

## FROM THELEMA TO SANTA MUERTE

### An Interview with Dr Manon Hedenborg White



**WRSP:** Thelema is not a particularly well-known religion, even among scholars of new religious movements, and Aleister Crowley himself is often misunderstood and even demonised. For that reason, could you give readers a very basic introduction to what Thelema is.

**Dr Hedenborg White:** Thelema (Greek for “will”) is the religion founded in 1904 by Aleister Crowley. Its foundational document is *The Book of the Law* (or *Liber AL vel Legis*), a text Crowley held was dictated to him by a discarnate being named Aiwass. The central maxim of Thelema is “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law” and the related “Love is the law, love under will.” Rather than an injunction to follow each impulsive whim or desire, this refers to what Crowley described as the “true Will”—the unique purpose of each life, which it is incumbent on each individual to discover and fulfil. *The Book of the Law* (and Crowley’s later interpretations thereof) suggests a dialectical ontology, centring on the generative coupling of the goddess Nuit, representing limitless space, and her consort Hadit, the infinitely condensed life-force of each individual. Their ecstatic union generates Ra-Hoor-Khuit, a manifestation of the Egyptian god Horus. This is important as *The Book of the Law* also heralds the advent of a new age in the spiritual evolution of humanity (with Crowley as its prophet), which Crowley later identified as the Aeon of Horus, and which he believed would be characterised by radical social transformation, the union of the spiritual and material, and a focus on individual liberation.

Crowley’s system of Magick combined ceremonial magic in the style of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn with yogic techniques he learned while travelling in India, Ceylon, and Burma. After joining the initiatory fraternity Ordo Templi Orientis and being made head of its British section in

1912, Crowley also began experimenting systematically with sexual magic, and came to view sexuality as a supremely potent magical force. Crowley has frequently been demonised due to his advocacy of sexual freedom—and not least the fact that he was openly bisexual—as well as his liberal use of drugs and engagement with various forms of social and religious transgression. Of course, many of the ideas he espoused relating to sexual liberalism and individual self-development are much more mainstream today, so I think it's fair to say that Crowley was ahead of his time in many ways.

**WRSP:** Where does your interest in occultism come from? Is this something that you've had from childhood/young adulthood or did it develop while you were at university?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** I've held this interest since childhood, though it took many years for it to take form. When I was very young, my grandfather used to read to me from a children's book of Greek mythology, which I adored. When playing make-believe with my friends, I'd adopt the names of Greek goddesses or mythological women like Ariadne and Atalanta. When I was five or six years old, my father introduced me to his Thoth Tarot deck (the tarot deck co-created by Crowley and the artist Frieda Harris), which we used to play around with and draw cards from. Growing up, I was fascinated by "fringe" religious movements and belief systems, and was attracted to occultism, but didn't have a context for it at all—none of my friends held similar interests, so I mostly explored magical worlds in fiction and films (though I briefly ran a secret society of my own—the Order of the Mistletoe—complete with degrees and initiatory pledges, which I recruited my siblings into). I devoured anything I could find that pertained to witches, vampires, demons, secret societies, arcane rites, or ancient paganisms, and wrote short stories and spin-offs to my favourite novels. Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* exerted a huge fascination, as did Marion Z. Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, and anything related to ancient Egypt.

I was also fascinated by stories about pacts with the Devil, watching Polanski's *The Ninth Gate* in my teens. It became (and remains) an instant favourite. Like many people in my field (or so I've heard), I remember thinking that being an occult "book detective" (like the film's protagonist, played by Johnny Depp) would be a dream gig! But it wasn't until I began attending university that I realised this was something I could seriously pursue, and which could even turn into a profession. I studied social anthropology during my first semester, but quickly moved on to history of religions as this seemed to be the way to go if one wanted to pursue PhD studies around an esoteric topic (which I decided halfway into my first semester at university that I wanted to do). Though Lucifer hasn't materialised before me on any of my research trips (at least not yet), my teenage self would have been over the moon to learn that she would get to sift through arcane manuscripts and study magical rituals for a living.

**WRSP:** Related to the previous question, what led you to choose the specific PhD topic that you pursued? Did the topic shift over the course of your research?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** From the outset of my academic studies, I was interested in the nexus of (Western) esotericism, gender, and sexuality. One of my earliest undergraduate papers focused on a comparison between the Virgin Mary and the Thelemic goddess Babalon, who appears in Crowley's visionary record of 1909 and is inspired by his favourable reinterpretation of the Whore of Babylon from the New Testament book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of John. This project subsequently turned into my first independently authored peer-review article (published in Swedish in the journal

*Aura* in 2011), and—gradually—into a PhD project proposal on the changing construction of femininities and feminine sexuality in the discourse around the goddess Babalon from Crowley until today. I was fascinated by the way in which a biblical antagonist could be reshaped as an emblem of divine femininity in the early-twentieth century, and—especially—the ways in which it seemed to challenge pervasive notions of femininity and feminine sexuality in wider society around that time. In the early twentieth century, even feminists mostly tended to focus their political efforts in the area of sexuality on protecting women from sexual harm and damage—and won crucial political victories in doing so. But there were few who actively and unapologetically celebrated female sexual desire—and especially outside of a monogamous, heteronormative context—so it was quite a radical move for Crowley and his followers at this time to envision the divine feminine in the form of the whore goddess Babalon, celebrating the free expression of sexuality in all its forms, for all genders. I wanted to understand what this symbolic reconfiguration meant for the understanding of femininity and women’s roles, and how it evolved over the twentieth century and up until today in the interface with feminist and queer thought (which have impacted the contemporary occult landscape in many ways). The end result—my dissertation—remained relatively faithful to the original idea in terms of topic and materials, though my theoretical framework evolved considerably, and came to incorporate theorisation on femininities, femme, and sex radical feminist perspectives that I hadn’t considered to begin with. One of my PhD supervisors, Professor Ulrika Dahl (Uppsala University), is a trailblazer in the field of critical femininity studies and was instrumental to bringing these tools to my awareness. The work of feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Mimi Schippers, Rosi Braidotti, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ulrika herself has been absolutely indispensable to me in learning to think about femininities—in the plural—beyond rigid binaries of essentialism/constructivism, both as symbolic constructs and modes of being that are not predetermined either by a specific biological morphology nor by heterosexuality.

**WRSP:** As part of your research you’ve placed quite an emphasis on Thelemites other than Crowley, including those whose most significant work took place after Crowley’s death (Jack Parsons, Marjorie Cameron, Kenneth Grant, and so on). Although there are others who have done this (namely Martin P. Starr and Henrik Bogdan), academic discussion has primarily focused on Crowley himself rather than on his followers. Where do you think scholarship stands when it comes to Thelema beyond Crowley?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** The study of (Western) esotericism is fairly young in an academic context, so of course there are still a lot of gaps in what has been researched. I mean, we still lack solid, academic biographies for many of the foundational figures of modern occultism, not to mention their disciples! Within the last few decades, there have been major advances in the study of Crowley and Thelema, but of course there is work to be done, not least in terms of situating the ideas of Crowley and the other Thelemites within their historical, cultural, and social contexts. Crowley is such a colourful character, whose *oeuvre* and life story are so rich with possibilities for scholarly exploration that he sometimes tends to overshadow those around him. But of course, religious or esoteric movements are rarely the sole creation of a singular individual. I think there is something to be said for viewing early Thelema not solely as Crowley’s invention, but as the product of a social milieu wherein others participated and made meaningful contributions. Martin P. Starr’s *The Unknown God: Wilfred T. Smith and the Thelemites* (Teitan Press, 2003) is a great example of this, as is *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* (eds. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, Oxford University Press, 2012), which also shows how Crowley’s ideas have been developed in later forms of esotericism. Going forward, I hope to see more of this, in addition to sociological and ethnographic

scholarship on Thelema (as well as other forms of esotericism) in a contemporary context, showing how Thelemic practices and beliefs have evolved over time in the interface with other forms of esotericism as well as social and political movements.

**WRSP:** Your thesis combined historical analysis with ethnographic work among contemporary Thelemites, especially in the United States; if I understand correctly, that makes you one of the first scholars to publish research based on ethnographic work among Thelemites. How were you received among these Thelemites and subsequently how have Thelemites (and other Crowley-oriented occultists) responded to the publication of *The Eloquent Blood*?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** My experience doing fieldwork among contemporary Thelemites was overwhelmingly positive. My interlocutors were a very well-spoken, easy-going crowd, with a great sense of humour and a genuine interest in academic research on their tradition. I am tremendously grateful for their time and input, and not least the help I received in accessing unpublished archival sources, which has been invaluable to me. Many of those I got to know during my fieldwork remain my good friends. I am also very happy to say that the general response to my book from the Thelemic community and beyond has been very positive: many Thelemite readers (as well as other esoteric practitioners) have reached out to me with positive feedback, and I frequently receive speaking invitations from various branches of the Thelemic community.

Of course, there have also been critical comments: for some readers, mere mention of words such as “gender,” “feminism,” or “Judith Butler” seems to provoke indignation. Conversely, I have also been accused of being anti-feminist as I am seen as defending a “stereotypical” or passive femininity. It’s true—things like lipstick, high heels, garters, and sexual availability do figure in many (but of course not all) esotericists’ rituals, artistic renditions, and imaginings of Babalon. I don’t see this as inherently problematic or oppressive to women, and I take seriously the ways in which such aesthetic styles and practices entail both receptivity and agency. Moreover, I don’t view it as my job as a scholar to rate or judge esoteric movements or practitioners according to my own personal standards of empowerment or liberation. To some, this reads as a betrayal of feminist ideals. I think this is telling—as I address in the book, femininity has often been seen as a problem, even within many feminist circles; as an artificial, debilitating mask that women must discard in pursuit of liberation. As a scholar, I find such readings of femininity too simplistic. Firstly, viewing femininity as something exclusively performed for the benefit of the male gaze marginalises queer feminine desire, and secondly, I feel it is important to consider the ways in which all gendered expressions are, to some extent, culturally constructed. Thirdly, vulnerability and restriction (as some conventionally “feminine” aesthetic styles may certainly connote!) do not preclude agency, and I am inspired by femme and sex radical theorists in this regard. I find these reader responses interesting, as they indicate how femininity is still a tender spot, something that incites disdain as well as desire. But most of all, I am happy to see all kinds of responses to the book as it means it is being read—this, to me, is the most gratifying thing of all.

**WRSP:** One of the most striking features of *The Eloquent Blood* is that it draws from theoretical perspectives rooted in critical theory, feminist philosophy, and related currents of thought. Although various historical works on Spiritualism and Theosophy have certainly been informed by women’s studies, generally speaking these theoretical approaches are not something we see a lot of in the

study of esotericism; do you think that these sorts of approaches are going to have a much greater impact on the field going forward and what do you feel they are bringing to the table?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** It is difficult for me to answer this question succinctly as I think critical theory and gender and queer studies have tremendous potential for the study of esotericism. These paradigms have been essential to my development as a scholar, and my manner of thinking and asking questions about the topics that I study is completely informed by a critical approach to established categories and binaries. Gender and feminist theory allows us to think about very concrete things like: why were Theosophy and Spiritualism attractive to many first-wave feminists, while contemporary Satanism has tended to attract a higher number of men? How and why did early-modern alchemy function as a forum in which women alchemists were able to construct theories about gender that could challenge official notions of men's and women's social roles? What are the historical inspirations for the idea of gender as a polarity, as seen in the writings of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers on sexual magic, and what were the implications of these ideas? And why are young LGBTQ folks today turning towards—and creatively reformulating—currents and practices like astrology, witchcraft, and tarot? These, and countless other examples, demonstrate how questions of gender are not peripheral to the study of esotericism, but are central to the ways in which esoteric currents have taken form and developed over time.

The academic study of esotericism has often overlooked gender, resulting in frequent obscuration of the experiences and contributions of women and gender-nonconforming persons, but also to esoteric masculinities being under-examined. There has been much excellent research aimed at addressing this imbalance, especially in recent decades, and there will certainly be more—I am particularly looking forward to Professor Christine Ferguson (University of Stirling) and Dr. Tanya Cheadle's (University of Glasgow) forthcoming special issue of *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* on "Masculinities, Sexualities, and Esotericism." However, I often find that gender is still viewed as supplementary or "add-on" knowledge within the study of esotericism; as something that is primarily of relevance to those who are particularly interested in women, rather than something with the potential to challenge the way we think about esoteric currents, groups, and thinkers at a general and conceptual level. Given the historical marginalisation of women and femininities from hegemonic institutions of knowledge production and scientific rationality, the notion of esotericism as "rejected knowledge" (as pioneered by Wouter J. Hanegraaff) could productively be engaged from perspectives of gender. Conversely, a gender perspective can also highlight how esoteric epistemologies, while in some sense rejected from these institutions, have also reproduced hegemonic logics that have subordinated women, people of colour, and gender and sexual minorities. It is also interesting to note that historically, the marginalisation of Platonic worldviews coincident with the advent of Western modernity also paralleled with a gradual transition from a hierarchical model of gender to a model of biological, sexual dimorphism and complementarity. Thus, knowledge of the ways in which esotericism has developed in relation to the cultural mainstream also helps us understand changing notions of gender.

**WRSP:** You've just edited a special edition of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* devoted to "Rethinking Aleister Crowley and Thelema." Could you tell us a bit more about this?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** As noted, Crowley has attracted serious scholarly attention in the last few decades, but much fertile soil remains for scholarly interventions contextualising his ideas and those of his followers historically and culturally. With this special issue, I wanted to bring together a selection of essays that approach the study of Crowley and/or Thelema in novel ways. Christian

Giudice (independent scholar) explores Crowley's early poetry, proposing a re-evaluation of the British occultist as a genuine representative of British Decadence. Henrik Bogdan (University of Gothenburg) analyses the concept of God in Crowley's magical writings, situating the latter within contemporary tensions of modernity, disenchantment, and disillusionment with organised religion. Matthew Fletcher (University of Bristol) examines Crowley's *The Book of Thoth* (1944), linking Crowley's decision to change the names of several tarot trumps to his wish to rid the tarot of Christian influences in favour of the tenets of Thelema. Deja Whitehouse (University of Bristol) traces Frieda, Lady Harris's relationship with Crowley's Thelema, thus providing new context for the collaborative relationship that birthed the Thoth Tarot. Finally, my own article explores the role of Crowley's lover and disciple Leah Hirsig (1883–1975) through a Weberian lens, proposing an addition to Weber's tripartite typology of authority in the form of "proximal authority"—authority ascribed to or enacted by a person based on their real or perceived closeness to a leader. It is my hope that the publication of this special issue will give rise to new discussions and approaches, and inspire further revisitation of familiar topics in novel ways.

**WRSP:** With Fredrik Gregorius, you also have an article in the journal *Religions*, "The Scythe and the Pentagram: Santa Muerte from Folk Catholicism to Occultism," looking at the uses of the Mexican folk saint Santa Muerte within the Anglo-American occult milieu. It's a fascinating topic; how did you come to pursue it?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** This has been a fascination of mine for some time. It started while I was travelling in the U.S. in 2012. Visiting *botánicas* (stores selling religious goods, medicinal herbs, oils, perfumes, incenses, and so on), especially in California and Texas, I increasingly came across statues and paraphernalia depicting a robed, Grim Reaper-esque figure—the Mexican folk saint Santa Muerte (literally "Saint Death" or "Holy Death"). Looking into the origins of this figure brought me to read R. Andrew Chesnut's *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Oxford University Press, 2012), from which I learned that Santa Muerte is seen as an extremely powerful and non-judgmental miracle worker. Traditionally something of a patroness for marginalised or disenfranchised people in Mexico—women, the working classes, LGBTQ people, and sex workers, as well as for people involved in both sides of the drug war—she has become increasingly popular on both sides of the Mexico–U.S. border. Doing fieldwork among occult practitioners in the U.S., I came across Santa Muerte statues in the homes and ritual spaces of many of my interlocutors. I've also had the opportunity to visit and attend services in shrines to Santa Muerte in the U.S. and Mexico, including what is likely the most famous one—the Santa Muerte shrine in Tepito, Mexico City. I find the cult of Santa Muerte to be a fascinating example of lived religion and the ways in which it can function as a site of resistance, and it's something I would love to research further at some point. Sadly, my current Spanish skills aren't sufficient to do fieldwork in Mexico, but maybe someday?

**WRSP:** With Professor Christine Ferguson of the University of Stirling you launched the Esotericism, Gender, and Sexuality Network (ESOGEN) as part of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) in 2019. Could you tell us more about the launch of this group and what you see as its role within the study of esotericism?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** Affiliated with the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, ESOGEN is a thematic network that aims to bring together research efforts around the nexus of esotericism, gender, and sexuality, and organise funding bids, conferences, and panels around these

topics, and promote interdisciplinary dialogue between scholars and students. Our inaugural event will be ESOGEN Symposium, an international one-day Zoom conference organised in collaboration with the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, taking place on April 16 this year (2021). This event will feature paper presentations from around twenty MA and PhD students, as well as a keynote lecture by Christine. We will also be hosting a panel discussion at the next ESSWE conference (taking place in Cork, and scheduled for 2022) around the topic of Western esotericism, gender, and the creative arts.

**WRSP:** You are presently engaged in a postdoctoral project at Södertörn University on the subject of “Power through Closeness? Female Authority and Agency in a Male-Led New Religion” as part of which you were looking at Thelemite women Leah Hirsig, Jane Wolfe, and Marjorie Cameron. Can you tell us more about this new project?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** In a sense, the purpose of this project has been twofold. Firstly, it has aimed to analyse twentieth-century Thelema through the perspective of some of the women who were essential to its development: the Swiss-American music teacher Leah Hirsig (1883–1975), who was Crowley’s lover and disciple in the early 1920s, and co-founded his Abbey of Thelema at Cefalù, Sicily; the American silent film actress Jane Wolfe (1875–1958), who studied under Crowley at Cefalù and was integral to the establishment of Thelema in the U.S. in the 1930s and 1940s; and the artist, poet, and avant-garde icon Marjorie Cameron (1922–1995). To that end, I have been working with archival sources, mostly unpublished: diaries, letters, ritual descriptions, visionary records, and so on, in order to understand these women’s lives and esoteric practices at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and alternative religiosity. Secondly, the project utilises these women’s roles in Thelema as a starting point for an investigation of female religious authority. To that end, I’ve been drawing on scholarship on women in new religious movements more broadly, and have proposed an addition to Max Weber’s tripartite categorisation of authority: *proximal authority*, which I define as authority ascribed to or enacted by a person based on their real or perceived closeness to a leader. My hypothesis is that the category of proximal authority is particularly productive for understanding how women (and other potentially marginalised groups) navigate authority via close relationships, and in a future project I will be developing this terminology based on a broader range of case studies.

**WRSP:** Are there any new projects of yours in the pipeline that we should keep our eyes out for?

**Dr Hedenborg White:** Right now, I am involved in two book projects, both of which focus on women in twentieth-century Thelema. With Dr. Christian Giudice, I am co-editing a volume entitled *Women of Thelema*, to be published by Kamuret Press, comprising a selection of historical essays on some of the most important women in the Thelemic tradition. With Professor Henrik Bogdan, I am working on an annotated edition of the magical diaries of Leah Hirsig, 1923–1925, which has been accepted for publication by Oxford University Press. This will be the first academic, annotated, and complete edition of Hirsig’s diaries from a crucial period of her life and magical career, and will feature a selection of contemporary letters as well as previously unpublished photographs.

**Dr Hedenborg White, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!**

**This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,**

**Dr Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)**

**Dr Hedenborg White** is a postdoctoral researcher at Södertörn University in Sweden and will become Senior Lecturer at Karlstad University in August 2021. She is the author of *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and has contributed chapters to such volumes as *Controversial New Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). She has also co-edited special issues of both *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* and *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* and seen her articles published in such journals as *Religions* and the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*.

\*\*\*\*\*

**WRSP Interviewer:**

**Dr Ethan Doyle White**