

A Thelemic Primer

A description, in simple language and suitable for beginners, of the
fundamental concepts of Thelema.

by

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Sun in 1° Taurus, Anno IVxvi

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What is Thelema?

THELEMA IS A SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY DEVELOPED by the English poet Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) during the first half of the Twentieth Century. Its central text is *The Book of the Law*, also called *Liber AL vel Legis*, which Crowley claimed to have ‘received’ in 1904 in Cairo via audible dictation from ‘Aiwass’, a being whose nature he could never satisfactorily explain. He stated that ‘whether Aiwass is a spiritual being, or a man known to [Crowley], is a matter of the merest conjecture,’ but said that Aiwass was ‘an Intelligence possessed of power and knowledge absolutely beyond human experience; and therefore. . . a Being worthy, as the current use of the word allows, of the title of a God.’¹

The idea of a book being dictated by a ‘God’ strains the credulity of most reasonable people. However, Thelema is unique amongst ‘religions’ in that whilst it has a central text that is held to contain truth, that truth is independent of its origins. Thelemites consider that *The Book of the Law* contains statements which can be shown to be true; they do not consider a statement to be true just because it says so in *The Book of the Law*. If it were to be demonstrated that a statement in *The Book of the Law* was incorrect, Thelemites would accept the fallibility of the book. Ultimately, the ideas underlying the philosophy of Thelema can and do exist separately from its central text.

Is Thelema a religion?

Opinions vary on this question; some say it is, and some say it isn’t. In the sense that a religion is ‘a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons’ then Thelema

¹*The Equinox of the Gods*

may qualify as one, although many Thelemites may take issue with the use of the word ‘beliefs’; Thelema does not require its adherents to profess faith in any supposed ‘truths’. In the sense that a religion is a set of beliefs concerning the creation of the universe, the worship of a supreme being, the nature of a supposed ‘afterlife’ and the prescription of moral standards then Thelema is certainly *not* one. Thelemites do not believe in ‘gods’, or in life after death, or in any form of divine retribution. Thelema does not require any belief in the supernatural.

Many Thelemites prefer to describe Thelema as a ‘philosophy’, or a ‘spiritual philosophy’, or a ‘path’, or even just a ‘system’. It is not particularly important which label one chooses to employ.

The will

The central teaching of Thelema is that everybody should act in accordance with their own natures, and that everybody in fact would act in accordance with their own natures if they were not *restricted* from doing so by their minds. This restriction takes one of two forms:

1. *ignorance of one’s own nature* — one may think oneself an artist, but actually be more suited to practising law. Alternatively, one may have had a career in medicine drilled into one by one’s parents since an early age to the extent that one believes it oneself, when one may really be happier as a soldier; and
2. *rejection of one’s own nature* — one may know one’s own nature, but reject it, perhaps in accordance with a particular code of morality or in the belief that one should live for ‘higher purposes’. Christianity, for instance, declares human nature to be fundamentally ‘sinful’. Ignorance and rejection of one’s nature often overlap, in that a refusal to accept that something could be part of one’s nature can blind one to the fact that it is.

The mind can be a complex and extremely opaque veil around one’s real nature, presenting both conscious and unconscious obstacles. The mind has a tendency to believe that the universe either does or should work in the way that we would like it to; Thelema teaches us that we should accept and interact with the universe as it actually is, exorcising the mental restrictions that cause us to interact with the world and our selves on a fundamentally misguided basis.

The unrestricted expression of one’s real nature is referred to as the ‘will’ in Thelema, often capitalised as ‘Will’ or qualified as ‘True Will’ to distinguish it from the restricted ‘false’ or ‘conscious’ will.

The practical objective of the Thelemite is therefore to discover and then to perform his will.

Morality

Thelema teaches that morality is illusory, that it is simply an error to state that something is ‘good’ whilst another thing is ‘bad’, an error which restricts the will by subjecting it to the imaginary preferences of the mind as to what is ‘right’ or ‘proper’. An individual who thinks it is ‘morally right’ to act in a particular way contrary to his real nature may either fail to follow his will because he rejects it, or he will torment himself with feelings of guilt and shame when he is true to his nature regardless of his moral beliefs. Thelema teaches that all ‘standards of conduct’ are creations of the mind, that have no reality outside of that mind, and that therefore the real nature is the only valid and real guide to conduct.

The fact that Thelemites reject morality does not automatically mean that they will act in ways that would in today’s society be described as ‘immoral’. Explicit moral codes are generally codifications of common practice. This means that people do not avoid torturing babies because it is considered ‘immoral’, for instance, but that it is considered ‘immoral’ because the vast majority of people avoid doing it and have no desire to do it. In other words, people do not generally make ‘moral choices’ by reference to an explicit external code of conduct, but by reference to their own natures, by reference to their natural preferences and values. The fact that a Thelemite does not consider murder to be ‘wrong’, for instance, does not mean he will suddenly start going out and murdering people, simply because it was not his moral conviction that was preventing him from murdering in the first place.

In fact, it is likely that adhering to an external moral code is more likely to lead to what would be described as ‘immoral behaviour’ than abandoning that code. The moral belief, for instance, that homosexuality and witchcraft are sins, or the moral belief that it is ‘right’ to exterminate Jews in order to benefit the rest of the population, has led to a great deal of suffering and ‘evil’ that would probably not have occurred if the individuals responsible were not motivated by moral convictions. Moral beliefs provide a rationale for interfering in other people’s lives on a random and arbitrary basis. Thelema teaches that if everybody acted in accordance with their real natures, and abandoned the inner conflicts and false beliefs that arise from the acceptance of

the reality of morality, it is likely that there would be much less conflict.

Government

Thelema does not concern itself with government or mundane politics. In particular Thelema does not promote the creation of an anarchic society without any form of legal restriction. Thelema discards any notions of morality, so that it does not consider murder to be ‘wrong’, for instance, but for the same reason it does not consider the punishment of murderers by society to be ‘wrong’, either. Thelema is an entirely individual philosophy.

Any form of government could be said to be consistent with Thelema. Some consider that Thelema implies, if not an anarchic society, then at least a libertarian one, where citizens are generally given as much freedom as possible to discover and follow their wills, provided only that they accord that freedom to other citizens, as well. In reality, the only requirement Thelema imposes is that one should do one’s will. A brutally oppressive dictatorship could be said to be consistent with Thelema *if* that dictator was acting in accordance with his will.

Since one person’s will cannot be known by another, Thelema cannot sensibly be used to promote one form of government over another, and one policy cannot be said to be ‘more Thelemic’ than another. To do so would be to merely transform Thelema into an alternative brand of morality, something it explicitly rejects. That being said, since the Thelemite attends to his own will, it is reasonable to suppose that the majority of Thelemites would not have an excessive interest in the lives of others, and that most would therefore have a preference for individual freedom and liberty over excessive governmental control.

Death and creation

Thelema has no fables or supernatural beliefs about any form of life after death. It teaches that death really is death, and that far from being a curse, mortality is something more akin to a gift. An immortal soul would offer no hope of escape or relief; it would be horrible eternal bondage. Thelema teaches that death is the cessation of all worry and toil, the ultimate freedom, and the perfect rest.

Moreover, it is only mortality that gives life any meaning. With an immortal soul, we would have an infinite amount of time to do an infinite amount of things, no matter how long we waited to get started.

Therefore, it is hard to see how there could ever be any motivation to do anything. A finite amount of life gives our choices meaning, because every choice reduces the number of choices that we have remaining. Our actions and our choices determine what we are, and with a finite amount of choices available to us, each choice and each action becomes an expression of individuality, a joyous statement of essential being, which provides the Thelemite's motivation.

Thelema also has no fables or supernatural beliefs about the creation of the universe and the origins of life. Such questions are considered to be the domain of science rather than religion, and when no scientific answer currently exists, it is not considered sensible to insert imaginary religious 'answers' in their place.

The natural world

Most Thelemites have a love for the natural world, since the will is the interaction between it and their selves. This love is not of a sentimental, 'environmentalist' or Luddite nature, however. The Thelemite considers humankind to be as much a part of the natural world as anything else, and that his own impact on it is no less 'natural' than the construction of an ant-hill or a beaver dam. Therefore although he will not consider the human race to be parasites upon the face of the earth, he will tend to have an affinity with the 'non man-made' world since spending time with it, outside of the turmoil of human society, impresses upon him his own position as a natural being.

In particular, the Sun — at the centre of the Solar System — is viewed by many Thelemites as a symbol of his own 'true self' around which his mind, body, personality and character gravitate. In its religious aspects, Thelema has the characteristics of solar and other nature-based religions, and in this sense has something of an affinity with pagan religions, although the moral teachings of the latter often conflict with Thelema's amorality, such teachings being considered by the Thelemite to be 'unnatural' in the 'man-made' sense.

Magick

Thelema does have an unfortunate association with the 'occult', due mainly to the fact that its founder, Aleister Crowley, was a prominent occultist and 'magician', and wrote extensively on these subjects. The core ideas and principles of Thelema are wholly separable from

occultism, however, although some people consider ‘Thelema’ to comprise Aleister Crowley’s entire occult system, rather than the system expounded in *The Book of the Law*.

Since the practical side of Thelema requires a rigorous investigation of the real nature of the self, many practices may be employed by the Thelemite — such as meditation, divination and ritual — which are of a religious or occult nature. However there is no need to believe in any of the various supernatural ‘theories’ which often accompany such practices.

Organisations

There is no ‘official’ Thelemic organisation or church. Aleister Crowley headed two major organisations in his lifetime:

- The A.: A.: — an organisation devoted to individual development, where each member (below a certain level) knows only the member who introduced him and the members he introduced; and
- Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) — a fraternal organisation with roots in freemasonry, devoted to providing instruction in certain sex magick techniques.

After Crowley’s death, these organisations ceased to exist. However, several people with connections to Crowley in both organisations have ‘claimed succession’ and a variety of groups bearing those names exist today, often squabbling with each other. Various organisations claim to be A.: A.: ‘lineages’ and claim succession from Aleister Crowley, usually through a very low-ranking member. The largest of the groups claiming the name Ordo Templi Orientis was created in the 1960s by Grady Louis McMurtry, and today claims somewhere in the region of 2,000 members. Its religious presentation of Thelema is radically different to the one presented in this primer, its rites, rituals and structure being heavily influenced by Catholic Christianity. Another Ordo Templi Orientis variant, claiming that the ‘heart of magick’ is contacting extraterrestrial aliens, is headed by Kenneth Grant. Many other smaller organisations exist.

Moving on

Those interested in finding out more about Thelema may begin by reading some of the author's other writings.² We particularly recommend:

- *True Will*;
- *The Khabs is in the Khu*;
- *Fundamentals of Thelemic Practice*; and
- *The Point of View of the Sun*.

Following these, one may begin to read Erwin's blog³ which is regularly updated, and some other key Thelemic texts including *The Book of the Law* also available at the same web site.

As the individual begins to explore Thelema from other sources, he should be aware that many different interpretations exist, and as mentioned in the previous section some of them differ radically from the interpretation given in this primer. Some interpretations centre around politics, ranging from a kind of fascist 'master race' philosophy at one end, through to a form of mild socialism at the other. Other interpretations deal heavily with occult practices, and will deal with evoking spirits, contacting extraterrestrial aliens, and fanciful descriptions of mystical 'states of consciousness'. The reader is advised to employ a healthy dose of common sense and skepticism when considering these alternative interpretations.

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.

²Currently all available on <http://www.erwinhessle.com>

³At <http://www.erwinhessle.com/blog/>

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The Thelemic calendar counts years from 1904 EV (the year Liber AL was received). Each Thelemic year starts at the instant of the northern-hemisphere Vernal Equinox, coinciding with the Thelemic holiday called the Feast for the Equinox of the Gods. The civil date of the Thelemic new year will thus vary from year to year, and from location to location depending on the local time zone; but it is always within a few days of March 20. Rather than simply giving the year count from 1904, the Thelemic calendar uses a two-tiered system. The Thelemic Calendar begins in 1904, the year in which Aleister Crowley received The Book of the Law and inaugurated the New Aeon of Horus. When writing dates in the Thelemic style, Thelemites usually indicate the astrological positions of the Sun and Moon rather than refer to a month and day. The year is written as the number of years since the start of the New Aeon of Horus on March 20, 1904. Furthermore, the Thelemic year is often written as a pair of numbers, such as IV:15. A basic primer on the Tree of Life from a Thelemic viewpoint. The appendix contains the magickal records of Achad's discovery of his "Restored" Tree of Life. See also: Q.B.L. or The Bride's Reception: Being A Qabalistic Treatise on the Nature and Use of the Tree of Life. The Egyptian Revival. A detailed examination of Frater Achad's "Restored" Tree of Life, its justification in past cabalistic writings, and its relation to Thelemic symbolism. Contains many ideas later adopted (without credit) by other writers.