

# **Testing Ceremonial Magick**

## **PHL195 Critical Thinking and the Occult**

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The world of Ceremonial Magick is rather complicated. Various schools of thought and diverse ideologies have combined over the centuries to fragment the ritual practices of the past into conflicting and often competing methodologies. Combine this with the rise of materialism which dominates Western culture and we find that Magick itself has taken on a dubious character.

The first step must be to clarify our terms. To do so, I am turning to the last great practitioner of Ceremonial Magick. Whether they hate him or admire him, few who are knowledgeable about Magick dispute that Aleister Crowley was a highly influential magical practitioner of the 20th century. Arguments instead tend to be whether he was evil or whether such an appellation is even relevant. His influence is evident in nearly every modern work on Magick published today (often uncredited) and behind many modern new religions such as Wicca (Gerald Gardner, the creator of Wicca was a disciple of Crowley<sup>1</sup>). Crowley's thought and teachings are known as **Thelema**, which means *Will* in Greek.

The choice of Crowley as an authority upon which to base our definitions is desirable for several reasons. The first is that his philosophy (for want of a better term) is the one with which I am most familiar. Also, Crowley tried to infuse scientific methodology into the practice of magick. His magical order, the A.:A.:, has for its motto "The method of science -- the aim of religion." He wrote numerous books (on both magical and non-magical topics), the majority of which are online.

Considered by many to be his magnum opus on ceremonial magick, Liber ABA contains several theorems of magick in the introduction to part three (called "Magick in Theory and Practice"). Here he states his most well known definition of Magick: "Magick is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will."<sup>2</sup> This definition is a bit difficult for many, since the Will

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1 'Gerald Gardner & O.T.O. | Rodney Orpheus' <[http://rodneyorpheus.com/?page\\_id=271](http://rodneyorpheus.com/?page_id=271)> [accessed 9 March 2010].

2 'Magick in Theory and Practice - Introduction and Theorems' <<http://hermetic.com/crowley/book-4/defs.html>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

has special connotations in Thelemic thought. To grossly simplify it is the purpose and point of one's existence. To do one's will, one must engage in those actions which fulfill oneself. Once we have learned to ignore the distracting fluff of momentary engagement, we find that any action that leads to the fulfillment of one's purpose is magick. This leads to the main problem with this definition in regard to this paper. So defined, any action whether it be writing a paper for one's class or the invocation of the spirit of Mars to destroy one's enemies is an act of Magick. By this light, since it is my Will to continue living, the act of my preparing a meal so that I might be nourished is a magical act. The whole process is detailed by 28 points in the aforementioned introduction. Obviously, this broad definition is not what comes to mind when most think of magick and few would consider it to be Ceremonial Magick.

Crowley wrote a lot of instruction and guidance for his students. One of the preliminary texts is *Liber O* (more fully known as "Liber O vel Manus et Sagittae sub figura IV"). Part I contains some preliminary remarks and cautions:

2. In this book it is spoken of the Sephiroth and the Paths<sup>3</sup>; of Spirits and Conjurations; of Gods, Spheres, Planes, and many other things which may or may not exist.

It is immaterial whether these exist or not. By doing certain things certain results will follow; students are most earnestly warned against attributing objective reality or philosophic validity to any of them.

3. The advantages to be gained from them [magical practices] are chiefly these:

("a") A widening of the horizon of the mind.

("b") An improvement of the control of the mind.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to a system of Judaic mysticism known as the Qaballah.

<sup>4</sup> 'Liber O vel Manus et Sagittae sub figurâ VI' <<http://hermetic.com/crowley/libers/lib6.html>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

The attitude he wished to inculcate is expressed in many locations, perhaps most clearly and poetically in Liber CCCXXXIII (aka "The Book of Lies") where he wrote:

I slept with Faith, and found a corpse in my arms on  
awaking; I drank and danced all night with Doubt,  
and found her a virgin in the morning.<sup>5</sup>

Whether you feel that he established a suitably rigorous model or not, it is clear that Crowley wished to apply the scientific method to Magick. He wished to create a body of knowledge that would create obvious and repeatable results.

Before going too much further, I should first cover some of the problems inherent in any proof of ceremonial magick. First among these is that magick is an extension of the Will. To use magic would require that one have some idea of what one's will actually is. The average mind is a chaotic mess of conflicting desires and barely understood motivations. To glean one's will from this mess typically takes a significant amount of time and effort. Elements of Yoga, Qabala, Ceremonial Magick and the like are listed as part of the training regimen for achieving what Crowley termed the "Knowledge and Conversation with one's Holy Guardian Angel" (commonly abbreviated as K&C). The reading list alone can take a significant portion of time.

As an example of what is necessary, one of the requirements involves Hatha Yoga (what most in the West think of when they think of Yoga) where one has to assume a posture and hold it for thirty minutes. To make sure that you are actually holding the position motionless, a bowl of water filled to the brim is placed on your head. If you spill any, you fail.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned above, the reading list is also impressive. The section "for serious study" has 38 entries alone, some of which represent

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5 'Book of Lies', chap. 45: Chinese Music <<http://hermetic.com/crowley/libers/lib333.html>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

6 Aleister Crowley, 'Liber IX - Liber E vel Exercitiorum', chap. III <<http://hermetic.com/crowley/libers/lib9.html>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

multiple volumes. Some quick examples are: *The Equinox* (Crowley, 11 vol), *The Upanishads* (Vedantism), *The Hathayoga Pradipika* (yoga), *The Dhammapada* (Bhuddism), Erdmann's "*History of Philosophy*" (multiple volumes), *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James), *Science and the Infinite* (Klein), *The Age of Reason* (Paine), *First Principles* (Spencer), *Prolegomena* (Kant) and *Essays of David Hume*.<sup>7</sup> Further, work is also done to strengthen memory and to discipline the body.

Now we get to the purposes to which Magick can be directed. What is your goal? Traditionally, magick has been divided into two broad categories. I generally avoid them because of the pejorative nature of the titles, but they are useful and well known. These categories of magick are "High" and "Low." As one might imagine after years of being overshadowed by Christian values, High Magick refers to spiritual practices meant to guide the path of the soul toward God/Godhood. Low Magick refers to spells and hexes meant to affect a change in the physical world – such as satisfying the the desires for sex and power (however defined). When non-practitioners think of magick, they think of Low Magick. The Witch and the Sorcerer practice Low Magick almost exclusively. Hermetic magick practices both, but likes to pretend that it does not. Crowley eliminated this hypocrisy. He recognized that in order for one to pursue High Magick one's basic needs had to be filled. Low Magick exists as a method to assist in meeting these needs. He cautioned that one should use the most appropriate methods.<sup>8</sup> A simple method of explaining this would be that one must prepare a way for the magick to manifest. If I were to do a ritual for a job, I would increase the likelihood of success by providing any prospective employers with my contact information (e.g., send out my resume).

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7 Aleister Crowley, 'A.: A.: Curriculum' <<http://hermetic.com/crowley/equinox/iii/i/eq0301018.htm>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

8 Aleister Crowley, 'Magick Without Tears -- Chapter LXIV' <[http://hermetic.com/crowley/magick-without-tears/mwt\\_64.html](http://hermetic.com/crowley/magick-without-tears/mwt_64.html)> [accessed 5 March 2010].

This then begs the question of whether the magick actually caused the result to happen.

Pragmatically, it matters little. One has the money one asked for. For the purposes of establishing the validity of Ceremonial Magick, it muddies the water quite a bit. How can one tell whether a desired result occurred due to Cause A or Cause B? Is the "or" exclusionary or not? If it is inclusive, then how much of the result can be attributed to the various contributory causes?

Assuming we could find 100 Adeptus Minor, as defined in *Liber CLXXXV*, who had completed the task of attaining Knowledge and Conversation with their Holy Guardian Angel, we could probably create some statistically significant tests to establish the efficacy of magick. Finding this many who are willing to participate would be daunting. Finding ten who even qualified would be difficult.

If we relaxed the standards, we could probably find many people to volunteer, but a majority of them would be charlatans, fakers or people whose grasp of magick is incomplete at best. We seem to be at an impasse. If I asked a random group of strangers to perform a moderately complex scientific experiment of a somewhat advanced nature, would its failure be due to a faulty hypothesis or due to the incompetence of the experimenter? As a friend of mine often comments, if someone who has never been to medical school performs brain surgery, would its failure really be an indictment of the procedure?

Crowley is best known for two organizations, for which he wrote the majority of his magical work (he also wrote many poems, plays and works of fiction). These are the aforementioned A.:A.: and the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO). Of these, the second has a public face, being structured similarly to the Free Masons (they are not, nor do they claim to be, Masons). They also have a publicly published rituals such as *Liber XV* (aka "The Gnostic Mass"). Which has some clear and definite goals -- "health and wealth and strength" -- which are mentioned twice in *Liber XV*:

...that in us may be **health and wealth and strength** and divine pleasure according to the

Law of Liberty<sup>9</sup>

...bestowing upon us **health and wealth and strength** and joy and peace, and that fulfillment of will and of love under will that is perpetual happiness.<sup>10</sup> [emphasis added]

This ritual is supposed to provide Health and Wealth. It mentions other things both of a spiritual and highly subjective nature, however these two are less subjective. Baselines for a group and that groups relationship to a community can be established.

The Gnostic Mass is written for the OTO whose purpose is not Knowledge & Conversation but rather the promulgation of the principles of Thelemic philosophy within society at large. The Gnostic Mass is to be performed by a Priest, a Priestess, a Deacon and two "Children." Further, it is not required that these roles be filled by an Adeptus Minor (i.e., someone who has achieved K&C). The priesthood is conferred on men and women who request such after having attained the degree of **Knight of the East and West** (KEW) in the OTO. This degree is the first invitational degree, meaning that it is bestowed by other KEW in recognition of their suitability and dedication. The prior degrees are conferred after a suitable period of time and by passing the appropriate tests.

The KEW is the degree prior to that of the Knight/Dame of the Rose Croix (V<sup>o</sup>) which is the degree required in order to head a lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientis. According to the US Grand Lodge's website, there are 10 Lodges in the US, 3 in Australia, 3 in the United Kingdom, 3 in Canada, 1 in Croatia, 1 in Germany, 2 in Italy, 2 in Japan, 1 in New Zealand, 3 in Norway, 1 in Russia, 1 in Serbia and 1 in Sweden.

Now I am uncertain as to the feasibility of monitoring the order in the Slavic countries as I

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9 Aleister Crowley, 'The Invisible Basilica: Liber XV: The Gnostic Mass', chap. V: Of the Office of the Collects which are Eleven in Number <[http://hermetic.com/sabazius/gnostic\\_mass.htm](http://hermetic.com/sabazius/gnostic_mass.htm)> [accessed 5 March 2010].

10 Crowley, chap. VIII: of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements.

understand there was some persecution there. The Lodges in France were also shut down by the government. However, the lodges of the US, Australia, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Japan are (to my knowledge) free from persecution. I believe Scandinavia, Italy and Germany are also clear. This gives 29 bodies which should be able to perform the Gnostic Mass on a regular basis.

If the ritual is successful then the membership of these lodges should have their "Health and Wealth" improve to a point above the baseline for the communities in which they exist. At the very least their health and wealth should improve in comparison to others from their age and educational stratum.

Some possible obstructions lie within the politicking and social issues that arise within any group, especially those with values opposed to the society in which they exist. We should also investigate whether the members suffer cognitive dissonance regarding the professed values of Thelema and their actual values (i.e., do they still subscribe to the dominant societies values in practice)? Have the members completed the material as outlined and do they have sufficient understanding to warrant the degrees that they hold? We cannot expect the participants to be able to assess these sort of conflicts, so it must either be filtered prior to testing, or born in mind when analyzing the results.

Given the number of bodies in the US who perform the Mass regularly and the number of Lodges which have the personnel of the proper degree to meet the requirements for this ritual, it should be easy enough to compute the baselines for affluence (wealth) and health. In some cases, we might have to do a retrospective study to determine the baseline of these members prior to affiliation. We then compare the baselines against the baselines for non-affiliated members. Over time, these baselines should rise to (or stay at) a level above that of the general population which corresponds to their age and education bracket. The Man of Earth triad of the OTO takes, if one hustles, about four years to get from **Minerval** to **Prince of Jerusalem**. Thus, a period of four years should be

more than sufficient to show the validity of the Gnostic Mass and Ceremonial Magick (of which the Gnostic Mass is a type). Depending on where the baseline starts, general improvement compared to the society at large should also be noted (abject poverty to just below the mean could be counted as a success).

This test, as with anything testing these matters, will not be conclusive. Those inclined to believe in Ceremonial Magick will place the blame for any failures on those performing the Mass. Those disinclined to believe in Ceremonial Magick will credit the success to the discipline gained by the practices associated with doing Ceremonial Magick (e.g. Raja Yoga) or some other agent. Crowley even alludes to as much in Liber O. However, even with these caveats, a success or failure would indicate whether more study is warranted.

Crowley, Aleister, 'A.: A.: Curriculum'

<<http://hermetic.com/crowley/equinox/iii/i/eq0301018.htm>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

---, 'Book of Lies' <<http://hermetic.com/crowley/libers/lib333.html>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

---, 'Liber IX - Liber E vel Exercitiorum' <<http://hermetic.com/crowley/libers/lib9.html>> [accessed 5 March 2010].

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