

Religious Experience

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Dissolving Division: Religious experience in the philosophy of Aleister Crowley

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Introduction

There is no grace: there is no guilt: This is the Law: DO WHAT THOU WILT!¹

Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Lies* – Chapter 44

Aleister Crowley (1875 – 1947) is undoubtedly one of the most colourful characters in the history of modern religious movements.² ‘Aleister’ was born Edward Alexander Crowley, in Royal Leamington Spa, England, and his family were members of the Exclusive Sect of the Plymouth Brethren. For the majority of his childhood and early adolescence Crowley had little access to any reading material other than the King James Version of the Bible. In 1895, Crowley entered Trinity College, Cambridge, as a student of the Moral Sciences. Crowley left Cambridge without graduating, and seems to have spent most of his time there avidly reading all the classics of poetry, literature, religion, and philosophy that were forbidden to him during his youth. It was during this time that Crowley reports having his first mystical experience, although the remainder of his life became distinguished by an increasing appetite for such experiences. He went on to achieve some renown during his lifetime as a poet, a novelist, a mountaineer, and in his later years, a painter.

Crowley is commonly remembered now as the most famous or, alternatively, the most infamous occultist, mystic, and magician of the twentieth century. He is particularly notable for having experimented extensively with various combinations of sexual activity and psychoactive drugs together with the practices of ceremonial magic. The tabloid newspapers of his day undoubtedly contributed to his long-lasting fame when they branded him: ‘The Wickedest Man in the World’, ‘The King of Depravity’, and ‘The Man We Want to Hang’. Crowley also presumably did his reputation no favours when he self-identified as ‘The Great Beast 666’ and proclaimed himself the prophet of a new religious movement called Thelema. The main principles of Thelema are: ‘Every man and every woman is a star’, ‘Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law’, and ‘Love is the law, love under will’. He died in relative obscurity in 1947. From the late-1960s onwards, Crowley became increasingly well-known as a figure of 20th century popular culture: he was

1 Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Lies* (San Francisco, CA: Weiser, 1981), pp. 98-99.

2 For a concise overview of Crowley’s life and work, see: Marco Pasi, ‘Aleister Crowley’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 281-287. For a full biographical account of Crowley’s life with extensive references, see: Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

immortalized by the Beatles by his inclusion on the 1967 album-cover of *Sergeant Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club Band*. In recent years, he has begun to receive increasing attention as a topic of scholarly research.³ Valuable studies of Crowley and Thelema with respect to religious and cultural topics have already been written.⁴

It is my intention to analyse the conception of religious experience developed in the writings of Aleister Crowley and to examine its role in his philosophy. This concept of religious experience will be examined with respect to its role in relation to a number of different issues in Aleister Crowley's thought.⁵ In the first section, we see Crowley (i) hypothesize religious experience as the source of religious genius and the historical origin of religions, (ii) provide a universal phenomenological characterization of such experiences, and finally (iii) suggest that these experiences should be investigated scientifically.⁶ In the second section, we see Crowley place his concept of religious experience as the single goal of two distinct techniques of practical spiritual attainment, namely (a) meditative yoga and (b) ceremonial magic.⁷ In the third section, we encounter a Crowley who blends the terminology of epistemology and religious experience in an attempt to transcend the paradoxes of each.⁸ I will conclude that Crowley's concept of religious experience has scientific value insofar as it may be used a foundation for proper investigation. It is important for scholars of religion to understand since it plays such a crucial and central role in Crowley's religious thought. Indeed, it is key to his entire philosophy and a fundamental component of the religion Thelema.

3 For a collection of academic articles on Crowley, see: *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4 For instance, currently the most thorough analysis of Crowley's philosophy and system of magic is: Marco Pasi, 'Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice', in *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 6.2 (2011), 123-162.

5 The choice of Crowley primary source material has been made accordingly and is limited to philosophical prose monographs published during his lifetime, under his supervision, as these show the development of his philosophical system. They are: *Book 4: Part I – Mysticism* (1912), *Book 4: Part II – Ceremonial Magick* (1913), *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929), *Eight Lectures on Yoga* (1938), and *Little Essays Toward Truth* (1939).

6 For the most significant primary source for this section, see: 'Introduction' to *Book 4: Part I – Mysticism* (1912).

7 The main sources used in this section for Crowley on yoga are: *Book 4: Part I – Mysticism* (1912) and *Eight Lectures on Yoga* (1938). The main sources in this section for Crowley on magick are: *Part II – Ceremonial Magick* (1913) and *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929).

8 The main sources used here for Crowley on knowledge, truth, and certainty are: *Eight Lectures on Yoga* (1938) and *Little Essays Toward Truth* (1939).

1. Religious Genius and Religious Experience

No religion has failed hitherto by not promising enough; the present breaking up of all religions is due to the fact that people have asked to see the securities. ... Legends of miracle are perhaps universal, but these, in the absence of demonstrative proof, are repugnant to common sense. ... There is, however, one form of miracle which certainly happens, the influence of the genius. There is no known analogy in Nature. One cannot even think of a 'super-dog' transforming the world of dogs, whereas in the history of mankind this happens with regularity and frequency.⁹

Book 4 – Introduction

We place no reliance on virgin or pigeon; our method is science, our aim is religion.¹⁰

Eight Lectures on Yoga: Yoga for Yahoos – Fourth Lecture

Crowley's analysis of religions begins with the ominous assertion: 'Existence, as we know it, is full of sorrow. ... every man is a condemned criminal, only he does not know the date of his execution'.¹¹ Since the knowledge of eventual certain death can be an unpleasant burden, we do everything we can do avoid the sentence and would give anything to have it lifted. According to Crowley, all religions and philosophies have developed in response to this concern, and attract followers 'by promising their adherents some such reward as immortality'.¹² To ascertain if there is any truth to religious claims, the promises of religions ought to be carefully and critically assessed. Crowley considers whether there is any thing upon which all religions have agreed. If so, it is certainly not a point of agreement upon doctrine or dogma: 'Even so simple an idea as that of a supreme and eternal being is denied by a third of the human race. Legends of miracle are perhaps universal, but these, in the absence of demonstrative proof, are repugnant to common sense.'¹³

9 Aleister Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA, Book 4, Parts I-IV*, with Mary Desti and Leila Waddell, 2nd rev. edn, ed. by Hymenaeus Beta [William Breeze] (San Francisco, CA: Weiser, 2010), p. 7-8.

10 Aleister Crowley, *Eight Lectures on Yoga* (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 1992), p. 48.

11 *Magick*, p 7.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

Looking elsewhere for the point of agreement among religions, Crowley says: ‘what of the origin of religions? How is it that unproved assertion has so frequently compelled the assent of all classes of mankind? Is not this a miracle?’¹⁴ The historical impact of religious geniuses such as Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed is undeniable, so Crowley is compelled to ask if they all share any common factor:

No point of doctrine, no point of ethics, no theory of a “hereafter” do they share, and yet in the history of their lives we find one identity amid many diversities. ... Elaborate lives of each have been written by devotees, and there is one thing common to all three -- an omission. We hear nothing of Christ between the ages of twelve and thirty. Mohammed disappeared into a cave. Buddha left his palace, and went for a long while into the desert. Each of them, perfectly silent up to the time of the disappearance, came back and immediately began to preach a new law.¹⁵

So a point of agreement in the stories of religious geniuses is that they all crucially turn upon a pivotal period of time about which most accounts are conspicuously silent: a period during which a ‘nobody goes away, and comes back a somebody’.¹⁶ What happened to these individuals during this time? Crowley posits that they had ‘an experience of the class which fifty years ago would have been called supernatural, to-day may be called spiritual, and fifty years hence will have a proper name based on an understanding of the phenomenon which occurred.’¹⁷

Therefore, according to Crowley, there is at least one point of agreement among disparate religious traditions. In general, the narrative accounts of the lives of religious geniuses follow a pattern.¹⁸ The basic story is that of a hitherto relatively unexceptional individual, who undergoes a mysterious period of absence from worldly contacts, during which they are transformed, and from which they return apparently sufficiently inspired to initiate, or to provoke the initiation of, a religious movement. The transformation each underwent was due to a distinct type of experience: ‘the “vision of God,” or “Union with God,” or “*Samadhi*,” or whatever we may agree to call it’.¹⁹ I shall refer to it as the ‘religious experience’ in this paper. According to Crowley, of these

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 8.

16 Ibid. Crowley, who considered himself a prophet and a religious genius also, would later write several accounts of his own ‘religious’ career. It is not surprising then that his own ‘autohagiography’ (or ‘autobiography of a saint’) also pivots upon a crucial turning point of transformation about which very little is known for sure. See, for example: Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, ed. by John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (London: Penguin, 1979). Also, *Equinox of the Gods*, in *Magick*, pp. 287-446.

17 Ibid., p. 9.

18 It should be noted that this also applies to Crowley’s own literary depiction of himself.

19 Ibid., p. 14.

experiences there are 'many kinds and many degrees, although there is an impassable abyss between the least of them and the greatest of all the phenomena of normal consciousness'.²⁰ In his view, experiences of this sort are the origin of what we call religions. The differences which we see manifest in the religious doctrines of the prophets satisfy different biological and cultural necessities imposed by environmental circumstance, or perhaps they are indicative of some difference in 'degree' or 'kind' of religious experience. Nevertheless, despite their differences, all prophets have had an experience of this 'religious' class. Further, the forms of consciousness associated with religious experiences are of a drastically different order to normal consciousness. Crowley thus arrives at his basic theory of religious experience.

Religions and religious movements are founded upon the teachings of religious geniuses. Religious genius is the result of a particular kind of inspirational and transformative experience, which I shall label a 'religious experience'. Religious experiences are characterized by non-'normal' forms of consciousness. There are distinguishing characteristics which allow us to differentiate between the forms of consciousness associated with religious experiences and 'normal consciousness'. By normal consciousness, Crowley means a state of consciousness where the knowing subject is distinct from the object known and essentially defines itself by that distinction.²¹ The distinctive mark of normal consciousness is the immediate experience of the *self as an aware subject* who is distinct from the *object of its awareness*. Therefore, it is a state of consciousness in which there is a strong distinction between everything that is 'the self' and everything that is not-'the self'. So 'normal consciousness' is defined to be of a particular form: strongly dualist and characterized by a clear division between subject and object. This is sharply contrasted by Crowley's assertion about religious experiences, wherein:

this consciousness of the Ego and the non-Ego, the seer and the thing seen, the knower and the thing known, is blotted out. There is usually an intense light, an intense sound, and a feeling of such overwhelming bliss that the resources of language have been exhausted again and again in the attempt to describe it. It is an absolute knock-out blow to the mind. It is so vivid and tremendous that those who experience it are in the gravest danger of losing all sense of proportion. By its light all other events of life are as darkness.²²

So while normal consciousness is characterized by a strongly dualist division between subject and

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., pp. 12-13.

22 Ibid., p. 13.

object, the form of consciousness associated with a religious experience is distinguished by the dissolution of that division and the union of subject and object in consciousness. Crowley asserts that these experiences may be attained by the application of will, and can be investigated scientifically:

‘To sum up,’ we assert a secret source of energy which explains the phenomenon of Genius. We do not believe in any supernatural explanations, but insist that this source may be reached by the following out of definite rules, the degree of success depending upon the capacity of the seeker, and not upon the favour of any Divine Being. We assert that the critical phenomenon which determines success is an occurrence in the brain *characterized essentially by the uniting of subject and object*. We propose to discuss this phenomenon, analyse its nature, determine accurately the physical, mental and moral conditions which are favourable to it, to ascertain its cause, and thus to produce it in ourselves, so that we may adequately study its effects.²³

So Crowley has outlined a phenomenological and naturalized characterization of religious experience. Religious experience (i) is a natural phenomenon, (ii) is distinguished by a particular transformations of consciousness, and (iii) is wilfully attainable by all according to natural and scientific principles. Crowley concludes by proposing a scientific and experimental approach to the attainment of such experiences, in order to reap the benefits of the creative genius it inspires. Crowley summarized his approach in the motto of his periodical journal of occultism *The Equinox*: ‘The Method of Science, the Aim of Religion’.²⁴ He also provides what could be described as the ‘initial religious postulate’ of his scientific investigation into religious experience:

‘The main idea is that the Infinite, the Absolute, God, the Oversoul, or whatever you may prefer to call it, is always present, but veiled or masked by the thoughts of the mind, just as one cannot hear a heartbeat in a noisy city. ... to obtain knowledge of That, it is only necessary to still all thoughts.’²⁵

The next section shall deal with what Crowley considered to be the best techniques for stilling all thoughts to unveil the ever-present Infinite: meditative yoga and ceremonial magick.

23 Ibid., p. 14.

24 *The Equinox, Vol I.*, published 1909 – 1913. For an analysis of Crowley’s scientific methodology, particularly with respect to magical practices, see: Egil Asprem, ‘Magic Naturalized? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism’, in *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, 8.2 (2008), 139-166.

25 *Magick*, p. 42.

2. Yoga & Magick: Two Ways to Religious Experience

There is more nonsense talked and written about Yoga than about anything else in the world. Most of this nonsense, which is fostered by charlatans, is based upon the idea that there is something mysterious and Oriental about it. There isn't. ... Yoga is first of all the union of the subject and the object of consciousness: of the seer with the thing seen.²⁶

Eight Lectures on Yoga: Yoga for Yahoos – First Lecture

Now what is Magick? Magick is the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with the Will. How do we achieve this? By exalting the will to the point where it is master of circumstance. And how do we do this? By so ordering every thought, word and act, in such a way that the attention is constantly recalled to the chosen object.²⁷

Eight Lectures on Yoga: Yoga for Yellowbellies – Fourth Lecture

It is probably best to deal with yoga and magick in turn initially, and then proceed to discuss the ways in which they overlap and relate to each other.²⁸ In *Book 4*, Crowley effectively equates the practices of yoga, mysticism, meditation, and prayer. According to Crowley, all of these practices are in essence identical: they involve the concentration of the mind upon one particular object, with the goal of uniting with that object.²⁹ Successful union, as mentioned earlier, is characterised by the annihilation of the distinction between subject and object in consciousness. Further, he describes the practical basics of meditative yoga by entirely naturalistic explanations. It is heavily emphasised that the specifics of practices are strongly determined by the psychological or physiological

²⁶ *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁸ Crowley later came to use the terms 'yoga' and 'magick' in a broader sense. When the capitalized form is given, i.e. 'Yoga' or 'Magick', they can have a deeper philosophical connotation. In the narrow sense they refer to the actual practices of meditative yoga and ceremonial magick. When used in the broader sense, Yoga and Magick are best understood as systems of thought developed according to the metaphysics implied by the practices of meditative yoga and ceremonial magick. The physical practices of yoga and magick essentially exemplify the philosophy of Yoga and Magick in a very concrete way. He calls them the 'Ways of Union': Yoga being the 'Way' of the mystic and Magick the 'Way' of the magician. This section deals only with the physical practices, not the philosophies.

²⁹ *Magick*, p. 10.

conditions favourable to wilfully transcending normal consciousness.³⁰ For example, *asana*, the practice of holding the body still in a particular posture for an extended period of time, has the physiological effect of silencing the mind's awareness of the body.³¹ *Pranayama*, the practice of focusing on and controlling one's breathing, has the physiological effect of regulating the body's natural processes so that their rhythmic functioning presents no distraction to the mind.³² *Yama* and *niyama*, the practices of controlling and regulating one's lifestyle and behaviour, have the psychological effect of eliminating environmental and emotional distractions to meditation.³³ The psychological effect of *pratyahara*, the practice of focusing and controlling mental activity, is that the mind is intentionally constrained to one object. Ultimate success in these practices leads to the experience of *samadhi*, which is one label for the religious experience he sometimes labels 'Union with God'. In a later work, *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, written and delivered in 1938, Crowley went on 'to proclaim the entire doctrine of Yoga in the fewest possible words [as] ... Sit still. Stop thinking. Shut up. Get out!'³⁴

However, According to Crowley: 'Only by experience can the student discover the ingenuity of the mind in trying to escape from control. ... This fact is the root of all the legends about the "Saint" being tempted by the "Devil." ... It would almost seem as if one could not successfully practice meditation until the Will had become so strong that no force in the Universe could either bend or break it.'³⁵ So the main difficulty with yoga or meditation is that once one begins the basic practices, one very quickly discovers the difficulty involved in focusing and concentrating the mind. The problem then shifts to the question of how to train the will such that it becomes able to concentrate the mind. Crowley's solution to this problem is to strengthen the will by the practices of ceremonial magick.³⁶ Crowley had inherited a rich symbolic system of magical correspondences from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the famous Victorian secret initiatory society that taught ritual magic.³⁷ He had further supplemented this with his own wide knowledge of Eastern

30 Ibid., p. 11.

31 For more details on *asana*, see: *Magick*, pp. 15 – 17; and, *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, pp. 47 – 57.

32 For more details on *pranayama*, see: *Magick*, pp. 18 – 21; and, *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, pp. 57 – 61.

33 For more details on *yama* and *niyama*, see: *Magick*, pp. 22 – 23; and, *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, pp. 20 – 46.

34 *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 48. The first two steps describe the physical and psychological practices of yoga such as *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, etc.; while the second two steps describe the results of successful yoga practice.

35 *Magick*, p. 47.

36 Ibid., p. 47-48. Crowley initially characterizes meditative yoga as focusing and concentrating the mind, and ceremonial magick as focusing and concentrating the will. He later adopts a view which does not imply the subservience of one to the other, but considers them as two partners or 'lovers'. *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 111.

37 For more, see: Robert A. Gilbert, 'Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn', in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 544-550.

religious philosophies and his first-hand experience practising magic and yoga.³⁸ In 1903, he wrote: 'Our Ceremonial Magic fines down, then, to a series of minute, though of course empirical, physiological experiments, and whoso will carry them through intelligently need not fear the result.'³⁹ At that time he had a naturalistic, and purely physiological, interpretation of Golden Dawn style ritual magic, although this would develop and change over time. *Book 4* contains a relatively thorough account of Crowley's personally over-hauled Golden Dawn ceremonial system: 'We shall consider a simple form of magick, harmonized from many systems old and new, describing the various weapons of the Magician and the furniture of his temple. We shall explain to what each really corresponds, and discuss the construction and the use of everything'.⁴⁰

The following summary gives some impression of the sorts of forces and faculties symbolically represented and the kinds of symbolic relationships involved:

The Magician works in a *Temple*; the Universe, which is (be it remembered!) conterminous with himself. [footnote: By 'yourself' you mean the contents of your consciousness. All without does not exist for you.] In this temple a *Circle* is drawn upon the floor for the limitation of his working. This circle is protected by divine names, the influences on which he relies to keep out hostile thoughts. Within the circle stands an *Altar*, the solid basis on which he works, the foundation of all. Upon the Altar are his *Wand, Cup, Sword, and Pantacle*, to represent his Will, his Understanding, his Reason, and the lower parts of his being, respectively.⁴¹

In essence, the practice of ceremonial magick involves the manipulation of symbols and physical implements in a ritualistic fashion in order to exalt the consciousness of the magician to some particular desired state. Crowley says of ceremonial magick:

There is a single main definition of the object of all magical ritual. It is the uniting of the Microcosm with the Macrocosm. The Supreme and Complete Ritual is therefore the Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel; or in the language of Mysticism, Union with God.⁴²

So the supreme purpose of ceremonial magick then is to exalt the will and consciousness of the magician, through the manipulation of symbols and physical implements in a ritualistic fashion, to

38 Particularly the magical theories and practices described in *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage*, as translated by Samuel Liddell 'MacGregor' Mathers.

39 Aleister Crowley, 'The Initiated Interpretation of Ceremonial Magic', in *The Goetia: The Lesser Key of Solomon the King – Clavicula Salomonis Regis*, 2nd edn, trans. by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, ed. by Aleister Crowley (San Francisco, CA: Weiser, 1997), pp. 15 – 20 (p. 18).

40 Magick, p. 48.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 144.

the point of *samadhi* or 'Union with God', or to Invoke the Holy Guardian Angel.

In 1907, Crowley founded the A.:A.:, his own magical order: a thoroughly re-worked and widely expanded version of the Golden Dawn system. In Crowley's magical system, the magical aspirant must undertake an initiatory process described as obtaining 'the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel'. Crowley describes it as a path by which the normal consciousness of the magician is transformed into a more divinely inspired one.⁴³ The magician, as subject, must then aspire to unite with the Holy Guardian Angel, the object of the magician's devotion. Therefore, the purpose of magick is the same as that of yoga: to dissolve and transcend the division between subject and object, and thereby transform consciousness. The experience of success in these practices are labelled similarly: 'union with god' or '*samadhi*' or 'the Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel'. Crowley would later say: 'We see then that the exaltation of the mind by means of magical practices leads (as one may say, in spite of itself) to the same results as occur in straightforward Yoga.'⁴⁴ In other words, while the practices of both meditative yoga and ceremonial magick make take different routes, both ultimately lead to the same results.⁴⁵ Religious experiences and religious forms of consciousness are the goals of both. Essentially, the core principle of each technique of religious attainment suggested by Crowley is the willed dissolution of the division between subject and object. This is the goal of what Crowley calls 'yoga', an introverted practice of consciousness transformation. This is the purpose of what he calls 'magick', an extroverted practice of consciousness transformation. For Crowley, ultimately every moment of experience is potentially religious: the subject must only realize this potential and unite with its object in an act of 'love under will'. The practices of yoga and magick are presented as two proven techniques for exercising the will to do so.

43 He also says that this constitutes the 'raising of the complete man in a vertical straight line. Any deviation from this line tends to become black magic. Any other operation *is* black magic.' Ibid., p. 275. In other words, unless the goal of a ritual is union with the divine, or unless the goal *is* somehow subservient to divine union, it tends toward 'black magic'. Magical ritual may also be used for performing instrumental forms of magic aimed at gaining material advantages. Crowley himself practised instrumental magic. He accepted efficacy of such magic, provided it was properly performed according to correct principles. However, he thought that magic had built-in safeguards which would inevitably impel the practitioners to aspire higher. For instance, in order to evoke a demon to perform some task, he claimed the magician would first have to invoke a more pure and holy intelligence: the intelligence which governs the particular demon in question. Thus, the magician is forced to seek higher forms of knowledge and consult higher intelligences before acting, and the magician's aspiration and devotion to the higher will be strengthened. As this continues, the magician's consciousness becomes more purified and eventually discovers the necessity of invoking the Holy Guardian Angel.

44 *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 110.

45 A broad survey of Crowley's work suggests that devotion to practice and aspiration to divinity are the key techniques of attainment in both fields.

3. Certainty and Religious Experience

Nothing is any use to us unless it be a certainty unshakeable by criticism of any kind, and there is only one thing in the universe which complies with these conditions: the direct experience of spiritual truth. Here, and here only, do we find a position in which the great religious minds of all times and all climes coincide.⁴⁶

Eight Lectures on Yoga: Yoga for Yellowbellies – Third Lecture

The only correct and adequate mode of the Attainment of Understanding is to shut off and to inhibit the rational mind altogether ...⁴⁷

Little Essays Toward Truth – Understanding

This section shall examine the ways that the concepts of certainty and religious experience are related in Crowley's thought insofar as his characterization of religious experience extends into the domain of epistemology. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which deals with 'theories of knowledge'. The concept of 'certainty' is central to many theories of knowledge. Questions such as: 'what is certain?' and 'how can we be certain that what we know is true?' are epistemological questions. 'I think therefore I am', is probably the most famous statement of epistemology. The French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596 – 1650) understood this proposition to be impervious to criticism and therefore he took it as an indubitable certainty. For Crowley, 'the direct experience of spiritual truth' is the only thing which possess a 'certainty unshakeable by criticism of any kind'. What does Crowley mean here by 'certainty'? The following quote gives some clue:

the phenomena of high Magick and *samadhi* have an authenticity, and confer *an interior certainty, which is to the experience of waking life as that is to a dream*. ... the real guarantee that we have of the attainment of reality is its rank in the hierarchy of the mind.⁴⁸

Here certainty seems to refer to the strongly felt conviction of the reality of a phenomenon. Religious experiences approach 'reality' more nearly than normal consciousness, to the same degree

46 *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 97.

47 Aleister Crowley, *Little Essays Toward Truth* (Scottsdale, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 1991), p. 67.

48 *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 113.

that normal consciousness approaches 'reality' more nearly than dream consciousness. It therefore ranks more highly in the 'hierarchy of the mind'. What then is the main distinction between normal sensory perception and exalted religious states of certainty? Crowley says 'the difference is simply that the impression is deeper'.⁴⁹ In other words, they are experientially more vivid. Religious experiences not only produce an immediate sense of deeply impressed certainty, but they are also less subject to doubt than normal experiences:

if one attacks the evidence for *dhyana* [a successful result of yoga], the mind is staggered by the fact that all other experience, attacked on the same lines, will fall much more easily. In whatever way we examine it the result will always be the same. *Dhyana* may be false; but, if so, so is everything else.⁵⁰

In other words, as a result of the deep impression of certainty imposed by the experience, one cannot doubt the reality of that experience as easily as one can doubt other experiences. It seems even if one could doubt the reality of a religious experience on some argumentative grounds, the same argument would undermine the reality of all other experiences even more drastically. The direct experience of spiritual truth, the religious experience, the union of subject and object, is beyond rational and theological trifling.

From the above we may conclude that greater certainty is associated with forms of consciousness characterized by less duality and more unity, and certainty is a property conferred by experience. With this in mind, it is interesting to consider Crowley's epistemology, in which intellectual analysis 'carries no conviction' but 'illumination' does.⁵¹ Intellectual statements, like 'S is P', assert a duality that runs contrary to 'samadhic truth'.⁵² They deny a purer, more certain, form of consciousness in which subject and object are united, and they affirm the division which the mystic and magician both wish to dissolve. Therefore since 'Truth' is 'supra-rational',⁵³ and beyond duality, the 'only correct and adequate mode of the Attainment of Understanding is to shut off and to inhibit the rational mind altogether'.⁵⁴ So, attaining understanding is associated with forms of

49 Ibid., p. 112.

50 *Magick*, p. 34. He also says that it is 'difficult to overrate the value that *dhyana* has for the individual, ... his most deep-seated conception, the standard to which he has always referred everything, his own self, ... is overthrown; and when we try to explain it away ... we find ourselves unable to do so. You cannot argue with a flash of lightning that has knocked you down.' Ibid.

51 *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 110.

52 It is 'an affirmation of duality; or, we may say, intellectual perception is a denial of Samadhic truth. It is therefore essentially false in the depths of its nature.' *Little Essays Toward Truth*, p. 61.

53 Ibid., p. 66.

54 Ibid., p. 67. In other words, Crowley is here recommending yoga as a way to attain understanding.

consciousness characterized by less duality and more unity, and consequently a greater degree of certainty is conferred by the experience. Crowley therefore emphasises the use of spiritual practices which produce personal religious experiences as it is ‘necessarily above dogma, because dogma consists of a collection of intellectual statements, each of which, and also its contradictory, can easily be disputed and overthrown.’⁵⁵ Propositions do not carry certainty and intellectual analysis does not confer it: experiences do. Therefore genuinely attaining understanding or knowledge is like having a religious experience insofar as (i) a division is dissolved, (ii) the normal laws of thought are transcended, and (iii) consciousness is thereby transformed. And, as we have seen, in order to ‘shut off and to inhibit the rational mind altogether’, Crowley recommends yoga or magick (or both).

⁵⁵ *Eight Lectures on Yoga*, p. 97-98.

Conclusion

The man who truly understands the underlying formulæ of one root-subject can easily extend his apprehension to the boughs, leaves, flowers, and fruit.

Little Essays Toward Truth – Understanding

According to Crowley, the origins of the world's religious traditions lies in the transformational religious experiences of the religious geniuses who founded them. Religious experiences are an entirely natural phenomenon; they do not have a supernatural explanation. These experiences are characterized by a dissolution of division between the subject and object of consciousness. These experiences could and should be attained by will and investigated scientifically. Meditative yoga and ceremonial magick are sets of tried and tested physiological and psychological exercises to transform consciousness in this manner. They are distinct but complementary ways to achieve union and transcend duality. They are methods of attaining religious experiences directly. The direct experience of spiritual truth confers an unshakeable interior certainty. The truth of such moments is nearly impossible to doubt in comparison to all other moments: if they fall, then so does the entire epistemological house of cards. The reality of a religious experience is as deeply impressed in that moment as the reality of the world is upon waking from a dream. Intellectual analysis produces in us no truly compelling conviction: analysis and argument can be carried on *ad infinitum*. True understanding is only attained by inhibiting all thoughts and transcending the rational mind: a religious sort of experience. This basic concept of religious experience then, with its formulae of union and dissolution of division, is central to every aspect of Crowley's religious writings. It is at the basis of his naturalistic theory of religion. It is the fundamental item he proposes to scientifically study in his investigation into religion. It is the goal of both yoga and magick. It is even intimately related to his epistemology: he uses distinctly epistemological terms to characterise religious experiences, while religious language is used to characterise knowledge and the experience of its attainment. It is undoubtedly a key component of his thought and is fundamental to understanding his entire philosophical system. It is reasonable to ask what further value is gained from examining Crowley's concept of religious experience. Firstly, Crowley's purely naturalistic interpretation of religious experiences brings them within the realm of scientific investigation, at least from the

perspective of the philosophy of science.⁵⁶ This investigation could be furthered by his phenomenological and epistemological characterization of the form of consciousness associated with religious experiences – so he gives, as it were, the identifying mark of a the kind of experiences to be investigated. Similarly, his naturalistic interpretation of meditative yoga and ceremonial magick also bring them within the realm of science. Crowley also outlines the techniques of yoga and magick in a universal and philosophical way, in order that anybody may begin such practices and aspire to attain. Apart from the scientific value of the concept, it is also worth considering in religious studies because it illuminates aspects of contemporary forms of religious practice inspired by Crowley.⁵⁷ His vision of the new religious paradigm asserts: ‘The New Æon proclaims Man as Immortal God, eternally active to do His Will. All’s Joy, all’s Beauty; this Will we celebrate.’⁵⁸ In the religious formula of the ‘New Æon’, the practice of religion entails increasingly illuminated awareness of existence as ‘pure joy’. This is achieved through the direct experience of the immanence of divinity and of one’s identity with that. Therefore, understanding the role of religious experience in Aleister Crowley’s work, and the philosophy of its attainment, is crucial to understanding the contemporary practice of Thelema. It is impossible to properly appreciate Crowley’s vision of religion without an understanding of the supreme importance he places upon religious practices which bring direct spiritual illumination. The importance and centrality of the direct experience of spiritual truth for religion is emphasised, while faith and rigid adherence to dogma is reviled. This, for example, illustrates one layer of significance to the moment in the Gnostic Mass when the communicant is supposed to declare to the congregation with certainty, not faith: ‘There is no part of me that is not of the gods!’⁵⁹

56 If religious experiences are natural, and science studies nature, then science may investigate religious experiences.

57 In a sense, this applies not only Thelemites, but also to Wiccans for example. The main idea is that religious experiences are the core of religion and these are in principle attainable by anybody; in fact, there exist particular well-known techniques of attainment.

58 Aleister Crowley, *The Law is for All: The Authorized Popular Commentary on Liber AL vel Legis sub figura CCXX: The Book of the Law*, ed. by Louis Wilkinson and Hymenæus Beta (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 1998), p. 124.

59 ‘Liber XV – The Gnostic Mass’, *Magick*, pp. 584–597 (p. 597).

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