Islamic Roots of Thelema (first in a series)

Aleister Crowley's admiration for Islam is no particular secret. In Magick Without Tears, he wrote:

The most important of all of the efforts of the White School, from an exoteric point of view, is Islam. In its doctrine there is some slight taint, but much less than in Christianity. It is a virile religion. It looks facts in the face, and admits their horror; but it proposes to overcome them by sheer dint of manhood. Unfortunately, the metaphysical conceptions of its quasi-profane Schools are grossly materialistic. It is only the Pantheism of the Sufis which eliminates the conception of propitiation [characteristic of the Black School]; and, in practice, the Sufis are too closely allied to the Vedantists to retain hold of reality.

Crowley identified Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam, as a Saint of E.G.C. and a Magus of A.'.A.'., and Crowley directly compared his own relationship to the "praeterhuman intelligence" Aiwass with Mohammed's relationship to the angel Gabriel. During the Cairo working which resulted in the reception of The Book of the Law, Crowley was of course living in a predominantly Muslim city. During this time, according to his own account, he "had assumed some disguise, probably with the intention of trying to study Islam from within as he had done with Hinduism." With respect to his social circumstances at the time, he relates, "We occasionally hobnobbed with a General Dickson, who had accepted Islam; otherwise we knew nobody in Cairo except natives, carpet merchants, pimps, jewellers, and such small deer." And yet in his Confessions, he offers these details regarding Cairo in early 1904:

As to my study of Islam, I got a sheikh to teach me Arabic and the practices of ablution, prayer and so on, so that at some future time I might pass for a Moslem among themselves. I learnt a number of chapters of the Koran by heart.....

My sheikh was profoundly versed in the mysticism and magic of Islam, and discovering that I was an initiate, had no hesitation in providing me with books and manuscripts on the Arabic Cabbala. These formed the basis of my comparative studies.

Crowley claimed that his sheikh also taught him "many of the secrets of the Sidi Aissawa," a Sufi tariqa or initiatory system. Many of Crowley's examples of the yogic technique of mantra are in Arabic, and his description of them sometimes relates more strongly to the Sufi practice of dhikr. And his A.'.A.'. program recommends to aspirants the study of "Sufi poetry generally."

In fact, the literary form of The Book of the Law has more in common with the Quran than with the Bible or many other religious scriptures. Both Liber Legis and the Quran are very freely structured examples of what Northrop Frye calls the "oracle," which he explains as the "typical episodic product" of the mythical mode of literary composition. Both texts allow for the dominance of the divine voice in what is ostensibly a communication through an angelic intermediary to a human prophet. Both texts presume the existence of a narrative and mythic background which they demonstrate more often through implication than exposition. Each of the two texts professes to be an initial eruption of the prophetic tradition in the particular language of its inscription.

Crowley's "Annihilation" (itself a translation of fana', a Sufi term for a high mystical attainment) occurred during his work with the Enochian Aethyrs in the desert of Algeria, where he consecrated himself daily with a thousand and one recitals of the sura Al-Ikhlas ("Pure Faith") from the Quran. Of course, it is well-known that in his later life, Crowley referred to the successor to his organizing authority as the "Caliph," the Arabic title denoting the successor of Mohammed as the leader of the Muslim community.

The purpose of the forthcoming series of posts is not to reduce Thelema to an Islamic heresy. Instead, they will be an attempt to re-interpret Thelemic practices and concepts through the lens of certain Islamic doctrinal structures. It has become increasingly easy to find comparative expositions of Thelema in terms drawn from Egypto-Hermetic, Christian, Freemasonic, Tantric, or even Voodoo traditions. But Islam, a particularly prominent element in the syncretic origins of Thelema, has been notably under-utilized in interpretations of this material. I will seek to remedy the situation--in a small way--over the next few weeks.

"I flap my wings in the face of Mohammed & blind him."

- 'Liber Al Vel Legis' 3:52

"COMMENTARY: Mohammed's point of view is wrong too; but he needs no such sharp correction as "Jesus"...The tenets of Islam, correctly interpreted, are not far from our Way of Life and Light and Love and Liberty. This applies especially to the secret tenets. The external creed is mere nonsense similar to the intelligence of the peoples among whom it was promulgated; but even so, Islam is magnificent in practice. Its code is that of a man of courage and honour and self-respect, contrasting admirably with the cringing cowardice of the damnation - dodging Christians with their unmanly and dishonest acceptance of vicarious sacrifice, and their currish conception of themselves as "born in sin", "miserable sinners" with "no health in us"..."Din" - "severity" or "judgement" - may refer to the Jewish Law, rather than to the Faith (al-din) of Islam. I take Judaism as Qabalistic - but the practice imperfect. Assuming this, the six religions whose flesh must be torn out cover the whole globe outside Islam and Christianity."

- 'The Law is for All' (2002 edition) page 169

In 'The Confessions of Aleister Crowley', AC wrote that Islam unlike Christianity is "positive" and "not based on fear". He relates that he studied Islam, the mysticism of the fakir, the Darwesh and the Sufi, that J.F.C. Fuller sympathised with the "manliness of Islam" and according to Crowley "Islam is free from the degrading doctrine of atonement and the glorification of the slave virtues. The Moslem's attitude to Allah only errs in so far as it involves the childish idea of personofying the powers of the universe." (page 540). Crowley wrote that he quelled a "small riot" in Algeria, drawing sigils in the air with his ring, while reciting a chapter of the Qur'an.

Crowley's attitude to Islam would seem topical at the moment.

"My spiritual self is at home in China, but my heart and my hand are pledged to the Arab."

- Crowley

"Where Christian and Moslem missions are in direct rivalry, Islam collects the higher and Christianity the lower sections of the society."

- Crowley

There certainly are indications that AC wove a bit of Islam into his philosophy. Liber AL uses terms like Kaaba and Qiblah, and Chapter III resembles the warlike rantings of a Jihad. He also spent a good deal of time in Islamic countries.

But his works (including AL) are also filled with references to/from Hebrew Qabalah. And we've had quite a few post that point out his adherence to basic Christian/Biblical tenets. His philosophy is deeply rooted in Ancient Aegyptian concepts and god-forms. He was a great fan of Lao Tzu.

I think one (anyone) can make an argument for Thelema having this religion or that philosophy as its foundation, but we can always come back to what I have said here, and realze that his work is actually quite cosmopolitan and all-inclusive.

Mohammed

(570-632 e.v.)

by T. Apiryon

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Also known as Muhammad, Mahomet or Mahmud. Arabic (Meccan) religious reformer, and founder of the Abrahamic Religion known as Islam. Crowley considered him to be a Magus of A:. A:., whose Word was LA ALLAH or LA AL, “No God” and his fundamental doctrine was that God is One. See Chapter 74 of Liber Aleph, Part III of The Heart of the Master, and Chapter 7 of The Book of Lies. Crowley's version of Mohammed's Word as Magus is taken from the Kalimah, the first clause of the Muslim Profession of Faith, the Shahadah. which is: La ilaha ill' Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah, “There is no God, but God, and Mohammed is the Messenger of God.”

Muhammad ibn Abdallah was born into the Bani Hashim branch of the powerful Quraysh tribe, which had historically ruled the pagan city of Mecca (Makkah). Mecca was an important city even in those days, pilgrims from all over Arabia made pilgrimage to Mecca to circumambulate the Kaaba and kiss the Black Stone, which was then consecrated to the moon-god Hubal. Mohammed's father died before Mohammed was born. Mohammed was brought up first by his mother, Amina, then by his Grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, later by his uncle, Abu Talib. Throughout his childhood he was attracted to the world of the spirit. He was drawn to solitary contemplation, and he often experienced visions, some violent and disturbing. Some modern scholars have theorized that he was epileptic.

Mohammed's uncle, Abu Talib, was a textile merchant, and the young Mohammed accompanied his caravans to Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Mesopotamia. During the caravans, Mohammed often conversed with the priests, rabbis and monks he encountered at the various trading posts, accumulating knowledge about the various forms of Judaism and Christianity extant at the time.

At the age of twenty-five, he married a wealthy forty-year-old widow named Khadija. She gave him six children, two boys and four girls, only one of whom, his daughter Fatima, survived him. Khadija's cousin was a religious scholar named Waraqa, who was the first to have translated parts of the Old and New Testaments into Arabic. Mohammed frequently sought out Waraqa's company and conversation.

At the age of thirty-five, Mohammed began taking retreats to a cave in Mount Hiraa', in the desert hills outside Mecca, to meditate in solitude. It was during one of these retreats that Mohammed received his Call. It was the year 610 e.v., one of the last ten nights of the month of Ramadan; and at that time, Ramadan occurred during the hottest part of the summer. He was sitting alone in his cave in the darkness, wrapped in his shroud, when he was startled by a sound “like the reverberations of a bell.” He realized that it was a voice, and the voice had exclaimed the word, “ Iqraa! ” (“Read!”). Mohammed falteringly replied that he could not read. The voice repeated its command. Mohammed protested that he did not know how to read, but the voice repeated its command a third time. Mohammed then asked what it was that he should read, and a luminous scroll, inscribed with letters of fire, appeared before him. He read the words, though he had never read before. The voice continued:

“Read in the name of thy Lord, the Creator, who created man from a clot of blood! Read! Your Lord is most generous, for he has taught by the pen, revealing mysteries unto man!”

The vision had passed, and Mohammed was left questioning his sanity. He considered throwing himself over a cliff, but as he emerged from the cave into the night air, the Voice rang out again: “O Mohammed! You are Allah's messenger, and I am Gabriel!” He looked up and beheld the Angel suspended in the middle of the night sky, transfixing him with his piercing, shining eyes (later, astronomers determined that the Moon and the planet Venus had been in close conjunction at that time).

In further revelations, Mohammed's mission in life was clarified: he had been called upon to preach to the world the true Faith of the One God. At first he was reticent– he had doubts about the authenticity or source of his vision. But Khadija encouraged him, and soon his calling was confirmed by additional visions which revealed the terrible doom which lay in store for sinners and infidels. He began to preach to a small group of close associates. Khadija and Waraqa were his first disciples, then came his friend and business associate Abu Bakr, `Ali, the son of Abu Talib, and Mohammed's slave Zayd ibn-Thabit.

Muslims do not consider Islam to be a new religion. Islam was intended to be a reform of the ancient religion of Abraham, of which Judaism and Christianity are branches. Islam confirms the truth of the Torah and the Gospels, but purports to clarify them, to correct a number of errors of interpretation, and to purify them from the accretions of rabbinical and priestly sophistries. The major reforms of Islam include the rejection of polytheism (including trinitarianism), idolatry, and priestcraft. The “five pillars” of Islam are : 1. Shahadah, Profession of Faith; 2. Salat, Prayer (5 times a day); 3. Zakat, Alms giving; 4. Sawm, Fasting (during the holy month of Ramadhan); and 5. Hajj, Pilgrimage to Mecca (at least once in the Muslim's lifetime).

Muslims revere Isa (Jesus) as a great prophet, but not as God incarnated as do the Christians. Muslims also reject the belief that Isa suffered crucifixion, but assert that an accomplice was crucified in his place. An empty tomb for Isa lies next to that of Mohammed at Madina, where they believe he will be buried after his return to battle the forces of evil during the last days.

Mohammed's circle gradually grew wider, including the wealthy and influential merchant `Uthman ibn-Affan of the Umayyads, the Quraysh aristocracy, and the warrior prince `Umar ibn-Khattab. Mohammed began to feel more confident in his role as last of the Prophets. His visions continued, and included one (the Mi`raj) in which he was carried to the Temple Mount at Jerusalem on the back of a winged horse with a human face. There he entered the Holy of Holies and prayed alongside Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses) and Isa. He then ascended a celestial ladder to paradise and was brought before Allah Himself, who embraced him and spoke to him (Islamic theologians still dispute what Allah may have told him). He then descended the ladder to the Temple Mount, where the winged steed returned him to the house in Mecca where he was staying.

Eventually, he resolved to convert the pagans of Mecca to the One True Faith. The Umayyads, the aristocratic branch of the Quraysh, refused to recognize Mohammed's authority, and he was forced to flee Mecca to the city of Yathrib (now called Madinat an-Nabi-Allah, the City of the Prophet of God, or “Madinah” for short) under threat of murder.

Mohammed's flight from Mecca, called the Hijra, occurred in 622 e.v., and marked the beginning of the great diffusion of the Islamic Faith. The Hijra serves as the point of beginning of the Islamic calendar. Yathrib was a town founded by Jews, and Mohammed, while still in Mecca, had convinced a large number of them that he was the promised Messiah. These converts had prepared the way for him, and he entered Yathrib like a king.

Khadija had died before the Hijra, and Mohammed married `A'ishah, the daughter of his close friend Abu Bakr. His preachings began to take on a gentler tone, emphasizing the rewards in store for the faithful, and how the faithful should conduct their lives. He preached of the rights of women and of slaves, and preached against compulsion in matters of religion. He won many additional converts in Yathrib, and, with his eye still on Mecca, began raiding Meccan caravans to accumulate wealth. The Umayyads, of course, retaliated with sporadic attacks upon Yathrib. As his followers were increasingly required to kill and die for the faith, his preachings took on an increasingly belligerent tone; he proclaimed that idolatry was worse than war, and that the quickest way to Paradise was to die for the Faith in battle. When he had accumulated enough support and resources, he returned to the city of his birth and conquered it. He reconsecrated the Kaaba to the service of the One True God, and began laying plans for conquering the world. He died peacefully in `A'ishah's hut near the Mosque in Madinah, and was buried where he died. Although he did not live to see the Faith progress beyond the Arabian peninsula, his successors pushed it to the ends of the Earth. Within three generations after Mohammed's death, they had conquered nearly all the lands from Spain to the frontiers of China.

Mohammed had many children, but none of his sons and only one daughter, Fatima, survived him. According to tradition, only a male child is suitable for heirship, so Mohammed left no clear successor to his religious authority.

His first successor, or Caliph (Khalifa), the saintly Abu Bakr, was elected by a group of Mohammed's closest followers (in the absence of `Ali). Under Abu Bakr, the Islamic empire grew to include Yemen, Oman, Bahrain and most of Palestine.

Mohammed could not read or write, but his followers recorded his teachings on the materials that were available. After his death, Abu Bakr commanded Zayd to gather together Mohammed's revealed teachings, recorded over a twenty-three year period from 609 e.v. to 632 e.v., into a single volume. This volume became the Qur'an, which constitutes the holy book of Islam. The Qur'an is organized into 114 Chapters in which each Chapter, called a Surah (“degree”), represents one (or more) of Mohammed's revelations; although they are not arranged in chronological order. 93 of the Surahs were received during the 13 years prior to the Hijra at Mecca, the remaining 21 were received later at Madinah.

Abu Bakr died in 634 e.v. and was followed by the heroic, tyrannical `Umar, who conquered Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Persia and Jerusalem. `Umar was murdered in 644 e.v. On his death bed, he appointed a committee of six Quraysh to debate his succession between `Ali and `Uthman, and `Uthman, at age 70, was chosen. `Uthman's generals added a considerable amount of property to the empire, including Cyprus, Rhodes, Libya, Afghanistan, Turkestan and Khorasan. Nevertheless, `Uthman proved to be a feeble, corrupt and incompetent ruler. He placed members of his own Umayyad tribe in all the positions of high authority. He revised the Qur'an (deleting all the negative references to the Umayyads) and had all copies of the previous version destroyed. Many objected to `Uthman's revision, but it nevertheless became the standard and is the version in use today. `Uthman became quite unpopular, and he was murdered by insurgents lead by the son of Abu Bakr, Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr, in 656 e.v.

The Prophet's cousin, son-in-law, and adopted son, Hadrat `Ali ibn-Abu Talib, was elected the fourth Caliph. `Ali had married Fatima and had two sons by her, Hasan and Husayn. `Ali had been an extremely valiant warrior in Mohammed's service, earning the epithet “The Lion of God,” but he inherited from `Uthman an empire in disarray; and his reign as Caliph was plagued by treachery and conspiracy.

`Ali's election was disputed by a member of `Uthman's Umayyad elite, Mu`awiyah, governor of Syria. Mu`awiyah contended that `Ali bore some of the guilt for `Uthman's murder by failing to punish Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr. In defiance of `Ali, Mu`awiyah proclaimed himself Caliph at Damascus in 660 e.v. `Ali was powerless to stop him, and was assassinated in 661 e.v. `Ali's son Hasan claimed his successorship, but was convinced by Mu`awiyah to abdicate. Mu`awiyah promised that the Caliphate would return to the house of Mohammed upon his death; but after Hasan's death, he appointed Yazid, his own son, to be his successor. Husayn attempted a revolution, but was defeated and beheaded by Yazid. The house of Mohammed had bestowed the Caliphate upon the Umayyads, and a legacy of turmoil upon Islam.

`Ali's ardent followers, who became known as the Shi`a (adherents), believed that `Ali had been designated by Mohammed himself as his true successor, that `Ali's sons bore the Prophet's virtue through his daughter Fatima; and, therefore, that `Ali's dynasty had the true divine sanction to rule over Islam. They accepted the authority of the first four Caliphs, but rejected that of Mu`awiyah and all those who followed him. The Shi`a refer to the descendants of `Ali as Imams (examples), and reject the religious authority of all the Caliphs who succeeded `Ali. The “orthodox” Muslims, who recognized the authority of Mu`awiyah and the Caliphs who followed him, became known as the Sunni (traditionists).

The Shi`a have always been at odds with the Sunni, but they have also been at odds with themselves. The sixth Shi`ite Imam, Jafar, had two sons, Isma`il and Musa. The eldest, Isma`il, had been chosen as the next Imam but did not survive his father. Jafar designated his younger son Musa as the next Imam; but Isma`il had already had his own son, Mohammad ibn Isma`il, and had proclaimed him to be the next Imam. This, of course, resulted in another schism. The followers of Isma`il are known as Isma`ilis or “Sevener” Shi`ites.

Musa's decendants ruled over “orthodox” Shi`ism. Several generations later, in the year 878 e.v., the twelfth Imam of Musa's line, Mohammed ibn Hasan, decended the stairs into the cellar of the Great Mosque of Samarra and never returned. The twelfth Imam had vanished without a trace from the world at the age of seven, leaving no successor. “Orthodox” Shi`ism is therefore sometimes referred to as “Twelver” Shi`ism. The Twelvers believe that the twelfth Imam was taken by God into temporary hiding from the world, and that he will return some day as the Mahdi, or Messiah. It is this branch of Shi`ite Islam which rules modern Iran.

The Isma`ili branch of Shi`ite Islam gave birth to the ruthless, mystical Qarmatian movement, whose secret doctrines were revealed through a series of initiations given in seven degrees. The Qarmatians founded the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt, which in turn generated the secretive sect of Lebanon called Druses as well as the notorious Assassins of Lebanon and Northern Iran, who were alleged by some historians to have influenced the Knights Templar.

Islam contains another tradition worth mentioning here, that of the Islamic mystics known as Sufis or Dervishes. Sufism is nearly as old as Islam itself, and, though primarily centered in Persia, the heart of Shi`ism, crosses over all schismatic boundaries. The Sufis emphasize personal mystical experience over temporal power, and can in this way be considered the “Islamic Gnostics.” They are generally detested by both the Shi`a and Sunni orthodoxies. Some scholars believe that Sufism developed through the assimilation into Islam of elements of Christianity and Neoplatonism, but such hypotheses are difficult to prove. Sufism has it's own list of philosopher-poet-saints apart from the Caliphs and Imams, some of the greatest of which are Abu Yazid (“Bayazid,” died 909 e.v.), Rabi'a al Adawiya (717-801 e.v.), Husayn ibn-Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922 e.v.), Abu-Hamid Mohammed al-Ghazzali (1058-1111 e.v.), Fariduddin Attar (1110-1220 e.v.), Muhiyuddin Muhammad ibn-`Ali ibn-al-`Arabi (b. 1165 e.v.) and Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273 e.v.).

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Here I have tied together a few things with my own neat little string: ALLAH: Arm Leg Leg Arm Head, my physical pentalpha(-omega); the 4 elements are created, completed, and crowned by spirit, or when Kether meets Malkuth and thats when one can see ALLAH seeing his Creation through his Creature (you) ....... There is probably a lot of support for Thelema in more esoteric interpretations given to Qu'ran and hadith ... and also history. my mind immediately thinks of the declaration of Yawm-i-Qiyamat by Hassan-i-Sabbah II at Alamut. His statement supports an esoteric interpretation - the divine essence descending into matter, Nuit and Hadit ... as we know ALLAH'S Apostle SAW met al-Buraq on Laylat al-Qadr, and some ahadith say the Prophet SAW was recieved by prophets of ALLAH SWT at each of the 7 heavens. Just another event with some apparent mystical interpretations possible... I like to say these are the points where spirit adorns matter and vice versa, this is the point where the Garden of Eden becomes al Dunya, and its at this point that for the first (or not really first??... ha) time I may choose to introduce my left hand to my right, freeing my Will to direct itself as it pleases. This, to my thinking, means to me I am a Muslim in state of islam... I SUBMIT TO THE WILL OF THE LORD OF THE WORLDS , ALLAH sees al Khalq through I & I's eyes ... Lions Laugh w Lambs and Ar Rahman invites Iblis over for a cookout and it's Yawm-i-Qiyamat once again ...... alhamdulilah! Do what Thou wilt!