

THE YOGA OF SEX:  
TANTRA, ORIENTALISM, AND SEX MAGIC  
IN THE ORDO TEMPLI ORIENTIS

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In this time the East (which is now the mightiest representative of so-called Paganism) has conquered the West in bloody battle. After this Westerners can no longer sneer about “wild Pagans in faraway Asia,” rather they should think about the future when . . . the peoples of India . . . will knock at the doors of Europe. Then we will see if the Christian religion has left the people of the West enough belief in God and enough resistance to successfully reject the intruding masses of Asia, who serve the sex cult. To give our European Christian people such an inner resistance . . . a new kind of belief in God must be rooted in their hearts. If in the place of today’s extreme unbelief a real living belief in a divinity could occur then it would not be bad if this belief was embodied in a phallus cult of some sort.

Theodor Reuss, *Lingam-Yoni* (1906)

[F]or the last 150 years . . . we have been orientalizing; in reality, it is precisely because the whole world is Westernizing that the West is becoming more permeable to Indian philosophy, to African art . . . to Arabic mysticism.

Michel Foucault (Interview, 1967)

Since their first discovery of the complex body of texts and traditions known as “Tantra,” Western authors have been at once horrified and tantalized, scandalized and titillated, by this seemingly exotic form of Eastern spirituality. Above all, Western authors have been particularly obsessed with the use of sexual rituals in Tantric practice—phenomenon that was a source of disgusted revulsion for most Christian missionaries and Orientalist scholars, even as it was a source of erotic allure for many European esoteric groups. By the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, Tantra had begun to be appropriated by various European authors and increasingly fused with Western methods of sexual magic.

Today, if we browse the shelves of Barnes and Noble or surf the various occultist websites now saturating cyber-space, we find that sexual magic is very commonly associated, and often wholly identified, with Tantra. One need only run a Google-search on “sex magic” to come up with several hundred web-sites such as “SACRED SEX: Karezza, Tantra, and Sex Magic,” “TantraMagic.com,” and “Developmental Techniques for Tantra/Sex Magic,” most of which are based on a fundamental equation of Western sexual magic with Asian Tantra. In fact, the more erotically-challenged among us may now consult the *Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tantric Sex*, a fully-illustrated step-by-step manual for Tantric sex magic and its manifold benefits.<sup>1</sup> The more adventurous among us, however, might browse the much darker work by Nikolas and Zeena Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*. Presented as a neo-Tantric left-hand path adapted to the needs of the twenty-first century West, *Demons of the Flesh* begins from the principle that “SEX IS POWER,” and promises to unveil the secrets of “Sadomasochism, Orgies, Taboo-breaking, Fetishism, Orgasm prolongation, Sexual vampirism, Ritual intercourse with divine and demonic entities, Awakening the Feminine Daemonic,” as well as “Erotic deprogramming and deconditioning.”<sup>2</sup>

But what, if anything, do the Asian traditions of Tantra have to do with sexual magic as it is understood in the modern West? Not much really, but quite a lot accidentally. By this I mean that the early forms of Tantra that emerged in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of India, China, Tibet, and Japan have little in common with the forms of sexual magic that emerged in Europe and America since the nineteenth century. And yet, since the late nineteenth century, the newly-imported forms of Tantra would be progressively melded and often hopelessly confused with Western forms of sexual magic.<sup>3</sup>

As most modern scholars agree, the term “Tantra” or “Tantrism” does not refer to a singular, monolithic, or neatly-defined entity; instead, it is a rather messy and ambiguous term used to refer to a huge array of texts, traditions, sects, and ritual practices that spread throughout the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain communities of South and East Asia

<sup>1</sup> “Sex magic is an advanced art of Tantric lovemaking... [T]he phrase technically refers to creating what you want through Tantric union” (Kuriansky, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide*, 196).

<sup>2</sup> Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*. This list is from the back cover advertisement.

<sup>3</sup> See Urban, *Tantra*, chapter 6.

from roughly the fifth century onward. As André Padoux argues, the abstract category of “Tantrism”—as a singular, unified “ism”—is itself a relatively recent invention and in large part the creation of western Orientalist scholars writings in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> And surely the identification of Tantrism with “sexual magic” is a very recent idea. There is indeed a long tradition of sexual practice throughout the Indian Tantric schools since at least the fifth or sixth century; and yet these Indian sexual rites bear little if any resemblance to the various forms of “spiritual sex” and “sexual magic” now being marketed in New Age bookstores or on the infinite array of cyber-sexual web sites now proliferating on the Internet.<sup>5</sup>

So how then did the complex body of traditions known as Tantra come to be mingled, combined, and fused with Western sexual magic? And how did it come to be identified primarily with sensual gratification and sexual liberation? To answer this question, I think we need to look at the earliest Western scholarship on Tantra from the nineteenth century and then examine the complex process through which Tantra was appropriated by a Western popular audience at the turn of the twentieth century.

As Richard King has argued in *Orientalism and Religion*, Western scholars of the nineteenth century consistently imagined India as a land of transcendental mysticism and other-worldly spirituality, set in contrast to the “this-worldly” and politically-active West. Rather strangely, however, King makes absolutely no reference either to the role of sexuality in mysticism or to the category of Tantra. But in fact, I will argue, Tantra was a crucial element in the Orientalist imagining of India and a key part of the modern imagining of mysticism, particularly in its darkest, most dangerous and aberrant forms.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Padoux, “Tantrism”; Urban, “The Extreme Orient.”

<sup>5</sup> See White, *Kiss of the Yogini*.

<sup>6</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion*, chapter 5. King lucidly examines the “romantic and exotic fantasies of Indian religions as deeply mystical, introspective and otherworldly in nature” (p. 142); yet he strangely never mentions Tantra or anything relating to sexuality. I can only conclude that this is because the presence of Tantra would undermine his central thesis—namely, that Indian mysticism was imagined as something other-worldly, transcendent and identified with Vedanta and other highly philosophical schools. The intense sensuality of Tantra in the Orientalist imagination would seem to contradict this thesis. However, I would suggest that Tantra came to represent, for both Indian and European authors, mysticism in its most degenerate form—a kind of mysticism that had been corrupted with sensual desire and this worldly-power. See Urban, Tantra and “The Extreme Orient.”

As Michel Foucault has observed, this period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—roughly the period of the Victorian era in England—was by no means simply the age of sexual repression and prudery that we now commonly imagine it to have been. On the contrary, the late nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented explosion of discourse about sexuality, which was now categorized, classified, and described in endless titillating detail. Above all, there was a special interest in sexuality in its “deviant” or “transgressive” forms, such as homosexuality, masturbation, and other non-reproductive acts.<sup>7</sup> The new interest in Tantra and other exotic sexual techniques from the “mystical Orient” was part of this larger Western interest in the power of sexuality in its transgressive forms. Many European men and women of the late nineteenth century, it would seem, were working through their own deep ambivalence surrounding sexuality and religion; and they found in Tantra a wonderfully “other” form of spirituality—a kind of empty mirror onto which they could project their own most intense anxieties, fears, hopes, and forbidden desires.<sup>8</sup> For many Orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries, Tantra was reviled as the most perverse and depraved confusion of sexuality and religion, sensual indulgence, and spiritual ideals. Yet for many other authors of the late- and post-Victorian era, Tantra seemed to represent an exhilarating freedom from the oppressive prudery of nineteenth-century Christian society.

In this chapter, I will examine Tantra’s complex journey to the West in the nineteenth century through one of the most important and today little-known esoteric groups of this era, the Ordo Templi Orientis. Founded by Theodor Reuss in the early twentieth century, the O.T.O. was not only one of the earliest European groups to take a serious interest in Tantra; more importantly, it was also one of the first to meld the Indian traditions of yoga and Tantra with Western methods of sexual magic, such as the techniques taught by Paschal Beverly Randolph. We will see, however, that the O.T.O. would take

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. See also Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*; Anderson, *When Passion Reigned*.

<sup>8</sup> As Benavides comments in his study of Giuseppe Tucci, one of the great scholars of Buddhist Tantra, “The vision of the Orient nurtured by these intellectuals was in most cases a screen upon which they could project their own understanding of the Occident: either the triumphant discovery that the West was superior to the East, or the melancholy realization that the East possessed a magic no longer present in West” (“Giuseppe Tucci,” 162).

these sexual techniques in a very different direction than any Indian Tantrika would have imagined. For Reuss and the O.T.O., the sexual rites of Tantra were imagined as the means to achieve not just liberating spiritual experience, but the birth of a whole new social order. Finally, for the O.T.O.'s most infamous member, Aleister Crowley, these sexual techniques were imagined as the means to destroy the old, dying world of the Christian West and usher in a new era of human history. In either case, these Western appropriations of Tantra are not so much the product of any actual Indian tradition as they are reflections of the Orientalist fantasies and sexual obsessions of modern Western society itself.

*Sexual Union and Ritual Impurity in Hindu Shakta Tantra*

The one who is hesitant in drinking [wine] or is disgusted by semen and menstrual blood is mistaken about what is [in fact] pure and undefiled; thus he fears committing a sin in the act of sexual union. He should be dismissed—for how can he worship the Goddess, and how can he recite Chandi's *mantra*?

Krishnananda Agamavagisha, *Brihat-Tantrasara*  
(sixteenth century)

The Goddess is fond of the vulva and penis, fond of the nectar of vulva and penis. Therefore one should fully worship the Goddess with the drinking of the virile fluid and by taking pleasure in the wife of another man, as well as with the nectar of the vulva and penis.

*Kaulavalirnaya* (sixteenth century)

So just what is Tantra, anyway? The word itself is derived from the Sanskrit root *tan*, “to weave, stretch or spread,” and has been used throughout Indian history with a wide range of meanings. It appears from the earliest Sanskrit texts, the Vedas, to denote everything from a loom or weaving machine, to a system of philosophy, to an army, row or series, to a drug or remedy.<sup>9</sup> Most commonly *tantra* is used to refer to a particular text—though one that may not necessarily contain the sorts of titillating things we normally associate with “Tantra” (nor are all “Tantric” texts called *tantras*).

<sup>9</sup> See Urban, *Tantra*, 23–43; Padoux, “Tantrism.”

According to most popular literature on Tantra in the United States today, Tantra is defined primarily as spiritual sex or the use of sexual techniques to achieve higher consciousness and/or optimal orgasms (“nookie nirvana,” as *Cosmopolitan* magazine recently defined it).<sup>10</sup> According to neo-Tantric guru, Margo Anand, Tantra allows one to achieve “the feeling of lightness and joy that arises during ecstatic lovemaking, a sense of ‘dancing in the sky,’ that comes when we bring the quality of meditative awareness to our orgasmic power.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Tantra in the West is also often identified not just with sex, but more specifically with *sexual liberation*—above all, liberation from the prudery and repression of Christian society. As the Schrecks put it in *Demons of the Flesh*, the Tantric adept is “the gleeful transgressor of all accepted boundaries,” who joyfully overthrows the “distorted psychosexual conditions that the past centuries of Christian dominance have engendered.”<sup>12</sup>

And yet in most Asian traditions Tantra is generally understood less in term of “sex” than in terms of *power or energy*. That is, it is a series of teachings and techniques aimed at awakening, harnessing, and utilizing the spiritual power believed to flow through the entire cosmos and the human body. Thus, as White defines it, Tantra is

that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.<sup>13</sup>

In the Hindu Tantric traditions, this energy is typically identified as *shakti*—the power that creates, sustains, and destroys the universe—but it is also the power that flows through the social and political world, as well. Tantric ritual seeks to harness and exploit this power, both as a means to spiritual liberation and as a means to this-worldly benefits, such as wealth, fame, and supernatural abilities. As Douglas Brooks summarizes, “The Tantrika conceives of the world as power. The

<sup>10</sup> Collins, “The Secret to Tantric Sex,” 240. “The result is both an *out of body bond* with your partner plus *very physical* ecstatic orgasms... Grab your guy and get ready for a trip toward erotic enlightenment” (ibid.).

<sup>11</sup> Anand, *Art of Sexual Magic*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*, 41, 141.

<sup>13</sup> White, *Tantra in Practice*, 9.

world is nothing but power to be harnessed.”<sup>14</sup> Sexual union (*maithuna*) is indeed used in some traditions as one method to awaken and harness this power; but it is by no means the only, or even usually the most important, technique employed in Tantric ritual. And when it is used, it is typically restricted to closely guarded esoteric rituals and surrounded by severe warnings about the dangers of its abuse. In the words of one of the most famous and influential medieval texts, the *Kularnava Tantra*,

What I tell you must be kept with great secrecy. This must not be given to just anyone. It must only be given to a devoted disciple. It will be death to any others.

If liberation could be attained simply by having intercourse with a [female partner], all living beings in the world would be liberated just by having intercourse with women.<sup>15</sup>

Many forms of Tantric practice do involve explicit forms of ritual transgression. Consumption of meat and wine, and in some cases sexual intercourse in violation of class laws, can be employed as a means of awakening and harnessing the awesome power or *shakti* that flows through all things. Yet at the same time, Tantra is really by no means the subversive, anti-social force that many Western readers imagine it to be. On the contrary, it is in most cases a highly *conservative* tradition, which ultimately re-asserts the ritual authority and social status of male brahmins. Social and sexual taboos are typically only violated in highly controlled ritual contexts and are generally re-asserted—indeed, *reinforced*—outside the boundaries of esoteric ritual: “Anti-caste statements should never be read outside their ritual context. Returned to ordinary life, no high caste Tantric would think of breaking social taboos... The ritual egalitarianism of Tantrism in practice acted as a caste-confirming... force.”<sup>16</sup>

Not only is there a vast diversity of different texts, sects, rituals, and traditions that fall under the general category of “Tantra,” but there is also a huge diversity of opinion about the role of sexual union in Tantric practice. Various Tantric schools—and various modern scholars of Tantra—differ widely over the most basic questions: for example, is sexual union meant to be understood literally and performed physically, or is

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom*, xix. See Urban, *Tantra*, Introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Avalon, ed., *Kularnava Tantra*, II.4, II.117.

<sup>16</sup> Gupta et al., *Hindu Tantrism*, 32. On this point, see Urban, “The Power of the Impure”; Sanderson “Purity and Power.”

it to be understood symbolically and used merely as a symbol for the union of divine masculine and feminine energies? Should orgasm occur, or should orgasm be avoided? Should the semen be emitted during union, or should it be withheld and sublimated inwardly? Does the female partner have an active role in the union, or is she a mere tool or “flower” from which the “nectar” is collected and then cast aside? Some schools call for a difficult act of seminal retention and sublimation during the rite; others use an even more complex procedure called the *vajrolī mudra*, which involves not only seminal retention but actually the sucking or withdrawal of the female sexual fluids out of the woman’s body into the male body (what some call the “fountain pen technique”); and others reject the physical act of union altogether in favor of a purely symbolic understanding of divine union.<sup>17</sup>

As David Gordon White argues, one of the oldest Tantric schools, the Kaula (from *kula*, lineage or family), centered around the oral consumption of sexual fluids. By consuming the combined semen and vaginal fluids, the initiate was literally “incorporated” into the esoteric lineage, physically infused with its most powerful essence: “the Tantric Virile Hero generated and partook of his own and his consort’s vital fluids in a ‘eucharistic’ ritual, whose ultimate consumer was the Goddess herself, who pleased, would afford the supernatural enjoyments and powers the practitioner sought.”<sup>18</sup>

In India generally, bodily fluids, and above all sexual fluids, are considered dangerous and potentially polluting, as the ambivalent leftovers that overflow the boundaries of the physical body.<sup>19</sup> In the Tantric rite, however, the sexual fluids are the ultimate source of power. According to the sixteenth century *Bīrhat Tantrasara* (“the Great Essence of the Tantras”), the combined sexual fluids become the *kula dravya* or “clan substance,” which is the most awesome and dangerous of substances. It is the powerful “remnant” (*ucchishṭa*) of the “sexual sacrifice:”

With the sacrificial elements, the semen, unbroken grains of rice, perfume, flowers, he should worship the Goddess in the vagina... With incense, lamps and various food offerings, the Kula adept should honor her in various ways, and then he should [consume] the remnants himself.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities*, 51–52.

<sup>18</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yōgini*, 73–74.

<sup>19</sup> “Indian traditions have always viewed sexual fluids, and most particularly the uterine or menstrual blood, as polluting, powerful, and therefore dangerous substances” (White, *Kiss of the Yōgini*, 67). See also Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 114–122.

<sup>20</sup> Agamavagisha, *Bīrhat Tantrasara*, 703.



This *kula dravya* or “remnant” of the Tantric feast is surrounded with an aura of power and danger. If consumed outside the secret ritual, it will send one to the most terrible of hells: “apart from the time of worship, one must never touch a naked *shakti*. And apart from the period of worship, the nectar must never be drunk by adepts. Touching it, their lives are lost, and drinking it, they would go to hell. Thus is the Kula worship.”<sup>21</sup> But once placed in a sacrificial vessel and consecrated by the Goddess, the *kula dravya* is transformed into divine nectar, *amrita*. By consuming this nectar, the Tantrika will enjoy supreme bliss and fulfillment of all worldly and otherworldly desires.

Then with great effort, he must obtain the precious Kula nectar. For with that divine nectar, all [the gods] are pleased. Whatever the wise man desires, he will immediately attain... Having purified the Kula substance, which has the nature of Shiva and Shakti, O Beloved, and having deposited this nectar of life, which is of the nature of the Supreme Brahman, in a sacrificial vessel, [he attains] the eternally blameless state free of all distinctions.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, the Tantric rite of *maithuna* and the consumption of the combined sexual fluids is a profoundly transgressive act—an act that must be surrounded with an intense secrecy, and one that would destroy those who undertake it without proper intention or ritual controls. And surely much of its power derives precisely from its transgressive character. Like the sexual fluids themselves, these rites are surrounded with an aura of impurity and danger; but the Tantrik hero (*vira*) who dares to engage in them can transcend the mundane boundaries that limit ordinary human beings. As Alexis Sanderson observes, the aim of this transgression is precisely to attain a kind of “unfettered super-agency through the assimilation of their lawless power in occult manipulations of impurity.”<sup>23</sup>

That being said, however, the sort of “transgression” described in Tantric texts like the *Kaulajñananirnaya* or the *Bīḥat Tantrasara* is hardly a matter of socio-political transgression or a subversion of the larger status quo. In most cases it is quite the reverse. As Douglas Brooks argues, the highly esoteric transgressions of Tantric ritual typically served not to undermine the class system or *brahman* authority, but on the contrary

<sup>21</sup> *Bīḥat Tantrasara*, 704.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

<sup>23</sup> Sanderson, “Purity and Power,” 200–201. See Urban, “The Power of the Impure.”

to re-assert them. That is to say, they re-affirmed the authority of male *brahmins* as ritual experts who were skillful enough to handle the dangerous power unleashed by ritual impurity: “Tantrism... does not intend to be revolutionary in the sense of establishing a new structure of social egalitarianism... It opens its doors only to a few who... seek to distinguish and empower themselves.”<sup>24</sup> As we see in the case of the most famous Tantrikas like Abhinavagupta, Bhaskararaya or Krishnananda Agamavagisha, most Tantric authors insist that such transgressions were to be carefully restricted to closed ritual contexts; outside of esoteric ritual, the class system and *brahman* authority were to be reaffirmed, perhaps more strongly than ever.

*Tantra in the Orientalist Imagination*

Shaktas usually meet in a forest glade where, by the light of a huge bonfire, they begin the ceremony by getting drunk and eating cow’s flesh. On these nights everything is permissible; Untouchables jostle Kshatriyas, Brahmins dig knives into the remains of the cow, women come from the Zenana and discard their veils... Stretched on the grass with her sari thrown off lies a young girl... who must allow herself to be embraced by all the adepts in turn... The culminating act of this abominable orgy is the slaughter of a young man or woman who, while still alive is torn to pieces by frenzied Shaktas... [I]t is priests and Black Magicians who lead the way... who promise happiness to these poor deranged people who, groaning and screaming, wallow in the bloodstained mire.

Edmond Demaitre, *The Yogis of India* (1937)

From the very cradle of civilization in the temples of Babylon, hidden beneath the seemingly sex-negative creed of Christianity, and in the Western magical revival of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the siren song of the left-hand path calls.

Nikolas and Zeena Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh* (2002)

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities*, 70. See Urban, “The Power of the Impure.”

So if Tantra in its South Asian contexts was originally a highly esoteric tradition that had little to do with sensual abandon or sexual liberation, how then did “Tantra” come to be defined primarily as “spiritual sex” in the modern Western imagination? This shift begins, I think, during the early colonial era, with the first discussion of Indian religions by Christian missionaries and Orientalist scholars in the nineteenth century. The Orientalist interest in the Tantras, I would argue, was a part of the broader concern with sexuality and its aberrations during the Victorian era. As Foucault points out and we have already noted, the nineteenth century was anything but a period of silence and suppression of sex, but rather an era of unprecedented new discourse about sexuality, which was now endlessly described, classified and analyzed as “*the secret*.”<sup>25</sup> Above all, there was a new fascination with sexuality in its socially deviant or perverse forms, which were now categorized in intricate detail. As Richard von Krafft-Ebing suggested in his widely influential text, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the sexual instinct is the most powerful, sublime and potentially dangerous force in human nature, the origin of our religion and ethics as well as our most bizarre perversions:

[S]exual feeling is the basis upon which social advancement is developed. If man were deprived of sexual distinction and the nobler enjoyments arising therefrom, all poetry and . . . moral tendency would be eliminated from his life. . . . Sexual feeling is the root of all ethics, and no doubt of aestheticism and religion. The sublimest virtues . . . spring from sexual life, which, however, on account of its sensual power, may easily degenerate into the lowest passion and basest vice. Love unbridled is a volcano that burns down and lays waste to all around it; it is an abyss that devours all—honor, substance and health.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Krafft-Ebing and other European sexual scientists compiled a vast catalogue of sexual deviations—a sort of “medicoforensic peep-show” of perversions<sup>27</sup>—ranging from homosexuality and sadism to

<sup>25</sup> “The society that emerged in the nineteenth century—the bourgeois capitalist or industrial society . . .—did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harboring a fundamental secret” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 69).

<sup>26</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Kern, *The Culture of Love*, 334–335. As Foucault comments, “[W]hat came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, madmen and women and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias . . . Whence

hypersexuality, necrophilia, polyspermia, nymphomania and spermatorrhea. Among the most “dangerous” aberrations were those that mingled religion and sexuality: “The cause of religious insanity is often to be found in sexual aberration. In psychosis a motley mixture of religious and sexual delusions is observable. . . . The cruel, sensual acts of chastisement, violation, emasculation and even crucifixion, perpetrated by religious maniacs, bear out this assertion.”<sup>28</sup> Thus it is not surprising that many European authors were particularly fascinated, repulsed, and tantalized by the secret rites of the Tantrikas, with their explicit fusion of spiritual power and sensual pleasure.

The early Orientalist authors, such as Sir William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke, actually had relatively little to say about Tantra. It was really not until the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the arrival of Christian missionaries like Rev. William Ward, that Tantra became objects of intense interest and morbid fascination. Above all, the missionaries singled out the sexual element—particularly transgressive sexuality—as the most horrific aspect of Tantra and the clearest evidence of its complete depravity. As Ward put it, “the *tantras*” involve “a most shocking mode of worship” centered around the worship of a naked woman and rites “too abominable to enter the ears of man and impossible to be revealed to a Christian public.”<sup>29</sup>

For later authors like H.H. Wilson and Sir Monier-Williams, Tantra was incorporated into the larger Orientalist narrative of Indo-European history and the decadence of modern India. According to most Orientalist accounts, the history of India was a steady decline from a golden age, comparable to ancient Greece and embodied in the texts of the Vedas, down to a modern era of licentious superstition, embodied in the perverse rites of the Tantras. Throughout nineteenth-century literature, we find Tantra described in the most vivid language as “lust mummery and black magic,” (Brian Hodgson) “nonsensical extravagance and absurd gesticulation,” (H.H. Wilson) and “black art of the crudest and filthiest kind” in which “a veritable devil’s mass is purveyed in various forms.” (D.L. Barnett)<sup>30</sup> By the early twentieth century, as we see in

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the setting apart of the ‘unnatural’ as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality” (*The History of Sexuality*, 38–39).

<sup>28</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Ward, *A View of the History*, v.I, 247. For general discussions of Orientalist scholarship on India, see King, *Orientalism and Religion*; Inden, *Imagining India*.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Avalon, *Principles of Tantra*, 3–5. On Orientalist views of Tantra, see Urban, “The Extreme Orient,” 123–146.

Edmond Demaitre's text cited in the epigraph above, Tantric ritual was believed to be a kind of grotesque fusion of Dionysian *sporagmos*, drunken orgy and witches' *sabbat*.<sup>31</sup>

This identification of Tantra with sexual licentiousness was only further complicated in the late nineteenth century, as Tantra became increasingly confused with various pornographic and sexological literature proliferating in Victorian England. One of the most widely-read (though least original) authors on Tantra was Edward Sellon, who was best known as an author of cheap pornography, such as *The New Epicurean or the Delights of Sex Facetiously and Philosophically Considered in Graphic Letters Addressed to Young Ladies of Quality*. Having served as an Ensign in the Madras infantry as a young man, Sellon was particularly fascinated with the erotic mysteries of the Orient with all its dark skinned "houris." As he described his exploits among the enchanting women of India,

I now commenced a regular course of fucking with native women. The usual charge for the general run of them is two rupees. For five, you may get the handsomest Mohammedan girls, and any of the high caste women who follow the trade of a courtesan. The "fivers" are a very different set of people from its frail sisterhood in European countries... They understand in perfection all the arts of love, are capable of gratifying any tastes, and in face and figure they are unsurpassed by any women in the world...

I have had English, French, German and Polish women of all grades of society, but never, ever did they bear a comparison with those salacious, succulent houris of the far East.<sup>32</sup>

During his time in India, Sellon also learned something of Hindu belief and practice, which he published in his *Annotations upon the Sacred Writings of the Hindus*. Like his description of these dark-skinned, hyper-erotized Indian women, his view of Hinduism only continues the worst Orientalist stereotypes of the dark, mysterious, libidinous East. Above all, his titillating description of Tantric worship—in which "natural restraints are wholly disregarded" and which "terminates with orgies amongst the

<sup>31</sup> Demaitre, *The Yogis of India*, 222–23. Similar accounts can be found in a variety of other authors. According to August Barth, "The use of animal food and spiritous liquors, indulged to in excess, is the rule of the sect... Sakti is worshipped in the person of a naked woman, and the proceedings terminate with the carnal copulation of the initiated... [A] Sakti of the left hand is almost always a hypocrite and a superstitious debauchee" (*The Religions of India*, 199–200).

<sup>32</sup> Sellon, quoted in King, *Sex, Magic and Perversion*, 11.

votaries of a very licentious description”—would become one of the most influential accounts in the late Victorian popular imagination.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, this equation of Tantra with its sexual aspects would become hopelessly confused with the publication of various Sanskrit erotic texts by Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890).<sup>34</sup> Not only did Burton found a small secretive group called the Kama Shastra Society, but he also privately published the *Kama Sutra* (1883) and the *Ananga Ranga* (1885), the first Hindu treatises on love to be translated into English (texts which could not be officially translated until the mid 1960’s). Although the *Kama Sutra* in fact had little if anything to do with Tantra, from Burton’s time on, it would become largely confused and often completely identified with Tantra in the Western popular imagination.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a few brave scholars made an effort to defend and re-valorize Tantra, arguing that there is far more to this ancient tradition than mere illicit sexuality. The most important figure in this moralizing reform of Tantra was John Woodroffe (a.k.a. Arthur Avalon), the enigmatic High Court Judge and secret Tantrika, who made it his life’s work to defend the Tantras against their many critics.<sup>35</sup> In Woodroffe’s rather sanitized, rationalized account, Tantra is a noble philosophical tradition, basically in line with the Vedas and Vedanta and comparable in its symbolism to the liturgy of the Catholic Church.<sup>36</sup>

Despite Woodroffe’s attempts to present a sanitized and reformed version of Tantra, however, the equation of Tantra with sex would persist throughout the Western imagination, both popular and scholarly. By the mid-twentieth century, Tantra had become more or less equated with its sexual component, most commonly defined as “spiritual sex,” and generally confused with Indian erotica like the *Kama Sutra*. For the most part, this is a misunderstanding and confusion that continues to this day.

<sup>33</sup> Sellon, *Annotations on the Sacred writings of the Hindus*.

<sup>34</sup> See Burton, trans., *Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*.

<sup>35</sup> On Woodroffe, see Urban, *Tantra*, 134–64, and Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal*. Taylor argues that “Arthur Avalon” is not simply a pseudonym for Woodroffe, but is rather the joint creation of Woodroffe and a Bengali, Atal Behari Ghose, who helped him translate most of the texts.

<sup>36</sup> “Tantra simply presents the Vedantik teachings in a symbolic form for the worshipper, to whom it prescribes the means whereby they may be realized in fact” (Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta*, 587).

*Paschal Beverly Randolph and the Beginnings of Sex Magic*

The Light of the East, despite all fog, has emerged victorious!

Oriflamme (1912)

A new civilization, a new system of morals will arise from the new Christianity of the gnostic Templar-Christians... [T]he Church of the gnostic Neo-Christians seeks to found communities... of sinless, i.e. freed from the Nazarene Christian idea of original sin, people.

Theodor Reuss, "The Gnostic Neo-Christians"  
(1917)

One of the most important groups in the transmission of Tantra to the West—and also in its radical transformation and perhaps de-formation—was the highly esoteric brotherhood known as the *Ordo Templi Orientis*. Although they are little known or studied in contemporary scholarship, the O.T.O. was to play a critical role in the development of sexual magic and Tantra in the West over the last 100 years, for it is in the O.T.O. that we find the first real attempt to unite the two currents of Western sexual magic and the new, often garbled and misunderstood traditions of Tantra coming from India. The O.T.O. thus represents one of the first, even if rather misdirected and confused, attempts at cross-cultural synthesis between Eastern and Western esoteric traditions.

Sex, magic, and secrecy had, of course, long been associated in the Western religious imagination: from the early Gnostics to the Knights Templar to the Cathars of late medieval Europe, esoteric orders had long been accused of using sexual rituals as part of their secret magical arts.<sup>37</sup> However, perhaps the first evidence of a sophisticated and well-documented use of sexual magical techniques cannot be found any earlier than the mid-nineteenth century, with the mysterious figure of Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–75) (the focus of Patrick Deveney's essay in this same volume).<sup>38</sup> A mulatto born of a wealthy Virginian father and a slave from Madagascar, Randolph was raised a poor, self-taught free black in New York city. After running away from home at

<sup>37</sup> On the charges of sex magic brought against the Cathars and later the Templars, see King, *Sex, Magic and Perversion*, 170–171.

<sup>38</sup> For a longer discussion, see Deveney's chapter in this volume.

age sixteen, he traveled the world and eventually emerged as one of the leading figures in the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movements, the most famous scryer of his times, as well as America's foremost exponent of magical eroticism or Affectional Alchemy. In the sexual love, "he saw the greatest hope for the regeneration of the world, the key to personal fulfillment as well as social transformation and the basis of a non-repressive civilization."<sup>39</sup>

In the course of his wanderings through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Randolph encountered a wide variety of esoteric traditions—not just European Spiritualist, Masonic, and Rosicrucian orders, but also a range of Sufi lineages. In fact, he claims to have derived much of his knowledge from a group of Fakirs in the areas of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, which may have been a branch of the unorthodox Muslim mystical order of the Nusa'iri—a group long persecuted by orthodox Islam because of their alleged Gnostic sexual rituals.<sup>40</sup>

Whatever his primary inspiration, Randolph began to teach a form of sexual magic that would have a profound impact on much of later Western esotericism. For Randolph, the experience of orgasm is in fact the critical moment in human consciousness and the key to magical power. During orgasm, as new life is infused from the spiritual realm into the material, the soul is suddenly opened up to the spiritual energies of the cosmos: "at the instant of intense mutual orgasm the souls of the partners are opened to the powers of the cosmos and anything then truly willed is accomplished."<sup>41</sup> As such, the experience of sexual climax has the potential to lead the soul either upward or downward, to higher states of spiritual transcendence or to lower, more depraved states of corruption:

The moment when a man discharges his seed—his essential self—into a...womb is the most solemn, energetic and powerful moment he can ever know on earth; if under the influence of mere lust it be done, the discharge is suicidal... At the moment his seminal glands open, his nostrils expand, and while the seed is going from his soul to her womb he breathes one of two atmospheres, either fetid damnation from the border

<sup>39</sup> Franklin Rosemont, Foreword to Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, xv.

<sup>40</sup> Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 211ff. "The Nusa'iri of Ansairreh...are a nominally Muslim group living...in isolated areas in the mountains of northwest Syria and Latakia...What has mainly set the Nusar'is apart and made them the object of persecution and massacre by the orthodox Muslims...is the belief that they practiced pagan and Gnostic sexual rites" (ibid., 211).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 218–9.



spaces or Divine Energy from heavens. Whatsoever he shall truly will and internally pray for when Love... is in the ascendant, that moment the prayer's response comes down.<sup>42</sup>

The power of sex, then, can be deployed for a wide range of both spiritual and material ends. If one can harness the creative energy aroused by sexual contact, he can realize virtually any worldly or otherworldly goal. Not only can one achieve the spiritual aims of divine insight, but he can also attain the mundane goals of physical health, financial success, or regaining the passions of a straying lover. According to Randolph, the major uses sex magic are:

I. For purposes of increasing the brain and body power of an unborn child, II. Influencing one's wife or husband and magnetically controlling them, III. regaining youthful beauty, energy, vivacity, affectional and magnetic power, IV. prolonging the life of either the subject or actor or either at will, V. attainment of Supreme white magic of will, affection or Love, VI. For the furtherance of financial interests, schemes, lotteries, etc. VII. The attainment of the loftiest insight possible to the earthly soul.<sup>43</sup>

One of the most striking features of Randolph's sexual magic, however, is his insistence that both male and female partners must have an active role in the process, and in fact, that both must achieve orgasm in order for the magical operation to be successful: "For the prayer to be effective the paroxysm of both is necessary... [T]he woman's orgasms should coincide with man's emission, for only in this way will the magic be fulfilled."<sup>44</sup> The resulting pleasure that both partners feel in this union is nothing less than the overflowing joy of the divine emanating from above like the breath of God himself:

When pleasure results from the meeting of the electric currents of the male with the magnetic flow of the female, in the nerves of each, as in the touch of loving lips, the two currents spread out into waves, which flow all over the nervous network of both until they die out... upon the foot

<sup>42</sup> Randolph, *The Mysteries of Eulis* (manuscript 1860) reproduced in Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 339–40. See also Randolph, *Eulis!* and *Magia Sexualis*.

<sup>43</sup> Randolph, *The Mysteries of Eulis*, 337. Randolph lists over a hundred uses for sexual magic, which include: Frustrating bad plans of others; Relating to money dealings, losses, gains and to forecast them; The grand secret of domestic happiness; To render a false husband, lover or wife sexively cold to others; To secretly penetrate others' designs (Machiavelli's power), The power of influencing others, solely financially; To derange the love relations of those not one's lover; To become immersed in business spheres, to reliably direct others; The grand secret of life prolongation (*ibid.*, 319–325).

<sup>44</sup> Randolph, *Magia Sexualis*, 76–8.

of the throne whereon each souls sits in voluptuous expectancy... [T]he joy... is diffused over both beings and each is based in the celestial and divine aura—the breath of God, suffusing both bodies, refreshing both souls!<sup>45</sup>

Randolph's sexual teachings were to have a lasting impact on later occult traditions, introducing sexual magic into the mainstream of American and European esotericism: "[T]hrough Randolph's influence the genie had been released from the bottle; the notion that sex provided the lost key to scattered elements of mythology had taken on a practical side. A multitude of sexual mysticism flourished."<sup>46</sup>

*The Secret of Sexual Magic: Tantra and Sex Magic in the O.T.O.*

[T]he sexual-religion of the future... is based on the necessary ritual completion of the sex-act. The New Gospel of Salvation of Sexual Religion!

Reuss, "Parsifal and the Secret of the Graal Unveiled" (1914)

The original inspiration for or spiritual father of the O.T.O. is usually identified as Carl Kellner (1851–1905). A wealthy Austrian paper chemist, Kellner had studied widely in various esoteric traditions such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism and also traveled to Asia to delve into the Eastern mysteries. In the course of his travels, Kellner claims, he studied with three Eastern masters whom he identified as a Sufi named Soliman ben Aifa and two Hindu Tantrikas named Bhima Sena Pratapa and Sri Mahatma Agamya Paramahansa. According to later O.T.O. accounts, Kellner was also in contact with an esoteric order known as the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light. First appearing in Chicago in 1895 (though some date it earlier, to 1885), the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light appears to be either an offshoot or a rival branch of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, which had adapted many of Randolph's teachings on sexual magic.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Randolph, *Eulis!*, 126. "No real magic power can or will descend into the soul of either except in the mighty moment, the orgasmal instant of BOTH—not one alone! for then only do the mystic doors of the SOUL OPEN TO THE SPACES" (*The Ansairitic Mystery*, in Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 314).

<sup>46</sup> Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, 252.

<sup>47</sup> The connection of Kellner with the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light was asserted in the journal *Oriflamme* in 1912. See also Godwin et al., *The Hermetic Brotherhood of*

The primary architect of the O.T.O., however, was Kellner's associate, Theodor Reuss (1855–1923).<sup>48</sup> The son of a German father and an English mother, Reuss was a curious and controversial figure who was admired for his extensive knowledge of esoterica but suspected by many of being a charlatan or a fraud. As former friend, August Weinholtz, described him in 1907 in the Masonic periodical *L'Acacia*,

This man's cleverness and extraordinary activities, his sophistries, his knowledge of languages, his ability to play no matter what role, make him a real international menace. In some respects he reminds one of Cagliostro, the most brilliant of all masonic charlatans, who successfully contrived to dupe his contemporaries.<sup>49</sup>

After enjoying some success as a music-hall singer and newspaper correspondent, Reuss also appears to have been involved in some controversial political activities. In the 1880s, using false credentials, he joined the Socialist League, a Marxist group that attracted various dislocated communists and anarchists. Later, he would be accused by many of operating as a spy under the direction of the Prussian secret police, who had allegedly sent him to England to monitor the activities of Marx's daughter, Eleanor Marx-Aveling. Although the charges of espionage were never proven, they did add to Reuss' image as a mysterious figure who was variously regarded as either a genius or a charlatan.<sup>50</sup>

It is not entirely clear what connection there may have been between Reuss' political career and his occult activities. However, he would eventually claim to have an immense body of esoteric knowledge, and identified himself as a master in a wide range of occult traditions, particularly the "Irregular" forms of Masonry such as the Ancient and Accepted Primitive Rite of Memphis and Mizraim and the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. And he would ornament himself with a variety of impressive titles, such as Illustrious Brother, Expert Master Mason, Secret Master, Perfect Master, Grand Elect Knight Kadosh, 30°, Grand Inquisitor Commander, 31°, Prince of the Royal Secret,

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*Luxor*, 422, 428. For a discussion of Kellner's life see Dvorak, "Carl Kellner." The best overall reconstruction of O.T.O. history is Pasi, "Ordo Templi Orientis."

<sup>48</sup> There is some debate as to whether Kellner or Reuss was the founder of the O.T.O. Official O.T.O. sources generally credit Kellner as the one who came up with the idea of the Orientalische Tempel in 1895; critics like König, however, claim that Reuss was the real founder; see König, "The OTO Phenomenon," and "Theodor Reuss as Founder of Esoteric Orders;" Howe and Möller, "Theodor Reuss."

<sup>49</sup> *L'Acacia* 9 (Paris, 1907): 387–88, quoted in Howe and Möller, "Theodor Reuss."

<sup>50</sup> Howe and Möller, "Theodor Reuss." See also Howe and Möller, *Merlin Peregrinus*.

the Sovereign Sanctuary of the Gnosis, and various other increasingly elaborate ranks and degrees.

During the 1890s, Reuss claims to have collaborated with Kellner in order to form a new esoteric order dedicated to the inner secrets of magical practice. Initially, the goal was to found a new *Academia Masonica* that would enable all Freemasons to become familiar with all existing degrees and systems of Masonry. This appears to have been the original inspiration for the O.T.O., as a complex fusion of Craft Masonry, Rosicrucianism, and various Eastern imports, above all the techniques of Hindu Tantra. However, as Reuss defined it, the “Ancient Order of Oriental Templars” is nothing less than a secret, powerful brotherhood that has been operating covertly throughout all of history, guiding the forces of culture, politics, and even revolutions:

Let it be known that there exists, unknown to the great crowd, a very ancient order of sages, whose object is the amelioration and spiritual elevation of mankind. . . . This Order has existed already in the most remote, prehistoric times, and it has manifested its activity secretly and openly in the world. . . . it has caused social and political revolutions and proved to be the rock of salvation in times of danger and misfortune.<sup>51</sup>

The time had now come for this secret order of sages to reveal itself openly to the world.

From its origins, the O.T.O. claimed to be in possession of the innermost secret of all esoteric systems, the most profound mystery that lies at the foundation of all occult, mystical, and spiritual traditions, even the secret of the Eastern Sages, and the means to rebuild the Temple of Solomon. According to a 1904 edition of Reuss’ journal, *Oriiflamme*:

One of the secrets which our Order possesses to its highest degree consists in the fact that it supplies the properly prepared brother with the PRACTICAL means to erect the true Temple of Solomon in Man and to find again the “lost Word”: namely, that our Order supplies to the initiated and chosen brother the practical means to obtain proof of his immortality even during his earthly existence. . . .

This secret is one of the true secrets of Masonry and exclusively the secret of the Occult High Degree of Our Order. It has come down to our Order by word of mouth from the fathers of all true Freemasonry, the “Wise Men of the East”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> “Ancient Order of Oriental Templars,” in König, ed., *Der Grosse Theodor Reuss Reader*, 126.

<sup>52</sup> Reuss, “Von den Geheimnissen der okkulten Hochgrade unseres Ordens,” 31; reproduced in König, *Der Grosse Theodor Reuss Reader*, 75.

But what is this tremendous secret of the East that opens up the treasures of all occult systems of knowledge? The answer is given eight years later in the 1912 anniversary issue of the *Oriflamme*: the supreme mystery is nothing less than the secret of sexual magic, which, though extremely rare and precious, can be revealed to the most qualified seekers:

Our Order possess the KEY which opens up all Masonic and Hermetic secrets, namely, the teaching of *sexual magic*, and this teaching explains, without exception, all the secrets of Nature, all the symbolism of FREE-MASONRY and all systems of religion.<sup>53</sup>

Now, although this teaching of sexual magic is the secret of the O.T.O. and is not suitable for publication in a pamphlet which reaches wide circles, nevertheless, the management of the Order has decided to lift a very small tip of the veil which conceals our secret... to enlighten earnest seekers.<sup>54</sup>

Sexual magic may have already been a part of Carl Kellner's esoteric practice, which he claimed to have learned from the masters of the Orient. Kellner was in fact one of the few Western authors at the time who had a fairly detailed knowledge of yoga and certainly one of the few who had anything more than disdain for its more esoteric practices. In a piece attributed to Kellner in the 1912 issue of *Oriflamme*, he adapts the yogic idea of the *vayus* or vital energies believed to exist in specific parts of the physical body, such as the heart, anus, navel, larynx, eyes, etc. He was particularly interested in the *vayus* associated with the reproductive organ (the *napa*), which could be sublimated, re-directed, and transformed into intense spiritual energy through yogic practice. This, according to Kellner, is true "sexual magic" and the source of god-like power:

[S]exual magic is concerned with the Vayus Napa (in the reproductive organ)... This exercise is called "Transmutation of the Reproductive Energy." This exercise of the transmutation of the Reproductive energy is not done for the purpose of sexual excess, but in order to strengthen the eternal God Power on the earthly plane requiring sexually strong, perfect persons... The reproductive energy is a process of creation. It is a Godly act! In the reproductive organ (male and female) there is concentrated in the smallest space the greatest vital force... [T]he performer of the exercise must concentrate all his thoughts on withdrawing and lifting the reproductive energy from the organ into the solar plexus,

<sup>53</sup> Reuss, *Jubilaums-Ausgabe der Oriflamme*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Reuss, "Mysteria Mystica Maxima," *Jubilaums-Ausgabe der Oriflamme*, 21.

where he “wills” that it be stored for transmutation purposes... [F]inally the great “merging” or reunion occurs and the performer becomes the seer while remaining fully conscious and experiences what he sees. This is white sexual magic!<sup>55</sup>

Many believe that Kellner also engaged in more esoteric forms of magic together with a small circle of disciples called the “Inner Triangle;” these involved various forms of Yoga, meditation, and sexual rites aimed at generating the divine “Elixir”: “His wife was the Great Goddess. Kellner himself acted as Babylonian Priest. In his house was a room without windows where the tantric rites took place to prepare the Elixir, that is: male and female sexual fluids.”<sup>56</sup>

It was really Theodor Reuss, however, who made sexual magic a central part of O.T.O. practice. Indeed, Reuss regarded sexual rituals and the cult of the Lingam (the Sanskrit word for the phallus or male sexual organ) as the root of all religion, “the most ancient cult on earth,” and the core of every spiritual tradition from pre-historic times down to the Christian Church itself. And the quintessential form of phallic worship is Tantra. As Helmut Möller and Ellic Howe observe, Reuss’ knowledge of Tantra seems to have been drawn primarily from secondary European sources and was “nebulous” at best.<sup>57</sup> Following most European Orientalists of the day, he defines Tantra as basically “sexual religion.” In his words, “Tantra (Sexual-religion) is built on the active principle of generation, as it manifests in the female energy (Shakti) and the manly energy (Shiva). The Linga (Phallus) is the holiest form in which and through which the great lord-God must be worshipped.”<sup>58</sup> This Tantric sexual religion is for Reuss essentially the same as that of the Eleusinian mysteries and early Christian Gnosticism, both of which he sees as cults of fertility and sensual ecstasy:

The Eleusinian mysteries were pure Phallus cult. The ceremonies were those of the Tantrics. The members of these mysteries partook of such ecstasy that the freedom of the senses came to them as a totally natural by-product...

<sup>55</sup> Kellner, in *Jubilaeums-Ausgabe der Oriflamme*, 22–23. See Kellner, *Yoga*; Dvorak, “Carl Kellner.”

<sup>56</sup> König, “Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O.”

<sup>57</sup> Howe and Möller, *Merlin Peregrinus*, 194.

<sup>58</sup> Reuss, “Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Geheimnis” (1914), in König, *Der Kleine Theodor Reuss Reader*, 71.

The secret teachings of the Gnostics (Primitive Christians) are identical with the Vamachari rites of the Tantrics... Phallicism is the basis of all theology and underlies the mythology of all peoples... The Phallus as a divine symbol received divine veneration for thousands of years in India.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Reuss believes that the ancient cult of the Phallus has survived in a masked form throughout the centuries of Christian rule, persisting throughout popular worship and even in the symbolism of the mainstream Church. As he argues in the Introduction to his treatise on sexual worship, *Lingam-Yoni*,

In spite of the efforts of the Christian churches, over 120 million people... are still practitioners of the sex cult (Lingam-yoni), which surely shows the need to spread widely authentic material about phallism. With that a truer and fairer guideline for the modern sex cult movement (which should be condemned for its excrescences, but which reactivates the ancient divine worship in its inner core) can be found... [T]he Catholic Church uses, in a hidden form, the phallus worship, Lingam-Yoni cult... taken from so-called Pagan rituals... It was the leading religious cult during the fullest flowering of the cultures of classical antiquity, and is still a living factor in our time.<sup>60</sup>

The modern world, Reuss believed, was entering a new era in which the repressive attitudes of Christian Europe were being replaced by a liberated view of sexuality. Even the proliferation of pornography was a natural by-product of this new acceptance of sexuality and the body:

[O]ur time is a time of transition. Old ideas, old habits, old opinions and principles of living vanish bit by bit, and new ideas, new habits... even new religion, seem to grow out of our modern Western cultural ferment. It is only natural that this fermentation makes for peculiar bubbles, and occasionally a lot of foul smelling gas. I need only point out the frightening growth of pornographic literature... But actually these are only the side-effects of a growth period of a new Weltanschauung, maybe even an entirely new world.<sup>61</sup>

Under Reuss, sexual magic would become a central part of the upper grades of the O.T.O. The early Ordo was organized in ten major

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>60</sup> Reuss, *Lingam-Yoni*, Introduction. This passage was also published in *Oriflamme* 5, no. 1 (1906): 33–4. The text itself is largely a translation of Hargrave Jennings's *Phallism*.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

degrees, the lower degrees consisting of more traditional Masonic initiations and the tenth, Supreme Rex, existing largely as an administrative degree. It is in the IX degree that the most profound mystery of mysteries was to be revealed, namely, “the highest, most glorious, holiest, Symbol of sexual-magic! Here begins a secret teaching which is exclusively for initiates.” And this secret of sexual magic is in turn identified with the pre-Christian “pagan” traditions, of which Indian Tantra and the union of *lingam* and *yoni* is the clearest example.<sup>62</sup> The Lingam is, for Reuss, the most sacred symbol of creation, divine power, and the Logos; as Peter König observes, Reuss regarded the semen as the key to magical power and viewed women as ultimately non-essential to magical practice. Indeed, Reuss would later claim that the “central secret of the O.T.O.” was in fact a sexual interpretation of the Holy Mass, which involved “the union of man with God through consumption of semen—as allegedly taught by Jesus Christ.”<sup>63</sup>

Much of the O.T.O. literature employs complicated symbolism drawn from alchemy and Hermeticism to describe esoteric sexual rites. As Francis King explains, “the code phrase for the penis is the athanor, that for semen is the blood of the red lion, or the Serpent, while the vagina is referred to as the retort... [T]he fluids which lubricate the female organ are the menstruum of the gluten and the mixture of these with the male discharge is the first matter or, when it has been impregnated with the magic power, the Elixir.”<sup>64</sup> Sexual rites can be used for a wide variety of magical purposes, ranging from the invocation of a god to the finding of hidden treasure. For example, one might use sexual magic to magically empower a talisman; by concentrating on one’s intended goal at the moment of orgasm and then anointing the talisman with the semen, one infuses it with magical power which can then be employed for a wide range of this-worldly and other-worldly ends. Similarly, the power of controlled imagination and sexuality can be used to incarnate a god within one’s consciousness, by concentrating all one’s will on the deity at the moment of orgasm and so “blending their personalities into one.”<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Reuss, “Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Geheimnis.”

<sup>63</sup> König, “The Early O.T.O. and its Development.” Reuss found this interpretation of the Mass in a text by Le Clément de St-Marq: *L'Eucharistie* (1906); re-printed in *Der Grosse Theodor Reuss Reader*. See Marco Pasi’s chapter in this volume for more on Le Clément.

<sup>64</sup> King, *The Magical World*, 79.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*



Not surprisingly, Reuss and his disciples generated a certain amount of scandal and were accused of all manner of sexual perversion. Chief among the accusations was homosexuality, which does appear to have played some role in O.T.O. sexual magic. Thus, the *Masonic Journal of Vienna* published an article claiming that Reuss had engaged in a shocking “homosexual assault” that involved the “mutual touching of the phalli” during esoteric rituals.<sup>66</sup> Another journal, the antisemitic *Der Judenkennner*, would later allege that several novices were so horrified by these rites that they reported Reuss to the police, causing him to flee the country: “In the summer of 1906 he went to Munich...in order to initiate some ‘Novizen’ in the secret of the Order of the Templars. These ‘Novizen’ were so disgusted by these ‘revelations’ that they alerted the police to arrest the libertine Reuss, who...fled to his crony John Yarker in England.”<sup>67</sup>

*Freedom from Original Sin: The Utopian Social Vision of the O.T.O.*

Freedom in & before God, that is the liberation from original sin, through which the reigning christian-nazarene Church has enslaved to their priests humanity from birth.... Love is the crowning of the world. Love is the highest law. Love is God.

Theodor Reuss, “The Gnostic Neo-Christians”  
(1917)

Like Randolph, Reuss clearly linked his sexual magical practices to a much larger vision of social transformation. Yet he also went a great deal further than Randolph had imagined by calling for the creation of an entire new morality and civilization based on freedom from original sin and sexual guilt. The power of sexual magic was not to be a matter of secret practice among the initiated few but would eventually spread outward and lead to the radical reform of society at large: “the sexual re-education of the masses would be the responsibility of ‘priest-doctors’... [P]rivate property would be eliminated, forced labour and eugenics were to be introduced, while only physically perfect parents

<sup>66</sup> König, “Anal Intercourse and the O.T.O.”

<sup>67</sup> *Der Judenkennner* 7 (12 February 1936), reproduced in König, “Theodor Reuss as Founder of Esoteric Orders,” 188.

would be permitted to have children. The religion of the O.T.O. would become that of the State.”<sup>68</sup>

The new civilization that Reuss imagined was to be based on the worldview of the early Christian Gnostics—or at least what Reuss imagined the Gnostic worldview to be, given the fairly skewed knowledge of Gnosticism in early twentieth-century Europe. This new society would be a “Neo-Gnostic” society of “Templar-Christians” who had rejected the false idea of original sin and realized the inherent divinity of the sexual act. For the sexual act is the power to create life, and it is this power that makes us god-like, capable of creating life like God Himself. Sexual union is thus a sacrament and a “communion,” no less than the sacrament of the Eucharist:

A new civilization, a new system of morals will arise from the new Christianity of the gnostic Templar-Christians... [T]he Church of the gnostic Neo-Christians seeks to found communities, existing on a co-operative basis, of sinless, i.e. freed from the Nazarene-Christian idea of original sin, people. For the formation of such gnostic “Christos” communities only those are suitable who are... convinced of the truth of Manu’s saying: “Only he who has understood the holy doctrine of sanctity of the God-Organs is truly liberated and free from all sins”... The gnostics recognize that humanity’s “resemblance to God” consists in the fact that they are able to grasp and understand the divinity of the earthly act of procreation as a parallel of the divine act of creation... [T]he act of love consummated under the control of the will in God is a sacramental act, a “Mystic Marriage with God,” a communion, a union of self with God.<sup>69</sup>

A key part of Reuss’ vision of a new civilization free of original sin was a new respect for women. Because women can bear children, they are the ultimate embodiment of sexuality and should be revered as the highest symbol of this divine power of creation. This reverence for woman as Mother would in turn form the foundation for a new kind of nation for the future:

The first aim of our Order in the esoteric-practical realization of our teachings is that in the future the “Mother” is to be honored as “High priestess” in her family.

Every pregnant woman is a “Saint” in our eyes... She is the symbol of human procreation from the Godly power of creation...

<sup>68</sup> König, “The Early OTO and its Development.”

<sup>69</sup> Reuss, “The Gnostic Neo-Christians” (1917), reproduced in König, *Der Gross Theodor Reuss Reader*.

Our Order proves that it does not merely follow abstract goals, but that it is capable of intervening energetically in the everyday life of our common people whenever it is urgently necessary that they be educated to a correct understanding... of the duties of a nation with regard to its own future, particularly during the present era.<sup>70</sup>

It would, however, be a mistake to regard Reuss as a feminist. His ideal of the true woman was largely in keeping with mainstream nineteenth-century values: woman is to be exalted as a mother and revered for her central role in the domestic sphere. In fact, Reuss was quite critical of the early form of feminism emerging in England, “with its extreme Motherhood-denying ‘woman’s movement (Suffragettes),” and he hoped that the O.T.O. could help restore the true cult of Motherhood.<sup>71</sup>

One of the more intriguing episodes in Reuss’ life and utopian aspirations occurred during the last decade of his life in Switzerland. In August of 1917, Reuss organized an international “Anti-National” Congress under O.T.O. auspices at Monte Verità, a liberal commune near Ascona on Lake Maggiore. Interestingly enough, this event is mentioned in the notorious antisemitic tract *Die Geheimnisse der Weisen von Zion* (translated into English as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an immediate bestseller when published in Germany 1919). The author, whose actual name was Muller von Hausen, quotes from a letter that Reuss was alleged to have written:

My secret aim for this congress is to bring together land reformers, vegetarians, Theosophists, pacifists... from Spain, Italy, Holland, Russia, France, etc. and convert their hitherto poisonous anti-German sentiments into something more fair to Germany... The “Anti-Nationalist Cooperative Congress” flag and the draft programme are naturally merely a camouflage... Germany should send two masonic representatives who are men of the world and know the true... history of Freemasonry and its secret political history.<sup>72</sup>

Ever a subject of controversy and scandal, Reuss has been accused of both social-political subversion and simple greed-driven chicanery. According to one account of the events at Monte Verità, Reuss’ Congress assumed “almost orgiastic qualities. An O.T.O. lodge was founded, there were ‘initiations,’ and Reuss pocketed the money received

<sup>70</sup> *Oriflamme* (1912): 19–20.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*: 20.

<sup>72</sup> Beck (pseud.), *Die Geheimnisse der Weisen von Zion*, 165.

from successively higher degrees.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, more than one critic has accused Reuss of simply peddling secret degrees filled with tantalizing esoterica to various European bourgeoisie who liked the idea of becoming “knights” and “masters” in these arcane—and deliciously transgressive—occult orders.

But in this regard, Reuss was perhaps only fulfilling his role as founder of the secret order of “Oriental Templars.” An eclectic blend of Eastern exotica and Western erotica, the O.T.O. was from its inception less an embodiment of any actual Indian tradition than a product of Orientalist fantasy, nineteenth-century sexual obsession, and an ideal of radical liberation through sexual transgression.

*The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley and the Law of Thelema*

One of the great insights of South India is the great Temple of the Shiva lingam. I spent a good deal of time in its courts meditating on the mystery of Phallic worship... My instinct told me that Blake was right in saying: “The lust of the goat is the glory of God.” But I lacked the courage to admit it. The result of my training had been to obsess me with the hideously foul idea that inflicts such misery on Western minds and curses life with civil war. Europeans cannot face the facts frankly, they cannot escape from their animal appetite, yet suffer the tortures of fear and shame even while gratifying it. As Freud has now shown, this devastating complex is not merely responsible for most of the social and domestic misery of Europe, but exposes the individual to neurosis... We resort to suppression, and the germs create an abscess.

Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*

Perhaps no figure would take this goal of radical liberation through sex magic and Tantra further than the O.T.O.’s most infamous member, the Great Beast, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). As I have argued elsewhere, Crowley does not appear to have had a very deep knowledge of Indian Tantra.<sup>74</sup> He did, however, inherit much of the Orientalist vision of the exotic, erotic East, which he melded with his own elaborate experi-

<sup>73</sup> Howe and Möller, “Theodor Reuss.”

<sup>74</sup> Urban, “Unleashing the Beast” and “The Beast with Two Backs.” For other studies of Crowley, see Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*; Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*.

ments in sexual magic (or Magick, to use Crowley's spelling),<sup>75</sup> and he would be credited by his later disciples as one of the first adepts to synthesize Eastern Tantra with Western magic. As his biographer John Symonds remarks, "His greatest merit was to make the bridge between Tantrism and the Western esoteric tradition and thus bring together Western and Eastern magical techniques."<sup>76</sup> In the process, however, he would take the ideal of social and political transformation to even further extremes. As Alex Owen observes, Crowley's sexual magical rites were "performed in a colonial context against a backdrop of fin-de-siècle 'decadence.'"<sup>77</sup> As such, I would argue, Crowley's sex magic takes the O.T.O.'s Orientalist dreams and libertarian fantasies to their ultimate ends.

It would be difficult to summarize Crowley's sexual-magical experimentations in a long book, much less a short article; so for the sake of brevity I will simply mention a few of his notable innovations in the practices of the O.T.O. In many ways, Crowley might be said to embody some of the deepest tensions in late Victorian English society as a whole. The son of a preacher in the highly puritanical Plymouth Brethren sect, Crowley would later turn to the most extreme forms of sensual excess, apparently not resting until he had shattered every imaginable social and religious taboo. Like many other British intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—such as Oscar Wilde, D.H. Lawrence, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter and others—Crowley loathed what he saw as the stifling hypocrisy and repression of the Victorian era: "[T]o us Victoria was sheer suffocation.... She was a huge and heavy fog; we could not see, we could not breathe.... [T]he spirit of her age had killed everything we cared for.... The soul of England was stagnant, stupefied!"<sup>78</sup>

Yet Crowley also went much further than most of his generation had dared by not simply proclaiming the death of the old Victorian era,

<sup>75</sup> Crowley uses the spelling "Magick" to distinguish his art—the art of changing nature in accordance with one's Will—from most vulgar understandings of the term. See *The Law is for All*, 39, and *Magick in Theory and Practice*.

<sup>76</sup> Symonds, Introduction to Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, xxv. As Grant comments, "The revival of Tantric elements in the *Book of the Law* may be evidence of a positive move on the part of [Crowley] to forge a link between Western and Oriental systems of magick" (*The Magical Revival*, 126). Popular books on Tantra/Sex Magick are too numerous to cite here: see for example the works of Christopher S. Hyatt: *Tantra without Tears; Secrets of Western Tantra*.

<sup>77</sup> Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 187.

<sup>78</sup> *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, 216.

but also by proclaiming himself to be the herald of a whole new era in history. In 1904, in fact, Crowley claimed to have received a revelation from his guardian-angel, Aiwass, who dictated to him *The Book of the Law* (*Liber AL vel Legis*).<sup>79</sup> His most famous work, *The Book of the Law* announces the dawn of the third Aeon of mankind: the first aeon was that of the Goddess Isis, centered around matriarchy and worship of the Great Mother; the second aeon was that of Osiris, during which the patriarchal religions of suffering and death—i.e., Judaism and Christianity—rose to power. Finally, with the revelation of the *Book of the Law*, a new aeon of the son, Horus, was born: “the old formulae . . . of the dying God is no longer efficacious. . . . The formulae of the new Aeon recognizes Horus, the Child, crowned and conquering, as God.”<sup>80</sup>

Beginning in 1910, Crowley became involved with Reuss’ O.T.O. and soon became its most infamous member. According to his own rather fanciful account, he was approached by Reuss, who had read a cryptic chapter of Crowley’s *Book of Lies* and accused him of revealing the innermost secret of the O.T.O.: the secret of sexual magic. Though Crowley had done so unintentionally, the story goes, he was named the Sovereign Grand Master General of Ireland, Ioana, and all the Britains. Going even further than Randolph or Reuss, Crowley identified sexual magic as the most powerful of all forms of magic—a secret that even he himself had not fully understood after years of experimentation, and one so powerful that it “cannot be used indiscriminately” or revealed to the unworthy.<sup>81</sup>

If this secret which is a scientific secret were perfectly understood, as it is not by me after more than twelve years’ almost constant study and

<sup>79</sup> Actually, the revelation came first through Crowley’s wife, Rose, during their trip to Cairo, when the voice of the god Horus began to speak through her. She later revealed that the being speaking through her was an emissary of Horus named Aiwass, and Crowley eventually claimed to have received the *Book of the Law* directly from Aiwass without Rose’s mediation.

<sup>80</sup> Crowley, *The Law is for All*, 47. See Symonds, *Introduction to The Confessions*, xxii.

<sup>81</sup> Crowley, *The Book of Lies*, 5–6. “Shortly after publication, the O.H.O. (Outer Head of the O.T.O.) came to me. . . . He said that since I was acquainted with the supreme secret of the Order, I must be allowed the IX {degree} and obligated in regard to it. I protested that I knew no such secret. He said ‘But you have printed it in the plainest language’. I said that I could not have done so because I did not know it. He went to the book-shelves; taking out a copy of THE BOOK OF LIES, he pointed to a passage in the despised chapter. It instantly flashed upon me. The entire symbolism not only of Free Masonry but of many other traditions blazed upon my spiritual vision. From that moment the O.T.O. assumed its proper importance in my mind. I understood that I held in my hands the key to the future progress of humanity. . . .” (ibid.).

experiment, ...there would be nothing which the human imagination can conceive that could not be realized in practice...If it were desired to have an element of atomic weight six times that of uranium that element could be produced.<sup>82</sup>

Like Reuss, Crowley does discuss Indian Tantric techniques and various other generic Oriental exotica. Styling himself “Mahatma Guru Sri Paramahansa Shivaji,” Crowley wrote quite a bit on *hatha yoga* (“yoga for yahoos”),<sup>83</sup> and he included a discussion of Tantric sexual techniques in his *De Arte Magicka*.<sup>84</sup> Yet, as his own disciple Kenneth Grant acknowledges, Crowley’s references to Tantra reveal a general ignorance of actual Tantric techniques and reflect a more widespread Orientalist stereotype of Tantric eroticism and libertinism.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to quasi-Tantric references, however, Crowley also added his own interpretations and ritual flourishes to the O.T.O.’s magical repertoire—including a full-scale Gnostic Mass filled with highly erotic symbolism.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, he also revised the O.T.O.’s hierarchy

<sup>82</sup> Crowley, *The Confessions*, 767.

<sup>83</sup> Crowley, *Eight Lectures on Yōga*. He claimed to have achieved the highest yogic state of *samadhi* while meditating in Ceylon in 1901. See “The Temple of Solomon the King,” 166–7.

<sup>84</sup> “[T]he wise men of India have a belief that a certain particular Prana, or force, resides in the Bindu, or semen... Therefore they stimulate to the maximum its generation by causing a consecrated prostitute to excite the organs, and at the same time vigorously withhold by will... [T]hey claim that they can deflower as many as eighty virgins in a night without losing a single drop of the Bindu. Nor is this ever to be lost, but reabsorbed through the tissues of the body. The organs thus act as a siphon to draw constantly fresh supplies of life from the cosmic reservoir, and flood the body with their fructifying virtue... (see almost any Tantra, in particular *Shiva Sanhita*)” (*De Arte Magicka*, XVI).

<sup>85</sup> See Urban, “Unleashing the Beast.” Grant recounts Crowley’s correspondence with David Curwen, who studied left-hand Tantra in South India. According to Grant’s account, Crowley was rather annoyed that Curwen seemed to possess much greater knowledge about Tantra and sexual magick; as Crowley himself admitted, “Curwen knows 100 times as much as I do about Tantra. But I do not advise it” (Letter to Grant, 1946; cited in Grant, *Remembering Aleister Crowley*. Curwen claimed to have a recipe for preparing the prized “Elixir of Life” that was far superior to that of the O.T.O. (*ibid.*, 49).

<sup>86</sup> See Urban, “Unleashing the Beast.” An elaborate, highly choreographed ceremony, the Gnostic Mass is a creative re-imagining of the secret rites alleged to have been practiced by the early Gnostics and later corrupted by the Catholic Church. Although there is no physical intercourse involved in the Mass, its symbolism is highly sexual. The primary actors are the Priest, who parts a sacred veil with his “Lance,” and the Priestess, who removes her robes to embody the nakedness of the divine female principle. The Mass also involves the consumption of wine and “cakes of light,” and it is perhaps worth noting the ingredients suggested for the latter. According to the recipe provided in the *Book of the Law*, they are to be made with “meal & honey & thick leavings

of initiatic degrees, expanding them to eleven. The eighth, ninth, and eleventh of these focused on more explicitly transgressive sexual rites of auto-erotic and homosexual intercourse. As Peter König summarizes the upper degrees,

Crowley's VIIIth degree unveiled...that masturbating on a sigil of a demon or meditating upon the image of a phallus would bring power or communication with a divine being...The IXth degree was labeled heterosexual intercourse where the sexual secrets were sucked out of the vagina and when not consumed...put on a sigil to attract this or that demon to fulfill the pertinent wish...In the XIth degree, the mostly homosexual degree, one identifies oneself with an ejaculating penis. The blood (or excrements) from anal intercourse attract the spirits/demons while the sperm keeps them alive.<sup>87</sup>

As we can see, Crowley's practice of sexual magic represents a radical departure from the rather prudish system of Randolph; it is even more extreme than that of Reuss and much more willing to use a wide variety of non-heterosexual forms of sex magic. Indeed, his sexual palate was quite eclectic. In addition to more mundane heterosexual acts, his magic sampled a smorgasbord of techniques, including "mentally meditating on his penis—masturbating—while thinking of gods and angels; consecrating talismans with combinations of semen, vaginal juices and menstrual blood; prolonging and intensifying sex through visualization...beseeching gods for information, money and material possessions during sex."<sup>88</sup> Many of Crowley's own diaries are quite replete with detailed discussions of his own experiments in auto-erotic, heterosexual, and homosexual intercourse. Between 1914 and 1918, Crowley's journal, *Rex de Arte Regia*, records a long series of 309 acts of sexual magic for a variety of purposes. These included both spiritual aims, such as offering praise to Pan or attaining supernatural powers, and more material aims, such as fascinating mistresses or enhancing his youth and sexual attraction. Of these, the largest number were employed for the purpose of generating money. Increasingly worried

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of red wine: then oil of Abramelin and olive oil" and softened with fresh blood. As for this last ingredient, menstrual blood is preferred.

<sup>87</sup> König, "Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O." Two of the most important texts for the IX degree rituals are *Liber Agape* and *De Arte Magica* and the magical diaries based on his sexual operations: Symonds and Grant, eds. *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*. The IX degree rite was also published in censored form as "Two Fragments of Ritual." See also King, *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.*

<sup>88</sup> Michaelson, ed., *Portable Darkness*, 143.



about his own finances, Crowley developed a sexo-economic technique of imagining a shower of gold coins raining down at the moment of climax. At least in his opinion, this worked, since he claimed to receive several unexpected checks and offers showing up out of the blue.<sup>89</sup>

But perhaps the most significant feature of Crowley's sexual magic was his explicit use of transgression as a ritual tool. Indeed, he seems to have taken a certain delight in inverting and tearing down the social taboos of his Victorian childhood, in ways that would have made even the most hard-core Indian Tantrika blush. I could cite a number of entertaining examples here; but for the sake of brevity, I will note just a few of the more notable ones. As we have already seen, Crowley's higher-level rituals centered around acts that were considered extremely transgressive by Victorian standards. Sodomy and masturbation were foremost among the acts considered both physically and morally dangerous in Victorian society, and they would therefore become powerful tools in Crowley's magical practice. The original preface to his *The World's Tragedy* was, in fact, sub-titled "Sodomy," in which he vowed "to fight openly for that which no living Englishman dared defend, even in secret—sodomy!"<sup>90</sup>

However, even Crowley's heterosexual rites would have been considered somewhat against the grain of Victorian sexual values. As we have already seen, many of his practices involved deliberate inversions of "normal" sexual intercourse, such as the consumption of sexual fluids, which were regarded as the powerful "elixir" employed in many of the IX degree operations.<sup>91</sup> In some cases, Crowley seems to have truly exulted in his own depravity, going to great lengths to describe his descent into licentious transgression. As he described his relations

<sup>89</sup> Skinner, *The Magical Diaries of Aleister Crowley*, 5–6. See Symonds and Grant, eds. *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*.

<sup>90</sup> Crowley, *The World's Tragedy*, xxvii. One of Crowley's most intense periods of experimentation in sex magic began in 1914, during his "Paris Workings," conducted with the help of his lover, Victor Neuberg; Crowley engaged in a variety of rites intended to achieve the goals of invoking the gods Jupiter and Mercury. In the course of the operations, Crowley became possessed by an evil spirit posing as the god Mercury. This being informed them that the ultimate act of magic would require the rape, ritual murder and dissection of the body of a young girl. Yet even the Beast recoiled from this act. See King, *The Magical World of Aleister Crowley*, 85; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 186ff.

<sup>91</sup> On the consumption of the "elixir" see especially *De Arte Magica*, chapters XIV–XVI, and Crowley's magical records, many of which discuss preparation of the "elixir," the commingled male and female fluids integral to the O.T.O. IX degree ritual (*The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, 45ff.).

with his partner, Ronnie Minor, in 1918, “I now do all those things which voluptuaries do, with equal or greater enthusiasm and power; but always for an Ulterior End. In this matter I am reproached by that whore of niggers and dogs, with whom I am now living in much worse than adultery.”<sup>92</sup> Similarly, as he described his relations with a young American, Cecil Frederick Russell, who come to study with him in 1921 and became a partner in his sexual magic,

Now I'll shave and make up my face like the lowest kind of whore and rub on perfume and go after Genesthai [Russell] like a drunken two-bit prick-pit in old New Orleans. He disgusts me sexually, as I him, as I suspect...[T]he dirtier my deed, the dearer my darling will hold me; the grosser the act the greedier my arse to engulf him!<sup>93</sup>

Crowley would go to even further extremes of transgression during his years at the Abbey of Thelema. In his diaries, he claims to have transcended all material distinctions, shattering the boundary between pure and impure, such that even the most defiling substances—including human excrement—became for him the pure Body of God. Thus the shit of his Scarlet Woman, Leah Hirsig, became the “Thelemic Host” in his Gnostic Mass:

My mouth burned; my throat choked, my belly wretched; my blood fled wither who knows... She stood above in hideous contempt... She ate all the body of God and with Her soul's compulsion made me eat... My teeth grew rotten, my tongue ulcered, raw was my throat, spasm-torn my belly, and all my Doubt of that which to Her teeth was moonlight and to her tongue ambrosia; to her throat nectar, in her belly the One God.<sup>94</sup>

While Crowley's rituals might strike many readers as disgusting, bizarre, insane, or simply absurd, they do in fact possess a very clear and coherent logic. His own stated goal was nothing less than to tear down and destroy the old, dying world of Western Christianity and the prudish Victorian society in which he was raised. If this was a religion and society built upon stern sexual morality and social taboos, then the surest way to destroy that world would be to systematically overturn, invert, and violate those taboos. Only then could he hope to raise up in their place the new law of Thelema, “Do what thou wilt”: As he put it in a letter to his brother-in-law, Gerald Kelly,

<sup>92</sup> Crowley, 1918 Diary (O.T.O. Archives), cited in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 265.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>94</sup> *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, 235.

I say today: to hell with Christianity, Rationalism, Buddhism all the lumber of the centuries. I bring you a positive and primaevial fact, Magic by name: and with this I will build me a new Heaven and a new Earth. I want none of your faint approval or faint dispraise; I want blasphemy, murder, rape, revolution, anything, bad or good but strong.<sup>95</sup>

Yet in the end, Crowley was really a deeply ambivalent and contradictory figure, a man who embodied many of the fundamental cultural contradictions of Western society in the early twentieth century. A kind of “Beast with two Backs,” he was a striking exemplar of the very same late Victorian society that he fought to hard to overthrow.<sup>96</sup> His own relentless quest for transgression, his pre-occupation with masturbation, sodomy and self-defilement, only shows that he was never really able to transcend the taboos of his Victorian childhood. As the Schrecks observe, even Crowley, “who spent decades reacting to the sexual repression of his upbringing in an extreme Christian sect, never completely deprogrammed himself. Even in his sixties, one gets the impression he was still ‘being a bad boy,’ doing everything he could to outrage his long-dead parents.”<sup>97</sup> By the end of his life in 1947, Crowley also seemed to have reached much the same state of exhaustion and collapse experienced by Europe at the end of World War II: like the grand ideals of European modernism, his dreams of a glorious new age of Thelema had ended not in a utopian society, but in drug addiction, loneliness, and squalor.

*Sex, Transgression and Liberation, East and West: A Brief Comparison*

Kulacara must be kept completely secret. In the *Nilatantra* it is said, the Kula rituals must be performed in an isolated place, and there must be no opportunity for common people to see

Krishnananda Agamavagisha, *Brihat Tantrasara*  
(sixteenth century)

<sup>95</sup> Crowley, quoted in Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast*, 44.

<sup>96</sup> See Urban, “The Beast with Two Backs.” Martin likewise describes Crowley as “both an effect and a cause of the shift in turn of the century Zeitgeist from Queen Victoria to D.H. Lawrence” (*Orthodox Heresy*, 183).

<sup>97</sup> Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*, 142.

Even the perversions in the excrescences of most modern fermentation are at their bases of divine origin.

Theodor Reuss, Introduction to *Lingam-Yoni* (1906)

If we compare the various forms of esoteric practice found in traditional Hindu Shakta Tantra and those in modern western movements like Reuss' O.T.O., I think we find both remarkable similarities and profound differences.<sup>98</sup> Both the Shakta Tantrikas and the O.T.O. engage in deliberately transgressive ritual acts that systematically violate conventional social codes and moral laws; and in both cases, these transgressions center at least in part around ritualized sexual intercourse and the consumption of sexual fluids as a source of super-human magical power. Both, moreover, are generally quite male-oriented and arguably even misogynistic in certain respects, making the male practitioner the primary beneficiary of the rites and treating women largely as tools (perhaps dispensable ones, at that) in secret ritual.

Apart from these interesting similarities, however, there are also fairly obvious and important differences between the Tantric and O.T.O. rites. First and foremost, Reuss begins from the fundamental (mis)identification of Tantra with sex. Following the nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and European Orientalist scholars, Reuss defines Tantra essentially as "sexual worship"—the only difference being that he turns the Orientalist narrative completely on its head, by regarding this Tantric sexual worship not as a depraved confusion of religion and sensuality but as the most needed spiritual remedy for a prudish, hypocritical Christian society. From Reuss' time onward, this basic (mis)equation of Tantra with sex has been a consistent theme in virtually every popular Western text on Tantra, from *Tantra without Tears* to *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Tantric Sex*.

Second and more important, most traditional forms of Hindu Tantra are by no means the subversive, anti-social, or revolutionary force that they are commonly imagined to be by western onlookers. As we have seen in the case of Krishnananda, most Tantric authors were quite conservative and limited their transgressive actions to the confines of highly controlled secret ritual. Outside of the ritual circle, social boundaries and gender relations were re-asserted, indeed, argu-

<sup>98</sup> For a more detailed comparison, see Urban, "The Power of the Impure."

ably even reinforced. Conversely, Reuss and virtually all later “Western Tantrikas” have embraced Tantra as a radical force of resistance and challenge to the existing social order. Since Reuss’ time down through the sexual revolutions of the 1960s, and continuing to this day, Tantra has been transformed into what neo-Tantric guru Nik Douglas calls an “engine of political change.”<sup>99</sup> As Nikolas and Zeena Schreck put it in their manual of twenty-first-century sex magic, Tantra is the path of “social defiance,” based on the “refusal to follow his or her society’s religious restrictions;” it is, as such, inherently opposed to any form of totalitarianism:

If the left-hand path is dangerous...one of its primary hazards is the peril of freedom in a world almost instinctively committed to crushing liberty in whatever form it might appear. All autocracies have held sway by severely curbing the full development of sexual power in their subjects. The left hand path...must be viewed as a threat to *any* hierarchy that seeks to bridle the development of man into god.<sup>100</sup>

Thus in the course of its remarkable journey to the West, Tantra has been transformed from a highly esoteric and generally conservative tradition into one of the most powerful symbols of sensual pleasure, sexual liberation, and political freedom.

*Conclusions: Tantra, Sex Magic and Neo-Orientalism Today*

A man who desires sexual intercourse because of lust or for the sake of mere pleasure will surely go to the Raurava Hell, O Goddess.

Krishnananda Agamavagisha, *Brihat-Tantrasara*  
(sixteenth century)

Tantra traditions come from ancient practices in India, Nepal and China. Whereas once they were reserved for royalty, now they are for all of us. The practices also help heal past hurts, often stored in sexual centers of the body, so that you can be more...open to love

Kuriansky, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tantric Sex*  
(2001)

<sup>99</sup> Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*, 315.

<sup>100</sup> Schreck and Schreck, *Demons of the Flesh*, 9–10.

Once Reuss and the O.T.O. had let the “secrets” of sex magic and Tantra out of the bag, a wide array of erotic-magical traditions would begin to flourish through Europe and the United States. In the process, the sexual magic derived from Randolph and the O.T.O. would be increasingly mingled and (con)fused with a somewhat garbled version of Indian Tantra. Reuss himself seems to have been aware of the dangers of revealing these sexual secrets. Already in 1906, in his *Lingam-Yoni*, he predicted that these Eastern teachings on sexual magic would very likely be misunderstood and abused by many:

Some Tartuffe may say that we are “immoral”, “corrupting.” etc., but we are prepared for that... While treating of this subject as we do in this work we will touch upon and describe many things which might inspire libertines of both sexes to perverted thoughts, which is only natural, but not our fault. To the pure, as we know, everything is pure.<sup>101</sup>

The O.T.O. itself gave birth to a number of offshoots and rival movements, such as the Fraternitas Saturni, the Fraternitas Rosicruciana Antiqua, the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the Typhonian current and the Ordo Templi Orientis Antiqua, a breakaway branch formed in 1921 which focused on sex magic and Voodoo. Today, as critics like Peter König observe, the once highly esoteric O.T.O. has become quite popularized and commercialized, as we can now discover all the secrets Tantric sex magic so long as we are prepared to pay for the costly series of initiations.<sup>102</sup>

Not only did Tantra and sex magic begin to proliferate throughout these esoteric traditions, but they also began to spread throughout Western popular culture in the twentieth century. Already in 1906, the first Tantrik Order in America was founded by the infamous Dr. Pierre Arnold Bernard, better known in the popular press as the “Omnipotent Oom” and the “Loving Guru.”<sup>103</sup> By the 1960s, Tantra had become increasingly incorporated into the countercultural movement and widely associated with not just sexual freedom, but also with movements toward political liberation and social revolution. Thus, in 1964, Omar Garrison published his *Yoga of Sex*, promising that through Tantra yoga “man can achieve the sexual potency which enables him to extend the ecstasy crowning sexual union for an hour or more, rather than the

<sup>101</sup> Reuss, Introduction to *Lingam-Yoni*.

<sup>102</sup> König, “Ordo Templi Orientis: The McDonaldisation of Occulture.”

<sup>103</sup> On Bernard see Urban, “The Omnipotent Oom.”

brief seconds he now knows.”<sup>104</sup> Finally, perhaps the most infamous Neo-Tantric master of the 1980s was Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (a.k.a. “Osho”), the self-styled “Guru of the Rich.” As Rajneesh re-defined it, Tantra is the ultimate path of individual freedom and rebellion against the fixed norms of mainstream society: “Tantra is a dangerous philosophy, it is a dangerous religion... [M]an has not yet been courageous enough to try it on a larger scale because the society does not allow it... [T]he society thinks this is absolute sin... Tantra believes in joy because joy is God.”<sup>105</sup>

In sum, it would seem that the “Orient” has not simply been a realm of other-worldly mysticism and transcendent spirituality in the Western imagination, as Richard King suggests. On the contrary, there has always been another darker, more disturbing, but also more tantalizing image of in the Orient in the Western gaze: the fantasy of the exotic, erotic, hyper-sensual fantasy Orient, most clearly embodied in the Western fascination with Tantra. The O.T.O. is simply one of the more extreme examples of this fetishization of Tantra, one of the first to combine Tantra with Western methods of sexual magic, and the first of many to re-imagine Tantra as a path of social and political liberation. In this respect, Reuss not only foreshadowed the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s by half a century, he also helped pave the way for the sexual theories of neo-Freudians like Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse—both of whom also closely linked sexual liberation with social and political liberation.<sup>106</sup>

Today, as we surf the “Tantra.com” web-site or browse our *Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tantric Sex*, it would seem that Tantra has been thoroughly commodified and mass-marketed as the most exotic, erotic form of the exotic Orient itself. According to Kuriansky’s “idiot” version, this is a simple, direct method to achieve both sexual and spiritual ecstasy. As such, it is naturally “consistent with Western obsessions with worldly pleasures” and our quick-fix mentality:

<sup>104</sup> Garrison, *Tantra*, xxviii, xxvi.

<sup>105</sup> Osho, *The Tantric Transformation*, 293; see Urban, *Tantra*, ch. 6.

<sup>106</sup> See Reich, *Selected Writings*; Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 197–211. As Altman observes, “The idea of sexual liberation as integral to larger social and political liberation was an underlying theme in radical and romantic theories since the early nineteenth century and became central to both the counterculture and New Left movements of the 1970s” (*Global Sex*, 160).

Although tantric practices were developed in the Eastern part of the world, they are particularly...appealing to the Western world today...Tantric sex promises simple steps and instant results, which are appealing to Westerners who are conditioned to "instant" lifestyles (instant coffee, fast food, instant gratification) and quick fixes.<sup>107</sup>

In short, Tantra in its Western forms has been remarkably transformed into a life-affirming technique of self-improvement that fits quite nicely with American capitalism and consumer culture. One is thus tempted to agree with König that what we are witnessing is a kind of "McDonaldisation of occultism," transmitting a form of "McGnosis" based on O.T.O. sex-magic: "It is only a matter of time before we see the 'Caliphate' not only selling T-shirts with the O.T.O.-lamen and...pornography but also frozen 'Amrita' (the sexual-secretion cocktail) over the Internet."<sup>108</sup>

In the end, it would seem that we have not advanced all that far beyond the sexual obsessions and transgressive fantasies of our Orientalist forefathers. If anything, our Orientalism has only expanded with the expanding networks of transnational capitalism. Today, we not only project our own suppressed desires onto the eroticized mirror of the Orient, but we also repackage these reflected phantasms for a new generation of spiritual consumers in a much larger global marketplace of exotic religions.

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<sup>107</sup> Kuriansky, *The Complete Idiot's Guide*, 8, 9.

<sup>108</sup> König, "Ordo Templi Orientis."



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