The Hadith of Gabriel and the Three True Grades

The use of the word “Islam” as a comprehensive term to refer to the religion descending from the teachings of Muhammad is a relatively modern development, culminating only in the last few centuries. Even into the 20th century, external accounts often used the now-rejected term “Mohammedanism.” When Islamic culture was in its original ascendant, it was customary for its adherents to refer more simply to din (i.e. “religion”), or for more specificity—to distinguish it from other religions—to use the Quranic terms din Ibrahim (the religion of Abraham) or din al-Haqq (the religion of the Truth, i.e. God’s own religion).

The Arabic word Islam denotes “submission” (sharing a root with salam, “peace”), and was used originally to refer only to the most external and overt features of Muhammad’s din. The clearest exposition of the relationship between the more particular Islam and the general din can be found in the important Hadith of Gabriel:

Umar Ibn Al-Khattab reports: One day when we were with God's Messenger, a man with very white clothing and very black hair came up to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, and none of us recognized him. Sitting down beside the Prophet, leaning his knees against his and placing his hands on his thighs, he said: “Tell me, Muhammad, about Islam.” He replied: “Islam means that you should testify that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God's Messenger, that you should observe the prayer, pay the alms-tax, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to go there.” He said: “You have spoken the truth.” We were surprised at his questioning him and then declaring that he spoke the truth. He said: “Now tell me about Iman.” He replied: “It means that you should believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you should believe in the decreeing both of good and evil.” Remarking that he had spoken the truth, he then said: “Now tell me about Ihsan.” He replied: “It means that you should worship God as though you see Him, for He sees you though you do not see Him.” He said: “Now tell me about the Hour.” He replied: “The one who is asked about it is no better informed than the one who is asking.” He said: “Then tell me about its signs.” He replied: “That a maid-servant should beget her mistress, and that you should see barefooted, naked, poor men and shepherds exalting themselves in buildings.” Umar says: He then went away, and after I had waited for a long time, the Prophet said to me: “Do you know who the questioner was, Umar?” I replied: “God and His Messenger know best.” He said: “He was Gabriel who came to you to teach you your religion [din].”

This narrative is classified as an “authentic” hadith, i.e. one of the most authoritative texts of Islam outside of the Quran itself. It is interesting on many counts—the appearance of Gabriel to the Companions of the Prophet (imagine Aiwass dropping in unannounced at Cefalu) and the ritualized, catechetical form of the dialogue are remarkable features. But for present purposes, I want to focus on the tripartite division of din into Islam, Iman, and Ihsan. (The questions about “the Hour” of Final Judgment and “its signs” are codas to Iman.) These three are conventionally translated as “submission” (or observance), “faith” (or belief), and “perfection” (or spiritual virtue). The three may be understood to correspond to the three “true grades” of Thelema, explained by the angel of the 13th Aethyr thus:

The man of earth is the adherent. The lover giveth his life unto the work among men. The hermit goeth solitary, and giveth only of his light unto men.

In Sufi doctrine, it is typical to construe Islam, Iman and Ihsan as three grades. The Muslim (one who exercises Islam) is oriented to shariah, which while it literally means “road,” is ordinarily translated as “Law.” The Mu’min (one who exercises Iman) has embarked upon tariqah, the initiatory “path” of attainment. And the Muhsin (one who exercises Ihsan) acts from his experience of haqiqah, the ultimate spiritual “reality.” (Note that the Sufis use the term Mu’min somewhat differently than others, for whom it merely designates a “believer.”)

The identification of the Law with the most exoteric of the three grades seems to shed an unaccustomed light on CCXX I:39-40.

The word of the Law is Θελημα.

Who calls us Thelemites will do no wrong, if he look but close into the word. For there are therein Three Grades, the Hermit, and the Lover, and the man of Earth. Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.

In view of this background, the “Thelemite,” who is the man of Earth as adherent of the Law, could signify all three grades by synecdoche, in the same manner as “Muslim” now does.

The Islam of To Mega Therion: First Pillar

Beginning with this post, I will attempt to address that portion of the din established through the prophetic work of To Mega Therion which corresponds to "Islam" in the more limited sense provided by the Hadith of Gabriel. In response to the examining angel, Muhammad defined "submission" or religious observance by five positive activities:

Islam means (1) that you should testify that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God's Messenger, (2) that you should observe the prayer, (3) pay the alms-tax, (4) fast during Ramadan, and (5) make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to go there.

These five acts of worship (ibadat) are often known as the "pillars of Islam," and they constitute the universal basis of Muslim religious praxis. Bearing in mind that Crowley declared "Islam is magnificent in practice," the present post and the four to follow will examine these pillars and reflect on how they may have been transformed for incorporation into the Thelemic system--or at least to which Thelemic practices they can be held to correspond.

The first pillar is the shahadah or "testimony." This practice is a simple declaration in two clauses. In Arabic: lā ilāha illā-llāh, wa muħammadan rasūlu-llāh. In English: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Crowley issued his own esoteric interpretation of the first clause of the shahadah in Liber Aleph (addressed to C.S. Jones).

[Mohammed’s] true Word was LA ALLH that is to say: (There is) No God, and LA AL is that Mystery of Mysteries which thine own Eye pierced in thine Initiation.

Certainly, this reading suggests the earlier AIN ALHIM of the Hebrew Psalms (14:2 and 53:2), which was a subject of mystical reinterpretation among kabbalists. It also seems to be reflected in Liber Legis II:23, "I am alone: there is no God where I am." But despite its presence in the Gnostic Mass, this statement cannot be regarded as the Thelemic shahadah.

The obvious candidate for our "testimony" is the Summary of the Law, which is made up of portions of Liber Legis I:40 and I:57: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law, love under will." Crowley discusses the centrality of these statements in Thelemic custom in the O.T.O. memorandum "Thelema" (published in Equinox III(10), 207-8) and "The Importance of Our Conventional Greetings" (Chapter 18 of Magick Without Tears).

While significantly different in meaning from the Muslim version, the Thelemic shahadah has points of commonality with it in sound. The two clauses of the Arabic shahadah each drive to resolution in the contracted -llāh, while the English Summary resolves its clauses with the word "law." The meter of the Summary echoes that of the English translation of the shahadah: the five naturally stressed syllables of "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" correspond to the full five syllables of "There is no god but God," and there are four obvious stresses in both "Love is the law, Love under will" and "Muhammad is the messenger of God."

The ritual function of the shahadah in Islam is twofold. It is to be recited daily for mindfulness of Islam, and in this respect it corresponds to our use of the Summary of the Law in daily greetings, correspondence, and ceremonial openings. Additionally, making the shahadah is generally considered to be the central act of conversion by which one may become a Muslim. (No further ceremony is requisite, but a convert must make the testimony with knowledge, certainty, sincerity, truthfulness, pleasure, submission, and acceptance.) While no parallel practice has been made explicit with respect to the Summary of the Law, Crowley’s "Thelema" memo was at pains to include the Summary in acts of initiation. And autonomous testimony of the two clauses of the Summary is now widely understood to qualify a speaker as a confessed Thelemite.

Use of the Summary in daily discourse has suffered a little on account of its unwieldiness. The cryptic abbreviation "ninety-three" could never suffice on its own as a formula for religious confession, and is entirely unsatisfactory as a testimony to the profane.

The Islam of To Mega Therion: Second Pillar

The second act of worship listed in the Hadith of Gabriel is salāt, “the prayer.” This Arabic term does not refer generically to occasional or spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving, imprecation, and so forth. Those prayers instead are designated as du’ā. Salāt is the required daily regimen of prayer at the five appointed times of early morning, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. Observing salāt requires that the adherent be ritually pure, face a particular direction (qibla), and perform a very specific sequence of invocations, with prescribed bodily postures, along with recitals from the Quran and perhaps a du’ā or two as components of the larger salāt.

Crowley’s admiration of and interest in the practice of salāt was expressed in his poem “The Five Adorations,” published under the pen-name Dost Achiha Khan in the Autumn 1909 Equinox:

I PRAISE Thee, God, whose rays upstart beneath the Bright and Morning Star:

Nowit asali fardh salat assobhi allahu akbar.

I praise Thee, God, the fierce and swart; at noon Thou ridest forth to war!

Nowit asali fardh salat assohri allahu akbar.

I praise Thee, God, whose arrows dart their royal radiance o'er the scar:

Nowit asali fardh salat asasri allahu akbar.

I praise Thee, God, whose fires depart, who drivest down the sky thy car:

Nowit asali fardh salat al maghrab allahu akbar.

I praise Thee, God, whose purple heart is hidden in the abyss afar:

Nowit asali fardh salat al asha allahu akbar.

Although an electronically-propagated editorial note by Br. WEH implies that the first line of each couplet is a “translation” of the second, I think the couplet form indicates that the lines are complements rather than equivalents. A reasonably literal translation of the Arabic lines would be “I intend to perform the obligatory morning (or other time of day, varied in each stanza) prayer; God is great.” This compound Arabic expression uses a conventional formula for niyya (“intention”), one of the preliminary components of any formal act of worship in Islam, including salāt. The niyya for salāt is ordinarily said softly to oneself. Then comes the taqbīr ("allahu akbar"), immediately before the salāt proper, which commences with a recital of the opening sura of the Quran.

But it wasn’t until 1910 that Crowley publicly issued his basic ritual for a salāt sort of worship among Thelemites. This “Liber Resh vel Helios sub figura CC” is prescribed for aspirants and initiates of both A.'.A.'. and O.T.O. Later curricular summaries describe it as an “instruction for adoration of the Sun four times daily, with the object of composing the mind to meditation and of regularizing the practices,” and a “highly important magical ritual for daily use and work.” Resh (as I will call it here for short) differs from the Muslim salāt by requiring only four, rather than five, sessions of prayer each day. It is also--from the Muslim perspective--blasphemously polytheistic, even in the instruction to “assume the God-form of Whom thou adorest, as if thou didst unite with Him in adoration of That which is beyond Him.” Interestingly, however, Muslim sources affirm the continuity of the prayer-times of salāt with the custom of pre-Islamic Arabic paganism. The synchronization was intended to force on the earliest Muslims an exclusive choice between Muhammad’s din and that of his tribal forebears. Crowley's "Five Adorations" poem, no less than Resh, seems to tie salāt back to its origins in solar worship.

Like the Muslim salāt, Resh is tightly regulated in terms of speech, thought and physical gesture, and yet affords room for variations based on traditional instruction and individual choice. There are two general tasks that complete the Thelemic ritual, in the form of the “adoration” and “holy meditation.” The stanzas from the Stele of Revealing as paraphrased in chapter III of Liber Legis seem to have become the global default option for the “adoration,” which is, however, supposed to be “taught thee by thy Superior” among initiates. “Holy meditation” is left undefined, and Crowley’s remark about “regularizing the practices” suggests that it might consist of one of the yoga exercises from Liber E, Liber Ru, Liber HHH, or Liber Yod. But the precedent of salāt instead inclines towards the notion of reciting memorized passages from the Holy Books of Thelema.

Another important development away from the Islamic salāt is the qibla, or direction of prayer. In Islam there have been two points designated as the qibla for all worshippers. The original qibla was Jerusalem. Only after the emigration of the fledgling Muslim community from Mecca to Medina did Muhammad abrogate the Jerusalem qibla in favor of the Kaaba at Mecca. In Thelema, Liber Legis designates a qibla (“kiblah”) at “thy secret temple -- and that temple is already aright disposed,” (III:10) interpreted by Crowley as a reference to Boleskine House in Scotland, which he had owned at the time of the Writing of the Book. Yet Resh does not use Boleskine as its qibla. Instead, worshippers are to orient towards the actual physical location of the Sun. The same solar qibla obtains in the Mass of the Phoenix, a later (1913) ritual for daily use that could fulfill some functions of salāt.

Boleskine only comes to serve as a proper qibla in the Gnostic Mass (1918) and the Ritual of the Mark of the Beast (1921 at the earliest—possibly as late as 1928). Each of these latter two rituals has features that invite comparison to salāt. The Ritual of the Mark of the Beast (detailed in “Liber V vel Reguli”) is “for the daily use of a Magician of whatever grade,” and could at least serve as a perpetual observance “to invoke the Energies of the Aeon of Horus.” The Gnostic Mass is, of course, based more closely on Christian models. But it inclines towards the sort of communal worship which is expressed in Islam through the weekly Friday salāt.

Although salāt always involves individual discipline, and it can be observed in a solitary manner, salāt in groups of two or more is considered meritorious. In particular, an expanded salāt undertaken by a congregation in a designated place of prayer (“mosque,” not necessarily a building) is obligatory for Muslim men at noon on Fridays. The Gnostic Mass is firmly oriented towards the congregational setting. But Resh can also be performed in groups; it was enacted thus at Cefalu, and Crowley’s instructions for O.T.O. stipulate it:

All residents in the Profess-Houses of the Order are formally bound to perform the four daily Salutations to the Sun as prescribed in Liber CC. The exception is, when actually engaged in a ceremony approved by the Order, such as initiation, invocation, or meditation.

Both the Mass of the Phoenix and the Ritual of the Mark of the Beast had variant forms for group use. The Mass of the Phoenix congregational version, called the “Ritual Ordained for Public Service,” also included preaching, which--under the designation khutba--forms such an important element in the Friday salāt.

The dual Sun/Boleskine system of qibla has continued in Thelemic practice. The two may reflect a deliberate design, emphasizing both distinction and correspondence between the “Lord visible and sensible” and the “Lord secret and most holy.” The Boleskine qibla, as an edifice on the Earth’s surface, most closely resembles the Muslim ritual orientation toward the Kaaba. In mosques, it is customary to mark the qibla with a niche called a mihrāb. Thelemic temples, following the indication of the ritual of the Gnostic Mass in Liber XV, may use a copy of the Stele of Revealing as a Thelemic mihrāb.