the more specific context of Victorian society. As is well known, in the last years of his life Burton translated and published classical texts of Indian and Arabic erotic literature, such as the *Kama Sutra* and Sheikh Nefzaoui's *Perfumed Garden*.⁹³ His purpose was far from being purely scholarly: this literature was supposed to offer an image of Oriental sexuality that was free from the restraints of sin and of the sense of guilt typical of Western culture. The study of Eastern erotic cultures and the curiosity for exotic sexual practices led Burton, and then Crowley in his wake, to develop a more or less explicit critique of their society, a critique that anticipates in many ways the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Based on an approach inspired, among others, by Michel Foucault and his *Histoire de la sexualité*, Hugh B. Urban has drawn attention to the fact that the occultist sexual magic that developed in North America and Europe from the mid-nineteenth century on is in fact a much more

complex cultural phenomenon than hitherto recognized.⁹⁴ Occultists such as Crowley introduce the conscious and systematic use of sex within the larger framework of more traditional magical practices. At the same time, late nineteenth-century esotericism creates a discourse on sexuality which, calling into question the moral values and social norms current at the time, radically anticipates the development of European culture in the twentieth century.⁹⁵ While I certainly subscribe to Urban's interpretation, I also find his focus on India, and more particularly on the traditions of Tantra and Haṭha Yoga, somewhat reductive. It is obvious that, for occultists interested in the spiritual and magical aspects of sexuality, Islam plays an equally important role. One only needs to think, apart from Crowley, of the American occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), who claimed to have learned his sexual magic techniques while traveling in the Middle East, thanks to his encounter with the mysterious Nuṣayrīs (also known as Alawites) from Syria and Lebanon.⁹⁶

For Crowley, who also follows Burton's example, the challenge to Victorian attitudes toward sexuality is not just about heterosexual eroticism, but extends to homosexuality. Homosexuality was perceived as particularly disturbing and offensive by Victorian culture, even if it was relatively tolerated in practice, provided it did not become the object of a public scandal, as was famously the case with Oscar Wilde's prosecution for "gross indecency" in 1895.⁹⁷ Burton played an important role in how the discourse on homosexuality developed in late nineteenth-century Britain. His influence on Crowley is quite evident in this respect.⁹⁸ Crowley, following Burton and other contemporary authors of clandestine and pornographic literature, attributes to Arab and Islamic cultures a particular propensity for the practice of sodomy.⁹⁹ For Crowley, who was bisexual and had various sexual and romantic experiences with men during his life, this view of Islam had rather positive connotations, even if his attitude toward homosexuality remained ambivalent.¹⁰⁰

In 1910, Crowley published *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz*, which presents itself as the translation of a series of Persian *ghazals*, or love poems, that glorify homosexuality in a very explicit way.¹⁰¹ The book was published clandestinely and was considered pornographic by the British authorities, who confiscated and destroyed all the copies that happened to fall into their hands, so that the first edition of this book, printed in only a hundred copies, is today extremely rare. At first sight, the title would seem to refer quite transparently to Burton's translation of the famous erotic textbook of Sheikh Nefzaoui, *The Perfumed Garden*, but we

can notice at least two important differences between the two texts.¹⁰² The first is that Crowley's book is not a translation of a pre-existing text, but is, in fact, entirely written by him.¹⁰³ It is pseudonymously attributed to a Persian author of the early seventeenth century, Abdullah el-Haji. The name of this fictitious author is in fact Crowley's nod to connoisseurs of Burton's work, since Burton had taken on the identity of a Persian Sufi named Abdullah for the final part of his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1853.¹⁰⁴ The second difference is that the version of Nefzaoui's *Perfumed Garden* published by Burton was about heterosexual love, and did not include a discussion of homosexuality.

This last difference indicates that Crowley, with the title of his book, was obviously referring to a new edition of Nefzaoui's book that Burton was preparing in the last years of his life. This new edition, which Burton did not manage to publish before his death, would have included a section on homosexual practices. Significantly, the title of this new edition would have been *The Scented Garden*, which is the title Crowley used for his own book. Burton's manuscript was burnt after his death by his wife Isabel and is therefore now lost.¹⁰⁵

It is also important to remember that, apart from the *Scented Garden* project of his final years, Burton shows a persistent interest in homosexuality in some of his other writings. Indeed, it is well known that in the first edition of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which he originally published in ten volumes in 1885, he devotes a substantial part of his "Terminal Essay" at the end of the last volume to the subject of "pederasty."¹⁰⁶ Burton presents there his theory that pederasty is a common practice especially in the latitudes closest to the tropics, which he calls "the Sotadic Zone." So there seems to be some kind of identification between an area corresponding to a significant extent to Islamic countries and the practice of pederasty.¹⁰⁷

Crowley's *Scented Garden* may simply appear to be a very elaborate pornographic joke. But that would be reductive: its explicit exaltation of pederasty and sodomy is combined with insights about mystical illumination that should be placed within the broader context of Crowley's esoteric ideas. Although it has attracted less attention than other works by Crowley, it possesses literary quality and was certainly considered an important work by its author.¹⁰⁸ The tradition of mystical love poetry, especially of a homoerotic nature, in Persian literature had found a receptive audience in Britain in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁹ In creating his own original work, Crowley exploits the Orientalist impulse of such an interest, while satirizing it at the same time. And the underlying message is clear:

what is perceived and even persecuted as an aberrant practice in a Christian context can be joyously glorified with beautiful poetry in an Islamic one. The vision of an exotic sexuality free from the sense of sin contrasts starkly with the restrictions of Victorian society. Burton's researches and publications about Oriental sexual customs had had a similar subversive goal.¹¹⁰

Significantly, the idea that homosexuality can express itself much more freely in an Islamic context than in a Christian one does not lead Crowley to perceive Islam as a religion with effeminate qualities: quite the contrary. In fact, Crowley often describes Islam as an eminently virile religion. This gendered perception of a religious tradition has to be placed back into the colonial, Orientalist context of nineteenth-century Britain. It was indeed a common cultural trope at the time to depict Hindus, and particularly Bengalis, as an effeminate, weak population, and to contrast them not only with the "muscular Christianity" of British colonizers, but also with the virile energy of Muslims.¹¹¹ This gendering of colonized populations had its roots in older debates during the Enlightenment, when Britain's colonial enterprise in India was gaining momentum.¹¹²

For Crowley, however, Christianity does not show any "muscular" qualities at all, and compares quite unfavorably to Islam, which seems to undermine contemporary ingrained notions of Western superiority. We have already seen that Crowley characterizes Christianity as a religion for "slaves," which points to a possible influence of Nietzsche. Other examples of this characterization can be given. For Crowley, "the manliness of the Mohammedan makes it impossible to despise his belief in Allah. Islam is free from the degrading doctrine of atonement and the glorification of the slave virtues."¹¹³ Burton had also insisted that Islamic doctrines were largely superior to Christian ones in "morality and manly dignity."¹¹⁴

THE ROLE OF SUFISM

We have noticed the importance that Crowley gives to the "secret tenets" of Islam, as distinct from the "mere nonsense" of its vulgar, exoteric form. It is therefore no wonder that he would also be interested in Sufism. And in fact we should pay attention to the fact that the sheikh who was teaching him the rudiments of the Arabic language and the Islamic faith in Egypt in 1904 also had other teachings to impart:

My sheikh was profoundly versed in the mysticism and magic of Islam, and discovering that I was an initiate, had no hesitation in providing me with

books and manuscripts on the Arabic Cabbala. ... From this man I learnt also many of the secrets of the Sidi Aissawa; how to run a stiletto through one's cheek without drawing blood, lick red-hot swords, eat live scorpions, etc.¹¹⁵

The Aissawa ('Isawiyya) is an important Sufi brotherhood mainly based in Morocco, but present also in other countries of the Maghreb. The brotherhood is known for its use of dances and, in some particular cases, self-injury in order to produce trance-like states.¹¹⁶ After his first acquaintance with their practices in 1904 through the Cairo sheikh, Crowley had a more direct experience of them in 1907, during a trip to Morocco. In his autobiography he tells how one night he stumbled almost by chance on the ritual performances of a local Aissawa community and was able to join the audience undetected.¹¹⁷ The almost brutal frenzy of the ritual, with practitioners hitting themselves on the head with small ceremonial axes until bleeding, captured and excited him. The episode was certainly interesting for Crowley, even if he does not seem to have given a profound spiritual meaning to it: "This little adventure always stood out as one of the most exciting (in a small way) of my life, that is, of merely material adventures."¹¹⁸

When it comes to a deeper intellectual interest in Sufism, it is rather in the direction of Persia that Crowley looked than the Maghreb. After a failed attempt at climbing Kangchenjunga in 1905, Crowley was resting in Darjeeling and considering his future plans: "I had been reproaching myself for my ignorance of the Sufi doctrines, and intended to cross Persia on my way back to England. For this purpose, I began to study the language with a munshi. I began to imitate the poets of Iran."¹¹⁹ He never went to Persia in the end, but this was the beginning of the literary project of *The Scented Garden*:

Persian fascinated me more than any other language had ever done and I reveled in the ideas of the Sufis. Their esoteric symbolism delighted me beyond measure. I took it into my head to go one better than my previous performance in the way of inventing poets and their productions.¹²⁰

We understand from these quotes that *The Scented Garden* for Crowley was not simply a literary project with pornographic and satirical contents but had a deeper meaning. And this meaning was closely associated with his interest in Sufism and Islamic mysticism. Crowley's *Scented Garden* can

then be compared in this respect not so much to Burton's erotic works, but to a poem Burton published pseudonymously in his later years, *The Kasīdah*.¹²¹ The poem is attributed to a certain "Haji Abdu El-Yezdi," who is none other than Burton himself.¹²² It enjoyed quite some popularity between 1900 and the Second World War, but its fortune declined thereafter and is certainly not Burton's best remembered work today. Crowley knew it very well and, although devoid of erotic elements, it is fair to assume that some of its formal aspects inspired him when writing *The Scented Garden*.¹²³ Burton wrote his *Kasīdah* around the time in which Edward Fitzgerald's version of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* had become a literary sensation, both in Britain and elsewhere, and had deeply influenced the way in which the West would understand Sufism.¹²⁴ The author is introduced as a Sufi, like the pseudonymous author of Crowley's *Scented Garden*, and the poem offers an overview of Burton's opinions on science, religion, and the mysteries of life, even if they are presented as coming from a Sufi perspective.¹²⁵ The doctrine of Burton's imagined Sufism is based on moral relativism and skepticism: there is no transcendent God, there is no afterlife, there is no absolute Good or Evil. Life makes sense only as a progressive discovery of one's self.¹²⁶ Man is the creator of God: "I am the Truth! I am the Truth! We hear the God-drunk Gnostic cry / The microcosm abides in ME; Eternal Allah's nought but I."¹²⁷ And who is the "God-drunk Gnostic," as Burton calls the original mouthpiece of this Sufi doctrine? Al-Hallaj, of course, whom we have already encountered when discussing Crowley's interpretation of the *shahāda* and in the OTO rituals. Burton expresses similar ideas elsewhere in the poem: "Man worships self; his God is Man; the struggling of the mortal mind / To form its model as 'twould be, the perfect of itself to find."¹²⁸ It is hard not to see an echo of these verses in Crowley's "There is no God but Man," associated by him—as will be remembered—with the "secret tenets" of Islam.

There can be no doubt that Burton's image of a Sufi worldview, as presented in *The Kasīdah*, influenced Crowley's own understanding of Sufism. It also comes as no surprise that some critics have perceived a Nietzschean flavor in Burton's poem, which is of course slightly anachronistic.¹²⁹ This indicates that Crowley's perception of Islam and Sufism could have been influenced just as much by Nietzsche himself as by ideas that had been circulating in European culture for a while even before Nietzsche.

Echoes of Burton's vision can be found in various places in Crowley's works, as I hope will be clear by now. Crowley's *Scented Garden* offers

relatively little that can be added to this picture. The main point that Crowley seems to make with the book, if we avoid considering it a purely pornographic joke, is that a valid mystical or esoteric doctrine can be couched under the veil of what most would consider as inappropriate sexual metaphors, and, more prosaically, that sodomy is a perfectly acceptable sexual practice. The book *is* most certainly a wild pornographic joke, but it is *also* a fascinating exposition of sexual mysticism in Sufi garb. A section of the introduction, attributed to the equally pseudonymous editor of the book, Alain Luti, but obviously written by Crowley as well, focuses on Sufi doctrines. It does not say anything specific about Sufism, however. It rather claims that “there is one mysticism and not two,” meaning that the truth obtained through mystical experiences is always the same everywhere and at all times.¹³⁰ Characteristically for Crowley, a naturalistic explanation is given for this fact, not a perennialist one. The truths of mysticism are the same in all human cultures “because the actual phenomena which every man is bound to observe in Nature are essentially the same in every clime,” and “the physiological constitution of mankind is practically identical the wide world over.”¹³¹

It is also interesting to see that, in other works, Crowley describes the doctrines of Sufism as being based on “pantheism”:

In its doctrine [i.e., of Islam] there is some slight taint, but much less than in Christianity. It is a virile religion. It looks facts in the face, and admits their horror; but it proposes to overcome them by sheer dint of manhood. Unfortunately, the metaphysical conceptions of its quasi-profane schools are grossly materialistic. It is only the Pantheism of the Sufis which eliminates the conception of propitiation.¹³²

The problem of “propitiation” is of course the problem of theism: in other words, the belief in the existence of a transcendent, personal God who can be propitiated by human beings, an idea that Crowley, as we have seen, strongly rejects. But Sufism, being based on a pantheistic doctrine, has a more correct view of reality, because it rejects the idea of a personal God. For the rest, we can find in the quotation some of the other tropes we have already discussed. Interestingly enough, the idea that pantheism is at the core of Sufism can also be found in Burton’s *Kasidah*.¹³³

If we put together all the elements we have seen so far in Crowley’s works, we have a picture of the Sufis as being closely related to ideas and practices that have long been considered as extremely subversive by the

religious establishment and mainstream culture of the West, such as freethought, pantheism, and sodomy. But this is not a peculiar invention of Crowley, nor even of Burton, since it has its distant roots in older perceptions of Sufism by Western intellectuals.¹³⁴

CONCLUSION

We have observed Crowley's positive appreciation of Islam, made evident not only by possible influences and similarities, which can always have an ambivalent meaning, but also by explicit passages in his writings. In the latter part of this chapter, I have tried to contextualize Crowley's Islamophilia by focusing especially on Burton's influence on him. Also, we have seen that Crowley's perception of Sufism, associated to freethought, homoerotic mysticism, and pantheism, whether or not it has its actual roots in real, historical Sufism, also depends on perceptions and interpretations that have been present in European culture at least since the Enlightenment.

It should hopefully be easier now to understand why Islam could exert such a power of fascination on Crowley. While the influence of Islam on Crowley's work, particularly with respect to Thelema, is evident enough, we can also see the kind of function it takes on. It becomes one of the means for expressing a desire for subversion and revolt against Victorian society, and more particularly against the form of Christianity that Crowley had experienced in the early part of his life. What is interesting to note is that this aspect brings Crowley unexpectedly close to another modern esotericist who would normally be thought to be his exact opposite: René Guénon (1886–1951).¹³⁵ It is easy to see how Guénon's radical choice of converting to Islam, moving to an Islamic country (Egypt), and living the "simple life" of a pious Muslim until the end of his life was a strongly subversive gesture toward modernity, Christianity, and the West as a whole.¹³⁶ The reasons, the contexts, the rhetoric, perhaps even the degree, of their respective Islamophilia were of course very different, but the function that Islam played in their lives is in the end quite similar. We can see something crucial here about the role of Islam in the history of Western esotericism that needs to be further investigated.

The history of Islamophilia and of the influence of Islam on Western esotericism remains largely to be written. This task in fact overlaps only partially with the history of Western Sufism, as it has been defined and brilliantly studied by Mark Sedgwick in his ground-breaking work on the

subject.¹³⁷ Even Angel Millar’s recent study, *The Crescent and the Compass*, while not focusing exclusively on Sufism, remains inevitably limited in scope and only offers an analysis of a few cases from the long history of Islamophilia in Western esotericism.¹³⁸ It is to be hoped that a broader overview, or at least a much larger number of case studies, will be made available by future research. This will allow us to have a more nuanced, diverse picture of Western esotericism’s “Orientalisms,” and thus balance out the strong emphasis that previous research has given to the influence of traditions from South Asia and the Far East. This chapter has been one step in this direction.

NOTES

1. There is an interest in the subject in some contemporary practitioners of Crowley’s magical and religious system. Their collections of sources and analyses are in some cases very useful for the academic researcher, even when they show a clear religionist bent. The most interesting example is the series of texts published online in 2007 by T Polyphilus and collected under the title “Islamic Roots of Thelema” (see <https://paradoxosalpha.livejournal.com/79983.html> for the first instalment in the series, accessed 17 April 2020). The series was later the basis for an essay: “The Sharia of the Great Beast”, published in: *Notocon VIII: Neither East nor West. Proceedings of the Ninth Biennial National Ordo Templi Orientis Conference* (Riverside, CA: United States Grand Lodge Ordo Templi Orientis, 2015), 2-20. “T Polyphilus” is the pseudonym of Dionysius Rogers, also known by the pseudonyms “Dionysos Thriambos” and “Paradoxos Alpha.” He is a prominent member of the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), the occultist organization of which Crowley was the international leader for a number of years and to which I will return later.
2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
3. See particularly Bryan S. Turner, *Orientalism. Postmodernism and Globalism* (London: Routledge, 1994); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999); Isolde Kurz, *Vom Umgang mit dem Anderen. Die Orientalismus-Debatte zwischen Alteritatdiskurs und interkultureller Kommunikation* (Wurzburg: Ergon, 2000); Alexander L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2007); Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Penguin Books,

- 2007); and Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
4. Dane Kennedy, “‘Captain Burton’s Oriental Muck Heap’: The Book of the Thousand Nights and the Uses of Orientalism,” *Journal of British Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 2000): 319.
 5. The *Book of the Law*, also known as *Liber AL vel Legis*, was first published by Crowley in 1909 (in: Id., *ΘEAHMA*, vol 3, [London], privately printed, [1909]), and has then been reprinted many times in various editions. I am using here the version published in Aleister Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods* (London: Issued by the O.T.O., 1936). The text can also be found online, for example, here: <http://lib.oto-usa.org/libri/liber0220.html>, accessed April 26, 2020. As it is customary, references to the text will be given by indicating the corresponding chapter and verse.
 6. On this important episode in Crowley’s life, see in particular Alex Owen, “Aleister Crowley in the Desert,” in: Alex Owen, ed., *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 186–220. On the role of the Enochian system in Crowley’s work, see Marco Pasi and Philippe Rabaté, “Langue angélique, langue magique: l’énochien,” *Politica Hermetica* 13, (1999): 94–123; and Egil Asprem, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture* (Albany: SUNY Press 2012), 85–102.
 7. On Crowley’s relationship with Christianity and Victorian culture, see Marco Pasi, “L’anticristianesimo in Aleister Crowley (1875–1947),” in *Aleister Crowley. Un mago a Cefalù*, ed. PierLuigi Zoccatelli (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1998), 41–67. For the more political aspects of this intellectual critique, see Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 23–64.
 8. The main sources for Crowley’s own narrative of the events are his autobiography, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley. An Autobiography* (London: Arkana, 1989), 382–402; and *The Equinox of the Gods* (London: O.T.O., 1936).
 9. Caroline Tully, “Walk Like an Egyptian: Egypt as Authority in Aleister Crowley’s Reception of The Book of the Law,” *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010): 20–47.
 10. The textual corpus of the Golden Dawn, including the rituals and teaching material, has been published by various authors at different moments and in various versions. To this day, the single most comprehensive collection remains the one edited by Israel Regardie in the 1930s: Israel Regardie (ed.), *The Golden Dawn. An Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn*, 4 volumes (Chicago: Aries Press, 1937–1940), then reprinted several times. Regardie later reorganized the material and republished it in a different edition: Israel Regardie

- (ed.), *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic* (Phoenix: Falcon Press, 1984).
11. Concerning the early history and main textual aspects of the Quran, my main source is Alford T. Welch, Rudi Paret, and James D. Pearson, “al-Ḳurʿān,” in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. Peri J. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill) first published online: 2012, 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0543, accessed April 21, 2020.
 12. For the Quran see, for example, XV:9; for the *Book of the Law*, see I:36; I:54; and II:54.
 13. The notion of the Holy Guardian Angel was derived by Crowley from *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage, As Delivered by Abraham the Jew unto his Son Lamech, A.D. 1458* (London: J. M. Watkins, 1898). This was an important magical text that had been published by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, one of the leaders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, around the same time as Crowley became a member of the Order. The book had a profound impact on Crowley. On the complex issue of Crowley’s gradual identification of Aiwass as his own Holy Guardian Angel, see Marco Pasi, “Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley’s Views on Occult Practice,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 6, no. 2 (December 2011): 158–160.
 14. Aleister Crowley, “Liber Resh vel Helios. Sub Figurâ CC,” *The Equinox* I, no. 6 (September 1911): 29–32.
 15. On this point, see also the comments of two contemporary Thelemite practitioners, both prominent members of the OTO and of the Gnostic Catholic Church: Tau Apiryon (David Scriven), “The Kiblah,” in: Tau Apiryon and Helena (Lynn Scriven), *Mystery of Mystery. A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism (Red Flame, 2)* (Berkeley: Red Flame, 2001), 83–88, now available online at <https://sabazius.oto-usa.org/the-kiblah/>, accessed 19 April 2020; and T Polyphilus (Dionysius Rogers), “The Islam of To Mega Therion: Second Pillar,” <https://paradoxosalpha.livejournal.com/82993.html>, accessed April 19, 2020.
 16. Boleskine, with its villa and the surrounding estate, is located on the southern shore of Loch Ness. Crowley bought it in 1899 and spent long periods there until around 1914. It was there that Crowley attempted to perform the rituals described in the *Book of Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*, which he believed to be of great importance in his initiatory path (see also n. 14 above). The house was almost completely destroyed by two consecutive fires in December 2015 and July 2019. The estate has now been acquired by the Boleskine House Foundation, which has been created in 2019 with the purpose of restoring it and preserving its cultural heritage. See <https://www.boleskinehouse.org/>, accessed April 19, 2020.

17. Aleister Crowley, *Magick Without Tears* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1973), 168.
18. Aleister Crowley, "Liber V vel Reguli," in *Magick in Theory and Practice* (Paris: Published for subscribers only—Lecram Press, 1929 [1930]), 331–344.
19. A history of the modern neo-Gnostic movement, of which Crowley's Gnostic Catholic Church is a part, remains largely to be written. The best overviews, if a bit dated now, are Massimo Introvigne, *Il ritorno dello gnosticismo* (Carnago: SugarCo, 1993); and Ladislaus Toth, "Gnostic Church," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al., (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 400–403. See also Hugh B. Urban, "The Knowing of Knowing. Neo-Gnosticism, from the O.T.O. to Scientology," *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*, 4 (2019): 99–116.
20. O.T.O. (Aleister Crowley), "Liber XV. Ecclesiae Gnosticae Catholicae Canon Missae," *The Equinox* III, no. 1 (March 1919): 247–270. See 249 for the instruction on the altar.
21. Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo. The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 319.
22. Aleister Crowley, "Liber CCC. Khabs am Pekht," *The Equinox* III, no.1 (March 1919): 178. For an even more elaborate interpretation of the verse from the perspective of a contemporary Thelemite, in which the "Kaaba" is not mainly understood as a geographical place, but as the body of each individual practitioner, see Jerry Edward Cornelius, "On the Proper Use of the Clerk House," online at <http://www.cornelius93.com/aa-clerk-houses-2016.html>, accessed April 19, 2020.
23. However, it is interesting to note that in Islamic Sufism metaphorical interpretations of the Kaaba have also emerged from time to time, although they were usually treated as heterodox and condemned by religious authorities. We have perhaps the most famous example of this with the Persian Sufi al-Hallaj, who claimed that the pilgrims' circumambulation of the Kaaba at Mecca could be performed just as effectively, if symbolically, "around a table at home" or "round the Ka'ba of your heart." It is mainly for this claim that he was eventually executed. See Louis Massignon and Louis Gardet, "al-Ḥallādj," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*; 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0256, accessed April 21, 2020; and Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 41. As we will see, Crowley was familiar with al-Hallaj's story.
24. For an introduction to these aspects of Thelema, cf. Marco Pasi, "Aleister Crowley," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 281–287. For a more extensive analysis, see Ian Drummond, "The Occult Macrohistory of Aleister

- Crowley” (Honors Diss., University of Sydney, 2003), available online at https://www.academia.edu/3991438/The_occult_macrohistory_of_Aleister_Crowley, accessed May 1, 2020. See also, especially on the eschatological aspects, Henrik Bogdan, “Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon: Dispensationalism and Millenarianism in the Thelemic Tradition,” in Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (eds.), *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 89–106. About Corbin’s notion of hierohistory (*hiérophistoire*) see Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, “Temps spirituel et hiéro-histoire selon Henry Corbin: une phénoménologie de la conscience psycho-cosmique,” in: *Henry Corbin et le comparatisme spirituel. Colloque tenu à Paris les 5 et 6 juin 1999* (Milan: Archè, 2000), 25–37.
25. Bogdan, “Envisioning the Birth,” 90.
 26. The doctrine of the “Magi” is presented by Crowley in several texts, with some significant developments over time. Of particular importance is the description given in his *Liber Aleph Vel CXI. The Book of Wisdom or Folly, in the Form of an Epistle of 666. The Great Wild Beast to his Son 777* (West Point: Thelema Publishing Company, 1961), 68–75, and *The Confessions*, 795–796. See also Drummond, “The Occult Macrohistory,” n.p.n. (but 11–15). To the sources discussed by Drummond one should add: Aleister Crowley, “Liber B vel Magi. Su figurâ I,” *The Equinox* I, no. 7 (March 1912): 5–9. With respect to Schuré, the reference is obviously to Édouard Schuré, *Les Grands initiés. Esquisse de l’histoire secrète des religions* (Paris: Perrin, 1889)—English transl.: *The Great Initiates. Sketch of the Secret History of Religions* (London: William Rider & Son, 1912). About the concept of Prisca Theologia in the long history of Western esotericism, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7–12, and *passim*.
 27. Arent Jan Wensinck, “Rasûl,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 10.1163/1573–3912_islam_COM_0911, accessed April 21, 2020; Toufic Fahd, “Nubuwwa,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 10.1163/1573–3912_islam_SIM_5964, accessed April 21, 2020; Marilyn Robinson Waldman and Bruce B. Lawrence, “Nubūwah,” in Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., (Farmington Hills: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), vol. 10, 6733–6739.
 28. We will see later what role has the idea of God in Crowley’s perception of Islam.
 29. Aleister Crowley, *The Heart of the Master and Other Papers* (New York: Ordo Templi Orientis and New Falcon Publications, 1992), 13–17 and 102. With respect to terminology, the idea of the Great White Brotherhood is ostensibly derived by Crowley from Theosophical literature, while that

- of the Secret Chiefs played an important role in the teachings of the Golden Dawn. The two concepts overlap with each other in Crowley.
30. Bogdan, "Envisioning the Birth," 90.
 31. The structure of the A.:A.:is described by Crowley in his "One Star in Sight," in Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 229–244.
 32. Crowley, "One Star in Sight," 234.
 33. See Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists. An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 36.
 34. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 68–75. Jesus was included in an earlier list of Magi in "The Vision and the Voice," the account of Crowley's visionary experiences in the Algerian Sahara in 1909, but the name was later taken out. See Aleister Crowley, "The Vision and the Voice," *The Equinox* I, no. 5 (March 1911): 126; and Drummond, "The Occult Macrohistory," n.p.n. (but 12–13). This is not so surprising, as Crowley came to doubt the actual historical existence of Jesus, or, more precisely, believed that "Jesus" was the syncretic aggregation of several historical persons and divinities, having merged into a single mythical figure. Features and episodes were attributed to Jesus based on the model of the "dying god" as described by James Frazer in his famous *Golden Bough*. See Crowley, *The Confessions*, 237, 795, and 808–809. Crowley expands on these ideas, and more generally on his interpretation of the Gospels, in his *The Gospel according to St. Bernard Shaw*, published posthumously in a first limited edition in 1953 (Barstow: Thelema Publishing Company, 1953), and then as *Crowley on Christ*, ed. Francis King (London: The C.W. Daniel Company, 1974). About Crowley's attitudes toward Christianity, see Pasi, "L'anticristianesimo." All the "Magi" listed by Crowley are considered by him also as "Saints" of his Gnostic Catholic Church.
 35. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 75.
 36. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 68.
 37. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 74. "ALLH" is obviously an alternative transliteration of "Allāh," the Arabic word for "God."
 38. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 74.
 39. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 74.
 40. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 74.
 41. Crowley, *Liber Aleph*, 74.
 42. Incidentally, it should be noted that the first part of the *shahāda* ("no god") is actually *lā 'ilāha*, where the word for "god" is with one "l," not with two as in "la allh."
 43. The "Liber Oz" is a one-page pamphlet that was printed and distributed by Crowley during the Second World War: Aleister Crowley, *Liber LXXVII. Oz* (Rainbow Valley: OTO, 1941). Interestingly enough, the

text was probably written by Crowley around 1918/1919 (the same period in which he was writing the *Liber Aleph*) and included in the revised ritual for the II degree of the OTO, to which we will return. See Theodor Reuss and Aleister Crowley, *O.T.O. Rituals and Sex Magick* (Thame: I-H-O Books, 1999), 202. As we will see, the setting of the ritual is in the Egyptian desert, where the Sultan Saladin has set his camp. By implication, one would have to assume that the core political and social values of Thelema are perfectly consonant to an Islamic context, as opposed to a Christian one.

44. Aleister Crowley, "Liber Legis. The Comment," *The Equinox* I no.7 (March 1912): 400.
45. On Crowley and Nietzsche, see Pasi, "L'anticristianesimo," 62–64.
46. Muhammad Iqbal, *Javid-Nama* (London: Routledge, 2011).
47. Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 89–90.
48. Iqbal, *Javid-Nama*, 112, vv. 2738–2739.
49. Iqbal, *Javid-Nama*, 113, vv. 2743–2744.
50. Iqbal, *Javid-Nama*, 112, vv. 2708–2709, and 2719. See also Suleyman Bachir Diagne, *Comment philosophe en Islam?* (Paris: Philippe Rey—Jimsaan, 2014), 135; and Massimo Campanini, *I giorni di Dio. Il viaggio e il tempo tra Occidente e Islam* (Milan: Mimesis, 2019), 138–142.
51. III: 52.
52. Aleister Crowley, *The Law Is For All, An Extended Commentary on the Book of the Law*, ed. Israel Regardie (Phoenix: New Falcon Publications, 1993), 301–302.
53. See Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).
54. Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism. From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 98–101. See also John V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad. Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 150–154; and Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 51–58.
55. For an overview of the history of the OTO, see Marco Pasi, "Ordo Templi Orientis," in: Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 898–906. For a more comprehensive study, focusing especially on the origins and early period, see Richard Kaczynski, *Forgotten Templars: The Untold Origins of Ordo Templi Orientis* (n.p., Printed for the author, 2012). Also useful, if often chaotic and biased in its treatment, is the vast amount of material on the history of the OTO published by Peter-R. König, whose most recent systematization can be found in *Der O.T.O. Phänomen*

- Reload*, 3 vv. (Munich: Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Religions- und Weltanschauungsfragen, 2011).
56. See Kaczynski, *Forgotten Templars*, 271–276.
 57. Kaczynski, *Forgotten Templars*, 119–172. On the history of the Egyptian rites, see Gérard Galtier, *Maçonnerie Égyptienne Rose Croix et Néo-Chevalerie. Les Fils de Cagliostro* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1989); and Serge Caillet, *La franc-maçonnerie égyptienne de Memphis-Misraïm* (Paris: Dervy, 2003).
 58. Kaczynski, *Forgotten Templars*, 271–272. See also Richard Kaczynski, “Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation: The Social and Literary Background of Aleister Crowley’s Magick,” in *Aleister Crowley*, ed. Bogdan and Starr, 148–150.
 59. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 656.
 60. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 656.
 61. Kaczynski, “Continuing Knowledge,” 152–156.
 62. For the text of the rituals, see Reuss and Crowley, *O.T.O. Rituals*; and Francis King, ed., *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.* (London: The C.W. Daniel Company, 1973). See also above, n. 44.
 63. On the neo-Templar tradition in Freemasonry and occultism, see René Le Forestier, *La Franc-Maçonnerie templière et occultiste aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*, 2 vv. (Paris: La Table d’Émeraude 1987); Peter Partner, *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and their Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 87–180; and Pierre Mollier, “Neo-Templar Traditions,” in Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 849–853.
 64. Partner, *The Murdered Magicians*, 34–35, 68, and 77–78.
 65. Partner, *The Murdered Magicians*. See also Zrinka Stahuljak, *Pornographic Archaeology. Medicine, Medievalism, and the Invention of the French Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 71–80.
 66. Aleister Crowley, “The Scorpion,” *The Equinox* I, no. 6 (September 1911): 67–107. See also Crowley, *The Confessions*, 656.
 67. Crowley, “The Scorpion,” 107.
 68. See also above n. 44. On the Hiram legend, see Henrik Bogdan, “Freemasonry and Western Esotericism,” in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A.M. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 296–301; and Jan A.M. Snoek, “The Evolution of the Hiram Legend in England and France,” *Heredom* 11 (2003): 11–53. Interestingly enough, the influential twentieth-century Sufi Idries Shah (1924–1996) also mentions an analogy between al-Hallaj and Hiram Abif, while discussing possible historical connections between Sufis, Templars, and Freemasons. See Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (London: The Octagon Press, 1999), 399. Shah may have been familiar with Crowley’s OTO rituals through his acquaint-

- tance with Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), the founder of Wicca (see Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 210). Gardner had met Crowley and had joined the OTO in the 1940s.
69. See Patrick D. Bowen, “Abdullah Quilliam and the Rise of International Esoteric-Masonic Islamophilia,” in Jamie Gilham and Ron Geaves (eds), *Victorian Muslim. Abdullah Quilliam and Islam in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25–39. See also Patrick D. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States, Volume 1. White American Muslims before 1975* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 115–138.
 70. Bowen, “Abdullah Quilliam and the Rise,” 27. See also Angel Millar, *The Crescent and the Compass: Islam, Freemasonry, Esotericism, and Revolution in the Modern Age* (n.p.: Numen Books, 2015), 65–76. Sedgwick, in his *Western Sufism*, does not mention Quilliam at all, which seems to confirm his irrelevance for the history of Sufism in the West.
 71. Bowen, “Abdullah Quilliam and the Rise,” 36–37. See also Crowley’s account of the events in [Aleister Crowley], “In memoriam—John Yarker,” *The Equinox* I, no. 10 (September 1913): xix–xxix.
 72. Bowen, “Abdullah Quilliam and the Rise,” 36.
 73. For an overview of OTO’s history after Crowley, see Marco Pasi, “Ordo Templi Orientis,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al., 905–906. On Crowley’s letters to McMurtry concerning the Caliphate, see “The Grady McMurtry Project,” <https://blazingstar-oto.org/gradymcmurtry/letters/aleister-crowley-mcmurtry-correspondence/>, accessed December 4, 2020. See also J. Edward Cornelius, “Letter Files,” <http://www.cornelius93.com/Grady-LetterFiles-MainPage.html>, accessed May 28, 2020.
 74. Some scholars have given attention to Crowley’s interest in Burton’s works and fascination for his persona. Some have done it while having Burton as the focus of their research, such as Colette Colligan; some others while focusing on Crowley, such as Alex Owen, Richard Kaczynski, and Massimo Introvigne. See Colligan, “‘A Race of Born Pederasts:’ Sir Richard Burton, Homosexuality, and the Arabs,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 25, no. 1 (2003): 11–13; Ead., *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2006): 85–86; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 189–190, and 203–206; Kaczynski, “Continuing Knowledge,” 152–156; and Introvigne, “The Beast and the Prophet. Aleister Crowley’s Fascination with Joseph Smith,” in Bogdan and Starr (eds.), *Aleister Crowley*, 267–268.
 75. Richard F. Burton, (ed.), *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana* (Benares: Kama Shastra Society, 1883); Richard F. Burton, ed., *The Book of Thousand*

- Nights and a Night* (Benares: Printed by the Burton Club for Private Subscribers Only, 1885–1888, 16 vol).
76. The critical bibliography on Burton, which includes at least a dozen biographies, is now very extensive. For my purpose here, I have particularly taken into account Dane Kennedy's important study, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Jean-François Gournay, "L'appel du Proche Orient. Richard Francis Burton et son temps 1821–1890" (PhD diss., Université de Paris IV, Lille, 1983). Both interpret Burton against the broad cultural and social context of his time.
77. Just a couple of quotations from Crowley's autobiography: "Burton was always my hero," and "I went toward China ... I was (after all) treading, though reverently and afar off, in the footsteps of my boyhood's hero, Richard Francis Burton" (Crowley, *The Confessions*, 327 and 460). Under the pseudonym "Reverend P.D. Carey" Crowley wrote an essay on Burton, in which he expressed all his admiration for him. The text was apparently never published during Crowley's lifetime and appeared for the first time in 2014: see Reverend P.D. Carey (Aleister Crowley), "Sir Richard Francis Burton," in *Mystery of Mystery: A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism* (Maple Grove: Ordo Templi Orientis USA, 2014), 252–258. The text is not dated, but was probably written in the period of the First World War, which Crowley spent in the United States. It is no coincidence that Reverend Carey is also one of the pseudonyms used by Crowley in his pornographic book *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz* (1910), strongly inspired by Burton and to which I will return.
78. On Eckenstein, see Thomas S. Blakeney and D. F. O. Dangar, "Oscar Eckenstein, 1859–1921," *The Alpine Journal*, 65 no. 300 (May 1960): 62–79; and John Gill, *The Origins of Bouldering: An Informal Survey of Sport from the Late 1800s to the 1960s and Beyond* (n.p.: J. Gill-Blurb, 2008), 9–28. Another indirect, but significant, connection between Crowley and Burton should be mentioned: Leonard Smithers, the publisher with whom Burton collaborated for his translations of a series of Latin erotic texts, the so-called *Priapeia*. Smithers later became the main publisher of the British Decadent movement and a close associate of figures such as Aubrey Beardsley and Arthur Symons. It is not surprising that Crowley, also close to the Decadent movement in his student years at Cambridge, turned to Smithers in order to have some of his poetical works published. See D. Kennedy, "Oriental Muck Heap," 321; and James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, and Dowson* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), *passim*.

79. This is the Sir William Martin Conway's Karakoram expedition of 1892. See Blakeney and Dangar, "Oscar Eckenstein, 1859–1921," 64–65.
80. See Nancy Charley, "Oscar Eckenstein and Richard Burton," 29 July 2016. Text available online from the SAR website: <http://royalasiaticsocty.org/oscar-eckenstein-and-richard-burton>, accessed October 3, 2016.
81. In the dedication, Burton is defined as "the perfect pioneer of spiritual and physical adventures" (Crowley, *The Confessions*, 27). Apart from Burton, Eckenstein, and Bennett, grouped together and referred to as "Three Immortal Memories," the dedication also includes "Three Friends": the mathematician J.W.N. Sullivan, the painter Augustus John, and the publisher P.R. Stephensen. Of these six, Burton is the only one Crowley never met personally. Also noteworthy is a passage in the *Confessions* where Crowley says that, when he left Cambridge University in 1898, "Sir Richard Burton was my hero and Eckenstein his modern representative" (ibid., 166).
82. See O.T.O. (Aleister Crowley), "Liber XV," 261.
83. I draw attention to this aspect of Crowley's work and personality in Pasi, *Aleister Crowley*, 24–25.
84. For Burton as a "cultural crossdresser," see Colette Colligan, "'Esoteric Pornography': Sir Richard Burton's Arabian Nights and the Origins of Pornography," *Victorian Review* 28, no. 2 (2002): 53. In Crowley's *Confessions* we find other anecdotes of cultural crossdressing with explicit reference to Burton, and also in relation to other religious contexts, such as Hinduism. See for instance the famous episode in which Crowley sat with only "a loincloth and a begging bowl" close to the famous temples of Madurai, in South India, in order to have access to their inner parts, normally forbidden to Europeans. He was eventually "allowed to enter some of the secret shrines," where he sacrificed a goat to the goddess Bhavani (*The Confessions*, 254–255).
85. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 388.
86. Richard F. Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (London: Tylston and Edwards, 1893), 5–6. See also Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 70–72.
87. Edward Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: C. Knight and Co., 1836). Lane is also the author, like Burton, of an English translation of the Arabian Nights.
88. Another famous example of a "cultural crossdresser" in an Arab context, this time contemporary to Crowley, is that of T.E. Lawrence. This example is also mentioned by Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 204.
89. See Said, *Orientalism*, 160–161.

90. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 387. The *talwar* is a curved sword typical of the Indian Subcontinent.
91. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 388.
92. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 625–626. Significantly, Crowley mentions Burton a few lines before as an inspiration for his behavior on this occasion.
93. Richard F. Burton (ed.), *The Perfumed Garden of the Sheikh Nefzaoui. A Manual of Arabian Erotology (XVI. Century)* (Benares: Kama Shastra Society, 1886); Burton, *The Kama Sutra*.
94. See Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
95. On this point, see also Marco Pasi, “But What Does Esotericism Have To Do With Sex?,” in *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 207–215; Hendrik Bogdan, “Challenging the Morals of Western Society: The Use of Ritualized Sex in Contemporary Occultism,” *The Pomegranate* 8, no. 2 (2006): 211–246; and Hugh B. Urban, “The Beast with Two Backs. Aleister Crowley, Sex Magic and the Exhaustion of Modernity,” *Nova Religio. The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 3 (2004): 7–25.
96. See John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1996), in particular ch. X, “The Coming of the Nusa’iri.”
97. Ari Adut, “A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (July 2005): 213–248.
98. See Colligan, “A Race of Born Pederasts,” 85–86.
99. It should be noted that the distinction between the Arab world and Islam is not always clear or reflected in this context.
100. See Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 42–43, 128 and 183. See also Marco Pasi, “The Neverendingly Told Story: Recent Biographies of Aleister Crowley,” *Aries. Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 3, no. 2 (2003): 233.
101. [Aleister Crowley], *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz. Translated from a rare Indian Ms. by the Late Major Lutiy* (London: Privately Printed, 1910). See the interesting analysis in Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 279–286. Crowley usually refers to this book with the title *Bagh-i-Muattar*, which is the transliteration of the Persian inscription

- appearing on the frontispiece. It has been reprinted in 1991 by Teitan Press (Chicago) with an introduction by Martin P. Starr.
102. [Burton], *The Perfumed Garden*.
 103. It should be noted that this point, although quite obvious, has escaped some researchers, who have thought that Crowley's book is a real translation of an original Persian text. See for instance Colligan, "A Race of Born Pederasts," 11–12.
 104. See Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 71. Burton continued to use the name as a pseudonym also after his trip to Mecca, for instance when writing letters to friends. In 1875 he would also organize weekly smoking parties in London known as "Haji Abdullah's Divan" (*ibid.*, 197). As we will see, Burton also uses a similar pseudonym, "Hājī Abdū El-Yezdi," in his poem *The Kas̄dah* (1880).
 105. See Dane Kennedy and Burke E. Casari, "Burnt Offerings: Isabel Burton and 'The Scented Garden' manuscript," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 2, no. 2 (1997): 229–244.
 106. Richard F. Burton, "D. Pederasty," in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* 10 (Benares: Printed by the Kama-Shastra Society for Private Subscribers Only, 1885), 205–254. Note that the term "homosexuality" at the time had not gained wide currency yet, and that "pederasty" was a much more common term.
 107. See Stephen O. Murray, "Some Nineteenth-Century Reports of Islamic Homosexualities," in *Islamic Homosexualities. Culture, History, and Literature*, ed. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 211–217.
 108. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 451–452. See also Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, 283; and Millar, *The Crescent and the Compass*, 45–47.
 109. See Mandakini Dubey, "Esotericism and Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narrative Initiations" (PhD Diss. Duke University, 2003), 127–140. See 131 for the idea of a "sodomystical language" of Persian Sufi poetry that Western readers struggled to interpret and come to terms to.
 110. Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 206–208.
 111. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 83–96.
 112. Jeng-Guo S. Chen, "Gendering India: Effeminacy and the Scottish Enlightenment's Debates over Virtue and Luxury," *The Eighteenth Century* 51, no. 1–2 (Spring-Summer 2010): 193–201.
 113. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 540.
 114. Richard F. Burton, "Notes on Waitz's Anthropology," *The Anthropological Review* 2, no. 7 (November 1864): 248. See also Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 80.
 115. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 388.

116. On the Aïssawa, see Mehdi Nabti, *Les Aïssawa: Soufisme, musique et rituels de transe au Maroc* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011).
117. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 550–552.
118. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 552.
119. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 445.
120. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 451.
121. Richard F. Burton, *The Kas̄dah (couplets) of Hājī Abdū Al-Yazdi. A Lay of the Higher Law. Translated and Annotated by His Friend and Pupil, F. B.* (London: H.J. Cook, 1900 or. ed.: 1880).
122. On Burton's use of the trope of the "pseudo-translator" of a literary work (while being the actual author), and with observations that could be easily applied also to Crowley's *Scented Garden*, see Glyn Pursglove, "Fakery, Serious Fun, and Cultural Change: Some Motives of the Pseudo-Translator," *Hermēneus. Revista de Traducción e Interpretación*, 13 (2011): 1–16. See also Dubey, "Esotericism and Orientalism," 109–113.
123. For Crowley's appreciation of *The Kas̄dah* see Crowley, "Sir Richard Francis Burton." It should be noted that Crowley also recommends its reading to aspirants of his occult order, the A.∴A.∴. See the "Curriculum of the A.∴A.∴" in: Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 213.
124. See Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 121–125.
125. It should be noted that Burton claimed to have been initiated to Sufism and to have become a "Master-Sufi." About this claim and more generally about his interest in Islam and Sufism, see Mary S. Lovell *A Rage to Live. A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton* (London: Abacus, 2004), 84–86; and Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 80–83.
126. On the philosophical ideas expressed in *The Kas̄dah*, see Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 195–205; Dubey, "Esotericism and Orientalism," 98–127; and Gournay, "L'appel du Proche Orient," 407–447.
127. Burton, *The Kas̄dah*, 3.
128. Burton, *The Kas̄dah*, 8.
129. Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, 200.
130. Crowley, *The Scented Garden*, 13.
131. Crowley, *The Scented Garden*, 13.
132. Crowley, *Magick Without Tears*, 81.
133. Burton, *The Kas̄dah*, 18–19. This is also noted by Burton's wife, Isabel, in her preface to the 1900 edition: "It is a poem of extraordinary power, on the Nature and Destiny of Man, anti-Christian and Pantheistic" (Isabel Burton, "Preface," in *The Kas̄dah*, ed. Burton, 4).
134. See Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, for examples of the Sufis being perceived as freethinkers (p. 111), pantheists (p. 131), and sodomites (p. 131). Sedgwick does not mention either Crowley or Burton in the book. Their

ideas however clearly belong to the history of Western esoteric perceptions of Sufism.

135. On Crowley and Guénon (and more generally Guénonian traditionalism), see Pasi, *Aleister Crowley*, 129–136.
136. Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World. Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 74–80.
137. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*.
138. Millar, *The Crescent and the Compass*.