

# FEMINIST THELEMA

Brandy Williams

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# Feminist Thelema

## Introduction

The concept of feminist Thelema is still new enough to be startling. Some feel that it is a contradiction in terms, that Thelema can never be feminist, while others view feminism as an unnecessary redundancy in an already egalitarian system. Nonetheless feminist Thelema continues to emerge as a philosophical position within the Thelemic communities.

This presentation represents a checkpoint in a continuing dialogue. The body of work generated by that dialogue is too extensive to detail here in depth. Instead we will review a summary outline of the main discussion points. Many of these thoughts will necessarily seem sketched in, both because of space and time limitations, and because the philosophy is still in its infancy. The discussion falls into these broad categories:

- Status of women in O.T.O. and E.G.C.
- Thelemic religion
- Thelemic philosophy
- Feminist Thelemic dialogue

Since all experience is embodied I should make clear the positions I hold. In O.T.O. I am an initiate, body master and chartered initiator. I am also an ordained Priestess of E.G.C. I have been feminist and active in the magical-Pagan communities for 30 years.

## ***History of the discussion***

My work with feminist Thelema began as an answer to a question. I was asked, "Why do some people consider Thelema in general and O.T.O. in particular to be sexist when Thelema and the Order explicitly include women?"

To answer that question I first reviewed the work available in the field. This was limited to a handful of position papers, notably Tim Maroney's, and the collection in *The Faces of Babalon*. I then conducted a gender inquiry based on a feminist epistemology. That is, I asked a set of questions about how Thelemic institutions and philosophy expect women to act and think. Are women's activities and histories visible? Do they act with authority, conduct inquiry, and produce knowledge? Do women act on their own behalf to further their own interests? How does Thelema understand gender hierarchy?

Since the initial inquiry I have made a series of presentations structured as dialogues, first at the O.T.O. Women's Symposium in 2006, and subsequently through informal and formal discussions in the Pacific Northwest O.T.O. and magical communities and in national online communities.

In the first part of each formal presentation I articulate the questions I am asking at this moment and some of the analysis which arises from the previous dialogues. The second part of the

presentation is informal discussion, which clarifies some of the material presented, and results in the next set of questions.

## **Terms of the discussion**

I position this work in the context of feminist spirituality, drawing on the work of feminist theologians working in the source religions of Thelema, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the work of feminist philosophers in the spiritual disciplines. I conduct this analysis and iterative inquiry as a Thelemic insider, speaking to both insider and outsider audiences.

The complementarity I explore here is that of presenter and audience, with the explicit expectation that both are equals in a horizontal dialogue, and that the result of the dialogue leaves the voices which engage in the dialogue distinct and formally unharmonized: everyone is heard, and everyone is right, at the expense of agreement. This reduces conflict, accommodates diversity, and permits exploration in the early stages of a developing philosophy.

## ***Feminism***

American culture in 2007 is sexist and patriarchal. This fact effects all of us whether or not we are aware of this. Women suffer from the effects of gender inequity, and everyone on the gender spectrum suffers from the enforcement of gender role restrictions.

The first challenge of feminist Thelema is to become educated about feminism. Specifically, feminist Thelema challenges all Thelemites to acquire an understanding of feminism from our own readings and from interaction with other feminists rather than media images and stereotypes. Contemporary feminist speakers often find we are the first feminists audiences have seen in person. Backlash has been effective in branding feminist speakers as confrontational and in marginalizing feminism. When I encounter apprehension about my work among Thelemites this almost always stems from a misapprehension of feminism based on media imagery rather than education or experience.

At minimum a feminist education includes a summary of feminist history, pre-Enlightenment, suffragist, new wave, and contemporary; an understanding of the difference between types of feminism, particularly liberal and radical; and a definition of feminist terms. This space is too limited to address this education, and I have provided a brief introduction to feminism elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Here is a brief reference to keep these definitions in front of us.

### **Patriarchy**

The system where men occupy most or all positions of authority. Literally, rule of the fathers.

### **Sexism**

The stance that men are better than women.

### **Misogyny**

A hatred of femaleness.

### **Tokenism**

A symbolic gesture toward equality.

**Backlash**

Resistance to change in sexist systems.

**Feminism**

Thinking critically about gender and acting to end sexism.

**Essentialism.**

The notion that what people think, feel and do is biologically determined.

**Liberal feminism.**

Advocates equal access by women to positions of power and economic resources. The most accessible feminism, relies on education to accomplish systemic change, places women and men in competition.

**Radical feminism**

Critiques the root causes and underlying structures of gender inequity. Less accessible, requires more education to understand, addresses the impact of patriarchy on men as well as women.

Feminism requires more than liking women, although that is a good start. Feminism requires the conscious effort to confront sexism in ourselves and in the world. Both men and women can be feminist, as both women and men can uphold sexist structures.

**Benefits of feminist inquiry**

This work is personal, conducted by myself, and is not an official initiative of O.T.O. Nonetheless I align this presentation with several of the strategic initiatives articulated in the O.T.O. US 2007 Strategic Plan. Attention to gender issues marks maturity in an organization. It increases academic and social credibility. It lays the groundwork for diversity initiatives which can expand membership, increase participation, and develop new strategies for conflict resolution.

As an insider I have access to information and experiences that outsiders do not. This permits me to conduct a more thorough analysis than an outsider could do. The existence of an insider feminist analysis of O.T.O. and E.G.C. serves as a counter and contrast to the criticism of outsiders.

Feminist critique also addresses the spoken and unspoken concerns of insiders about whether there are issues that we should be addressing. Formal analysis makes issues explicit, trading unspoken fears for useful discussion. Many people assume that any gender analysis must be hostile by nature. In fact, gender studies can act to call a truce in the war of the sexes. Rigidly enforced gender roles imprison both genders.

## **Women in Thelemic organizations**

Although I am aware of many Thelemic communities, and participate in some of these through e-lists and conversations, I am an initiate in only one fraternity, O.T.O., and clergy in only one church, E.G.C. I have analyzed the status of women in O.T.O. and E.G.C. Because I am not a member of AA I have not analyzed the status of women in this institution. This work remains to be done.

### ***Women in O.T.O.***

#### **Background**

The name Ordo Templi Orientis references the medieval Knights Templar, the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon, a military order of the Catholic Church which was terminated in 1307. The rule of the Templars did not permit the knights to touch women, even female relatives, and discouraged even talking to women.

O.T.O. derived its initial charters and ritual structure from nineteenth century fraternities, most notably Freemasonry. Traditional Freemasonic Lodges do not permit women to join as full members. However mixed lodges which included women members sprang up in eighteenth century France and were revived in the nineteenth century, spreading to England in the early twentieth century, and thence to America. Today several Co-Masonry groups admit both women and men.

O.T.O. did not derive a charter from any of the mixed lodges. However, women have been included in O.T.O. membership since its inception. When Carl Kellner began to discuss his ideas with Theodore Reuss in 1895 he made it clear he expected women as well as men to be admitted to the Order.<sup>2</sup> The earliest lodge book of O.T.O. lists 13 men and 2 women as VI degree members, of whom 10 men and 1 woman advanced to the VIIth degree, and 3 men and 1 woman the VIIIth and IXth.<sup>3</sup>

In her address to the O.T.O. Women's Symposium in August 2006 Soror Lutea noted that no statistics were kept at that time on the percentage of women members of O.T.O. However, women are routinely initiated and enjoy the full privileges and responsibilities of membership.

#### **Status of Women in O.T.O.**

Today women can hold any office in O.T.O. A woman can be master of a body (camp, oasis or lodge). As of July 2007, there were 13 women masters out of a total of 40 bodies, or roughly one-third.<sup>4</sup>

Women are eligible to hold a charter to initiate. No statistic is available listing charter holders by gender. Women can and do sit on legislative bodies such as the Grand Tribunal, although no statistic is available there. Of 11 members of the Electoral College, 7 are men, 4 are women.

Women can hold the Xth degree as Grand Master of a country and are eligible to hold the sole title of XIth degree or Outer Head of the Order. To date no woman has held either of these offices.

In conclusion, women in O.T.O. are free to take initiations and participate in governance of the organization. Further, women enjoy equality of access to positions of authority, and where statistics are available, they are represented in significant numbers, although not equity numbers.

## ***Women in E.G.C.***

### **Background**

At the time of the founding of the Gnostic Catholic Church, no mainstream European Christian church ordained women as clergy. Today some mainstream Christian churches in Europe and America do ordain women as clergy, with a few women being ordained as bishops. These women face significant challenges, including death threats. Women in some Judaic sects act as rabbis, and a few women have acted as Islamic imams. Neo-Pagan women on the other hand routinely hold positions of religious authority.

The direct predecessor of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica was the Gnostic Church in France. It was founded in 1890 by Jules Doinel, a Freemason and Spiritist. To define this church Doinel initially conducted seances with notable occultists, including Lady Caithness, a leader of the French Theosophical Society. Doinel and Caithness both believed a religious revolution would result in the return of the feminine aspect of divinity. Doinel initially consecrated male bishops and equivalent female "sophias" in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup>

### **Status of Women in E.G.C.**

E.G.C. clergy must be members of O.T.O. Individuals acting as priest and priestess must hold the invitational degree Knight of East and West. The seventh degree fraternal initiation is also the ceremony of ordination of a bishop.

Women in E.G.C. can hold all ecclesiastical offices. Women can be baptized, confirmed, ordained deacon, ordained priestess and ordained bishop. Women can also serve in the position of supreme authority in the church, although to date no woman has done so.

Deacon and bishop are gender neutral terms, applying equally to men and women who hold these offices. Priest and priestess are gendered terms. While these roles are differentiated for the purpose of the Mass, priestesses and priests perform the same functions in all other respects: they can perform baptisms, confirmations, and marriage and death ceremonies. No statistic is available identifying the percentage of women among the ordained clergy.

In June 2005, there were 31 bishops, 9 of whom were women. While this number is not proportional to population it is a higher percentage than that of most world religions. We can be justly proud of our record here.



## Thelemic Religion

This brief survey of Thelemic religion includes sources of the tradition, an analysis of male deity, an analysis of female deity, Thelemic gender hierarchy, and notes toward feminist Thelemic religion.

### ***Sources of the tradition***

Thelemic religion emerged from four major sources. The first source of Thelemic religion is Crowley's original work, including the *Book of the Law* and *Vision and the Voice*, both of which are revelatory in nature. The three chapters of the Book of the Law were each dictated by the three Egyptian deities Nuit, Hadit, and Ra-Hoor-Khuit. *The Vision and the Voice* records Crowley's visionary magical explorations.

The second is Christian religion. E.G.C. developed within the Gnostic Christian movement which emerged in France in the mid 1800s as a response to the Catholic Church's opposition to the initiate orders, ministering specifically to Freemasons who were shunned by the Catholic Church. E.G.C. later converted to Thelema and no longer considers itself to be part of the Christian tradition.

The third source of Thelemic religion is Neoplatonism and Hermeticism. These philosophies mix the Qabbalah, a Jewish mystical tradition, with Hellenistic Paganism, Christianity, and Islam.

Hugh Urban analyses the fourth source of Thelemic religious tradition, Eastern sex magic. The relationship of the male and female deities in the Thelemic theology bears a resemblance to Hindu and Buddhist formulations of sexually paired deities. Urban names Crowley a key figure in the transmission of Hindu and Buddhist Tantra to the west.<sup>6</sup> Aspects of sex magic appear in Thelema and form the central metaphor for the Gnostic Mass.

### ***Male deity***

#### **God**

E.G.C. was a Christian church before it converted to Thelema. Thelemic theology is not monotheistic, but henotheistic. In this system all forms of deity are subsumed into an ultimate source, described with male terminology. Ultimate deity is routinely referred to with male terms and pronouns: "God," "Lord," and "he."

Christian and Jewish feminist theologians have extensively analyzed the impact of male deity imagery and language on a religious tradition. Feminist theologian Mary Daly points out that a male god establishes the divine right of men to rule, and specifically to rule women. God the King rules heaven, men rule on earth, individual men rule the home. "If God is male," she says, "then the male is God."<sup>7</sup>

Feminist Jewish writer Judith Plaskow points out that long exposure to male God imagery inures us to its impact. The monotheistic male God emerged from a polytheistic environment filled with both male and female deities, and further, emerged as part of a deliberate campaign to exclude women from religious life. When religious imagery describes God the Father as creating man in his image, women understand themselves to be outsiders to this relationship. Male imagery as generic imagery excludes and conceals women's experience.<sup>8</sup>

Women have written at length on the experience of being outsiders in a religious tradition which valorizes the male. When divine imagery is male imagery, it takes a leap of imagination for women to read themselves into the image. As the title of feminist theologian Patricia Reilly's book suggests, "God the Father is not a God who looks like me."<sup>9</sup>

## **Hadit**

Because God is male, however, does not mean that God has a body. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz explores the history and ramifications of the disembodied male deity.<sup>10</sup> The disembodied god takes Thelemic form in the formulation of the god Hadit.

In Egyptian theology Nut was paired with Geb, the earth god. Thelemic theology does not draw on this tradition. Instead, a new formulation pairs Nuit as sky-goddess with Hadit. This god is suggested to take the form of a disembodied intellect.

While women embody Nuit in this system, men do not embody Hadit in the same way. In the ritual of the Gnostic Mass, the priest addresses the priestess as Nuit, while the priest is never directly addressed as Hadit. Men do not have the same opportunity to literally embody the divine that women do. Also in the Mass practitioners do not have the same opportunity to worship the body of the god as they do the body of the goddess. This is particularly important to feminist spirituality which grounds divinity in embodiment and challenges the traditional association of female with matter and the profane and male with reason and the sacred.

## ***Female deity***

As previously noted, Thelemic religion is not monotheistic in the sense that the tradition limits divine imagery to a single deity to the exclusion of all others. Thelema includes a multiplicity of deities from multiple sources. Thelema has fulfilled Doonel's and Lady Caithness' visions of re-establishing the divine feminine in the world. The inclusion of female deity in religious ritual predates the contemporary Goddess and women's spirituality movements by a number of decades.

The presence of female deities in Thelemic theology is important. Christian, Jewish, and Islamic feminists are committed to monotheism and must find both mother and father in the same deity. Thelema does not have a problem with polytheism and thus easily accommodates female deity as well as male.

It is important to note however that feminists in traditions which include goddesses, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, point out that that the simple inclusion of female divine imagery does

not guarantee a non-sexist religious tradition. For example, in theist Hinduism, even though there are goddesses, the supreme deity is male, usually Shiva or Vishnu.<sup>11</sup> How does Thelema view female deity?

The two primary Thelemic goddesses are Nuit and Babalon, both seen in visions by Crowley. Both are considered to be aspects of the divine feminine. The religious formulation of the divine feminine has not yet been clearly articulated in Thelema. However, these goddesses are seen as sexually active and as mothers.

## **Sexuality**

Monotheistic religion sanctifies the image of woman as sexually chaste and submissive. Crowley's theology turns these values upside down, reviling chaste submissiveness, represented by the Christian Mary, and exalting the free expression of sexuality, represented by Babalon. Revelation describes Babylon as holding a cup with the blood of the saints and the "filthiness of her fornications."<sup>12</sup> Crowley describes himself as drunk on Babylon's wine and as her cupbearer.<sup>13</sup> Where Revelation condemns the Whore, Crowley exalts her, describing her in ecstatic language. "Beautiful art thou, o Babylon, and desirable, for thou hast given thyself to everything that liveth..."<sup>14</sup> Crowley challenges the religious suppression of women's sexuality using the shocking image of desiring, rather than reviling, the Whore of Babylon.

Crowley valorizes sexuality in general and women's sexuality in particular, calling on women to participate in sex with the same freedom and enjoyment as men. He wrote, "The best women have always been sexually free, like the best men..."<sup>15</sup>

Crowley's call for sexual freedom for women broke taboos in its time and remains startling today when placed in a religious framework. The major world's religions still limit and suppress women's sexuality and punish women for most types of sexual behavior. In contrast Thelema provides a religious and spiritual context for sexuality for both men and women.

## **Motherhood**

Thelema also addresses the sacrality of motherhood. Crowley counteracted the Christian valorization of Mary as a virgin mother, one untouched by sexuality and therefore pure, with the valorization of Babalon as the sexually active mother.<sup>16</sup>

Thelema honors not only the divine mother, but human mothers as representatives of the divine. Crowley says, "All pregnant women are especially sacred to the Order."<sup>17</sup> Treating the experience of motherhood as sacred is a very powerful religious statement for women. It is a relief to celebrate motherhood as connected to sexual experience, since this is in fact the experience of nearly all human mothers.

In religious Thelema the image of the divine feminine as Nuit and Babalon serves as a model for women's sexual behavior. Women are free to act just as men do as sexual creatures. Further, in recognition of the primary biological difference between women and other genders, women are honored as the bearers of human children. This is one of the foundations of feminist spirituality.

However, Thelemic goddesses encode gendered assumptions about the specific function of the feminine in the divine realm. Nuit and Babalon are specifically described as mothers and as whores. They exist in relationship to male entities, Nuit to Hadit and Babalon to Chaos or the Beast.

There is an implication in Crowley's writings that he expected women to become mothers. Crowley termed motherhood the "frontal duty of womankind."<sup>18</sup> Although there is no official doctrine dictating that women hold specific roles, the Thelemic image of the divine feminine, linked to sexuality and childbirth, is reflected in the discussion of human women as mothers and lovers.

While the sacralization of motherhood is empowering to mothers, it becomes disempowering to women when motherhood is required of all women and when women's spirituality is solely limited to the expression of male-directed sexuality and motherhood. Not every woman will be a mother, and not every religious woman will express her spirituality in terms of sex with men and motherhood.

Feminist spirituality specifically opposes male appropriation of the female power to procreate. This appropriation occurs when men attempt to control whether women physically reproduce. This also occurs when male deity appropriates the power to give birth. Thelemic theology venerates physical and divine motherhood, as feminist spirituality does, while raising the question about whether women in Thelema occupy other positions than lover or mother, or own the decision to become mothers.

### ***Thelemic gender hierarchy***

#### **Yod He Vau He**

The primary ritual of E.G.C. is Liber XV, the Gnostic Mass. In *Mystery of Mysteries* Tau Apiryon explains that Thelemic theology as expressed in the Gnostic Mass describes a specific version of the relationship of male and female elements of the universe. The theology of the Mass is partly founded on the Tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters which spell out Yod Heh Vau He, or the name of the Jewish God Jehovah.<sup>19</sup>

Each of the four letters correspond to Thelemic deities. Yod is Hadit, Heh is Nuit, Vau is the union of Hadit and Nuit, and the final Heh is the product of the union. Yod is the King, wedded to Heh, the Queen, producing the prince and heir Vau, and the princess who is final Heh.<sup>20</sup>

These gendered principles have attributions. The male principles are fire and air, active elements, and represent will and cognition. The female principles are earth and water, passive elements, and represent memory and thoughts.

This construction privileges the male in a number of ways. First, in primacy of order: the formulation is always king, queen, prince, princess, never queen, king, princess, prince. Also in this construction the female principles are defined by their relationship to the male. The king

rules, his heir is the prince, the Queen's job is to produce the heir, and the princess is variously described as the result of the union and the destined bride of the prince. The heir is always the prince, and male; the princess is herself never the heir.

In this system the masculine encompasses the feminine, and the feminine is subordinate to the masculine. The goddesses Nuit and Babalon here occupy a specific and subordinate position within the divine heirarchy, in which all aspects of goddesses and gods are rolled up into the supreme deity Jehovah, so that Nuit and Babalon are a subset of God.

### ***Feminist Thelemic Religion***

In this section I reference work being done by women and men in creating Thelemic ritual today. It is important to note here also that women and men may contribute ideas, texts, rituals and other performances which further the development of feminist Thelema without themselves being feminist or intending a feminist impact.

Unlike the monotheistic world religions which until recently excluded women from full participation and from positions of authority, Thelemic religion requires the participation of women. The ritual of the Gnostic Mass requires women among the congregation and requires at least one woman, the priestess, to fill out the ritual team. We can and should be proud of this. However a great deal of interesting work remains to be done to articulate feminist Thelemic theology (or thealogy.)

### **Humanist deism**

The central challenge of Thelemic theology is to reconcile Deism with the dictum "there is no god but man." Medieval women theologians were often much less interested in the polarity man/woman than in the polarity human/divine. The Gnostic Mass and much of our ritual revolves around the human encounter with the divine, without and within.

### **A new formula**

The old formula, Yod He Vau He, encodes patriarchal and gender polarity assumptions. Feminist Thelemites seek a new formula with our experiments and meditations, one which assumes women as well as men rule, marry, develop both intellectually and spiritually, are parents and children, and inherit.

### **God**

Christian and Jewish feminist theologians utilize a number of strategies to depict a monotheistic deity who encompasses both male and female aspects of the divine. These include: the image of God the Mother; emphasizing God's incarnation in matter; focusing on God's loving relationship with humans; and the use of gender balancing language, such as God/ess and She Who Is.

Wherever we use the term God to mean the supreme deity, or the deity of whom all others are facets, we must specify that this term is meant to include the female as well as the male, and we must be on our guard not to slip into the use of male pronouns and imagery.

Some feminists believe that the word God has been so irretrievably stamped with the image of the old man in the clouds that it is not possible to reform the term in a gender-neutral way. They prefer to avoid the term altogether, substituting instead less loaded terms such as Spirit and Deity. This too is an option for us when discussing the nature of divinity.

### **Reinterpreting Thelemic gods**

Feminist Thelemites can develop conceptions of the embodied and adored male deity. Krishna serves as an excellent model here. The Hindu god of the moon entices women with his flute playing. He is the beloved lover of the Hindu pantheon. In the same way we can develop gentle, seductive, and loving aspects of Hadit.

While Babalon and Nuit represent approachable and nurturing mothers, Chaos and Hadit have not been well developed as nurturing and loving fathers. The patriarchal vision of God the father includes controlling and punitive aspects. As we call on Nuit as the mother of the stars, so can we call on aspects of Hadit or Chaos as supportive and protective father deities.

### **Researching Thelemic goddesses**

Thelemic women are reinterpreting female deity in relationship to themselves and their lives. They redefine the way in which the lover and mother are experienced. The lover is a powerful, active, and intellectual force, while the mother is not only sexual, and not only nurturing, but also fierce and protective.

In reinterpreting Nuit and Babalon, women look to their historical antecedents. Some study the Egyptian goddess Nut, the immediate antecedent of Nuit, while others, such as Soror Magdalena 463, explore the goddesses who served as the models for the Biblical Babalon.

### **Creating new rituals**

One excellent example of new Thelemic ritual exploring female imagery is Soror Asherah's "Vespers of Nuit". This ritual calls on Nuit as warrior as well as mother, includes historical references to Nut while firmly placing these in the context of the *Book of the Law*, and adds a list of women's names as well as men's as forebears. Another excellent example is Deborah Woody and Suzanne Kovacs' "Encountering Babalon" ritual presented at the O.T.O. Women's Symposium 2006, where a woman invokes Babalon, and another woman embodies her.

New ritual involving new conceptions of male deity is a desiderata.

## Thelemic Philosophy

Thelemic philosophy was expounded by Aleister Crowley. To date efforts to elucidate this philosophy reference only his writings. These are far too numerous to list in their entirety here.

Works discussed in this section:

Liber Aleph vel Cxi, the Book of Wisdom and Folly  
 Liber Al vel Legis, the Book of the Law  
 Liber Librae, the Book of the Balance  
 Liber Oz, the Rights of Man  
 Liber XV, the Gnostic Mass  
 Liber XXV, the Star Ruby  
 Liber XXXVI, the Star Sapphire  
 Liber LII, Manifesto of the O.T.O.

When I first presented on this topic I was aware that Aristotle was important to the history of western philosophy in general and Thelemic philosophy in particular. I conducted my own preliminary survey of Aristotle's thought, drawing on Brian Easlea's work<sup>21</sup>. Later I was delighted to discover that an important philosopher has made this study her life's work. I am completely indebted to Sister Prudence Allen for her groundbreaking work, *The Concept of Woman*, both for her analysis of Aristotle's impact, and on her articulation of theories of gender identity.

### ***Theories of gender identity***

Sister Allen identifies six basic theories of gender identity:<sup>22</sup>

Gender unity	men and women are the same
Gender polarity	men are superior to women
Reverse gender polarity	women are superior to men
Fractional gender complementarity	women and men have different characteristics, each is a fraction of a whole human being
Integral gender complementarity	women and men are different but whole and equal
Gender neutrality	gender is not considered

Gender neutrality and fractional gender complementarity often disguise an underlying theory of gender polarity. All gender complementarity theories run the risk of supporting gender polarity.

### ***Aristotlian gender theory***

#### **Plato and gender unity**

Aristotle's teacher Plato founded the gender unity theory. The theory of reincarnation led to his belief that women and men are essentially the same in spirit. He held that since souls are capable

of incarnating in either female or male bodies the soul itself is neither male nor female.<sup>23</sup> Sister Allen notes that this position places less value on the materiality of experience.

### **Aristotle and gender polarity**

Aristotle sought to solve the fundamental philosophical problem of his age. Where did humans come from? Specifically, do men and women both contribute seed to the formation of a new human?

Although many philosophers who preceded him believed both men and women contributed seed, Aristotle cut across the emerging consensus, and decided that only men contributed seed to the generation of humans. He reasoned that the female is colder than the male. The male's hotness heats up the blood and purifies it so that it becomes white and foamy. The female's colder blood remains red, unpurified, and is discharged monthly. Therefore only the male seed is fertile. The female contributes the material on which the male seed can work.<sup>24</sup>

This led Aristotle to the conclusion that the male seed contributes the essence, or soul, while the female contributes the material, or body, to the creation of humans. In the process of generation the female is passive, the male active. The soul principle in the male seed creates a male if it is successful in heating the cold female. If not, it creates a female, an infertile and deformed version of the male.

<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Hot	Cold
Soul	Body
Active	Passive

This theory of generation underlays Aristotle's theory of gender polarity.

Man

Woman (deformed man)

Because women are deformed men, woman's rational soul is not as fully developed as that of man's. Woman's rational soul lacks authority over her irrational soul. Therefore women should be governed by men.<sup>25</sup>

Aristotle valorized the monarchy as the model for the marital relationship. As in a monarchy there should be only one ruler in a household, the husband. The wife's sphere of authority is confined to that of the household, while the husband works in the public world. Since husband and wife are not equals, their friendship is not that of equals, and the husband loves less than the wife.<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle also developed a theory of planets and elements. The elements are a combination of hot and cold, dry and moist. The female is cold, and the male is hot. The elements are therefore gendered and arrayed in a hierarchy: the earth is at the bottom of the universe, fire and the sun are at the top of the universe, with the sun as male, and the earth as female.<sup>27</sup>



Male	Hot	Dry	Fire/Sun
Male	Hot	Moist	Air
Female	Cold	Moist	Water
Female	Cold	Dry	Earth

### **Impact of Aristotelian gender polarity theory**

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between the genders. Aristotelian gender polarity was transmitted to subsequent generations by the Neo-Platonists and Neo-Pythagorists, by the Jewish philosophers Philo, Avicenna, and Maimonides, the Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroes, and the Christian philosophers St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas.

When the first universities developed in Europe, Aristotle's texts were used in the faculties of the Arts, Theology, Medicine, and Law. As a direct consequence of the gender polarity which held that women could not reason, women were not admitted to the university in Paris at all, and were admitted in only small numbers in other academies.

The Aristotelian foundation of medical science encoded the single-sex concept into medical research. Until the Enlightenment the female body was described in terms of being a deformed version of the male body. The vagina for example was viewed as a form of the penis and the womb as a form of the scrotum. The model of the human body remained that of the male body as normative. A two-sex model emerged during the Enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> In the last decade researchers have pointed to medicalization of intersexuals, those born with bodies not neatly falling into one of the two sexes, as enforcing gender dimorphism.

Because Aristotelian gender polarity makes its way into Western occultism through the transmission of a number of religious philosophies, it has come to have the ring of universal truth. However, we know today that Aristotle was mistaken about the generation of humans. While men contribute seed (sperm), women also contribute seed (eggs) to create new human life, and both contribute to the child's genetic heritage. We also know that both women and men are capable of reason and passion, that men and women have souls and bodies.

### ***Gender unity in Thelemic philosophy***

Thelemic philosophy takes a gender unity position in regard to the soul and to will. The law of freedom applies to women as well as to men.

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.  
Love is the law, love under will.

This gender unity position provides a ground of discourse from which all other Thelemic philosophy derives its meaning. It is written in gender neutral language, addressing the person hearing it as "thou."

Thelemic religious philosophy also holds that the soul survives the body and can reincarnate. This is illustrated by the death collect from Liber XV, the Gnostic Mass:

Unto them from whose eyes the veil of life hath fallen may there be granted the accomplishment of their true Wills; whether they will absorption in the Infinite, or to be united with their chosen and preferred, or to be in contemplation, or to be at peace, or to achieve the labour and heroism of incarnation on this planet or another, or in any Star, or aught else, unto them may there be granted the accomplishment of their wills; yea, the accomplishment of their wills.

This is Platonic in its gender unity approach to the soul. Again, this collect is written in gender-neutral language, using the plural they as the descriptive pronoun.

### ***Gender neutrality in Thelemic philosophy***

At times Crowley's work does not reference gender. All genders are presumed to be represented by the male generic pronoun, and all genders by the image of the male body.

### **Male generic language**

Much of Crowley's work is written in the male generic. For example, Liber Librae addresses the reader as a man: "How should it be otherwise, O man, whose life is but a day in eternity, a drop in the Ocean of time; how, were thy trials not many, couldst thou purge thy soul from the dross of the earth?"

In 1976, Miller and Swift issued the first Handbook of Nonsexist Language. Their great achievement was to demonstrate that "man" is not a generic term in its current English usage. In earlier centuries, "man" meant both male and female humans, just as "girl" meant both male and female human children. Today we use "girl" to mean human female only, and we use "man" to describe the human adult male. Human adult males alone are never described as "woman" and human adult women are never described as "man." The assertion that mixed groups of humans can be described as men creates a false generic. In fact, since "man" means individual human male, it automatically generates a male image. The image of woman disappears in the false generic.

The pronoun "he" functions in the same way as the term man. It is always used to describe an individual male, never used to describe an individual woman. In sexist language it is used to describe both men and women.

### **The male body as normative**

Aristotle's presentation of the male body as the normal human form made its way into the monotheistic religions and also into the mystical systems based on them. The image of the primordial man occurs in Qabalah, which perfected the technique of imagining the man's body as the universe. God created the original primordial man, Adam Kadmon, in his own image. The

sefirot are organs in the body of the universal man, who bridges the realms of the human and the divine. The image of the human being is specifically male, called by a man's name, and bearing a man's genitalia. The woman's body, with breasts and womb, is not represented in this image.

In Crowley's rituals, the phallus embodies the generative nature of the universe. A primary example is the Star Ruby, which instructs the magician to point to the genitals and vibrate, "O phalloi." Some argue that Crowley meant phallus as a non-gender-specific term, denoting a universal generative power present in all humans. In "Facts and Phallogies," Thelemic writer Tim Maroney argued that by "phallus" Crowley meant the male organ. He demonstrated that Crowley did not view women as possessing a phallus and that his rituals were intended to be used by men.

### **The impact of gender neutrality**

The positive benefit of gender neutrality is that all genders have access to the privileges and experiences represented by the male generic. For example, when Crowley states in *Liber Oz*, "Man has the right to live by his own law, to live in the way that he wills to do," that right can be assumed to apply to women as well as men.

Gender neutrality masks an underlying assumption of gender polarity, that woman is a subset of man, who is the true template of humanity:

Man  
(Woman)

The negative impact of gender neutrality is that the embodied experience of women and other genders disappears into the male generic. Women then must "read" themselves into the text, either assuming an imagined male body, or adapting the imagery to their own bodies in implicit ways. In the case of the Star Ruby, for example, women do possess phalluses in the clitoris, but this is not the agency by which women generate life. Women's experience of having a womb is not reflected in the Star Ruby. Similarly, when reading the Rights of Man and other texts, women must read themselves into the text as men. This requirement to translate text and imagery represents a bar to women's experience of Thelemic thought and ritual that does not exist for men.

### ***Gender polarity in Thelemic philosophy***

Aristotelian gender polarity appears in Thelemic philosophy in the valorization of male seed, the devaluation of female reason, and the concealment of women's history.

Crowley valorizes semen as the sacred substance which creates life. He knew of the existence of the woman's egg, but treated it in the same terms that Aristotle used to describe the female blood or material, as passively accepting the imprint of the active male force.<sup>29</sup>

The section "On the Formula of Woman" in the *Book of Wisdom and Folly* reinforces the Aristotelian gender polarity that assigns reason to man and irrationality and passion to woman,

and fire and heavens to man, water and earth to woman. A woman cannot create, and so a woman cannot reach magical attainment, because she is a woman. She uses intuition and instinct while men use knowledge. Finally, a woman's own testimony about her cognition is to be ignored.<sup>30</sup>

Although there is no overt separation of men's and women's activities in Thelema into public and private spheres, some mechanisms obscure women's contributions to Thelema. In Liber LII (Book 52) Crowley specifies "The names of women members are never divulged."

Crowley also listed only men among the Saints called upon during the Gnostic Mass. In *Mystery of Mystery*, Tau Apiryon and Soror Helena address this issue. "It is to be noted that this list of saints is incomplete, as evidenced by such phrases as 'and many an holy bard' and 'and many another.' Even though the names of these other saints of our church are not mentioned in this place, their Essence is nevertheless invoked with that of those given specific mention. Let us not forget that among these silent saints are all the female saints of our Church (including all mothers, according to our Past Patriarch Merlin Peregrinus), whose names, in accordance with tradition, are never divulged."<sup>31</sup> This tradition conceals women's history, accomplishments, and the identities of the specific women meaningful to the church.

### **Gender fractional complementarity in Thelemic philosophy**

Some of Crowley's rituals require both a male and a female operator. For example, the Star Sapphire begins, "Let the Adept be armed with his Magick Rood [and provided with his Mystic Rose]."<sup>32</sup> Here the Magick Rood is the phallus, and the Mystic Rose is the female sex partner. Both operators are required for the ritual. However, in keeping with the Aristotelian dictum that women's passions should be ruled by men's reason, the male operator in this ritual directs the ritual.

Another example of fractional complementarity occurs in the combination of the elements. The chapter "On the Formula of Woman" in the *Book of Wisdom and Folly* affirms the Aristotelian assignation of women to water and earth and men to fire and air. This also appears in the Yod He Vau He formula. Because the male is fire and air and the female is water and earth, the combination of these elements results in the combination of male and female, resulting in a whole. While this construction is presented as representing a fractional gender complementarity, with both male and female principles being necessary for the union to occur, this theory conceals an underlying gender polarity, as fire and air are held to be superior to water and earth.

### **Impact of Thelemic gender theory**

While women participate in Thelemic religion and hold positions of authority in Thelemic fraternity, women rarely speak or write in the tradition. Of 16 speakers available through the Education Committee in 2007, 2 are women, or 6%. At Notocon in 2005, of 19 speakers, 3 were women, representing 15% of the speakers. In 2007 we have 19 speakers, 5 of whom are women, representing 25% of the speakers. Few Thelemic texts have been written by women.

Aristotelian philosophy overtly excluded women from public activity and from intellectual pursuits. This philosophy resulted in the exclusion of women from early European universities. We have seen that Thelemic philosophy valorizes the male contribution to generation, re-asserts the Aristotelian gender theory that women do not reason or create, conceals women's names, creates ritual based on the male body, and couches many key writings in the male generic. It is not surprising that women to date have rarely spoken or written about Thelemic philosophy.

The gender neutrality and fractional complementarity of elements of this system appear to conceal an underlying gender polarity. While this surprises some Thelemites, it is often the first impression of outsiders, and is one of reasons that feminists identify sexist elements in Thelemic philosophy.

We have also previously noted that feminist spirituality specifically opposes male control of female sexuality and fertility. The assumption that men direct women's power in heterosexual sex magic in rituals such as the Star Sapphire falls into this category. Feminist spirituality points to this as a primary criticism of Thelemic religious philosophy.

## ***Feminist Thelemic Philosophy***

### **Foundations of feminist Thelema**

It is important to note that Thelemic philosophy does not exclude women, and specifically includes theories of gender.

Thelemic principles which form the foundation for a feminist philosophy include:

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. *Liber Al.*

Every man and every woman is a star. *Liber Al.*

There is no god but man. *Liber Oz.*

Nevertheless have the greatest self-respect, and to that end sin not against thyself. The sin which is unpardonable is knowingly and wilfully to reject truth, to fear knowledge lest that knowledge pander not to thy prejudices. *Liber Librae, 15.*

### **Gender neutral language**

Crowley's work is often couched in the false generic. This language was current at the time he wrote. Because these works are central to Thelemic fraternal and religious practice, they are being maintained intact, in an effort to preserve the tradition. This preservation does not prohibit the creation of explanatory texts surrounding and explaining their meaning. We can pass them on unchanged while challenging the gender polarity inherent in the language.

Crowley wrote at a time when there were few or no alternatives to the false male generic. That is no longer the case. Feminist Thelema calls on Thelemites to create new texts using non-sexist

language. English is a very rich and flexible language which includes many true generics which provide alternatives to “man” and “mankind”. These include humanity, people, parent, kin. Modern non-sexist language recasts sentences to avoid the generic he. One frequent alternative is to use the term “he or she”. Also, “they” has for centuries served as the non-gender-specific English pronoun in common usage, both in plural form and in the singular. True generics also include nouns describing people and occupations, such as banker, astronaut, executive, and athlete. We can also remember to include women's names and imagery in gender neutral terms such as saint and Thelemite.

### **Surfacing women’s history**

Just as the divine feminine disappears into the male God, and women’s identity disappears in the generic male, women’s history disappears if it is not made public.

Today women are publicly acknowledged members of the Order. The history of women in the Order is being preserved in various publications. For example, Thelemic historian Phyllis Seckler wrote a biography of Jane Wolfe which was published in two parts in *The Red Flame*.<sup>33</sup>

E.G.C. policy prohibits altering the Mass to include names of female saints. However, Sabazius has created a program recognizing both women and men who influenced Thelemic principles called the Order of the Eagle and the Order of the Lion. At present there are eight members in both.<sup>34</sup> This strategy leaves the Mass in place while creating a new context in which women’s contributions are honored alongside that of men’s.

Even with this important contribution, however, there is still a great deal more biographical information available about the male Saints listed in the Mass than of any women who have contributed to Thelema and Gnosticism. The history of women in Thelema can specifically include biographies and images of women who acted in positions of religious and magical authority. A magical history of Thelemic women as extensive as the biographies describing the lives of these men is a desiderata.

### **Women speakers and writers**

The O.T.O. Womens Symposium in 2006 limited speakers to women only. Thirteen women presented at that conference. This was profoundly important, as it indicated both the ability and the willingness of Thelemic women to engage in speaking and writing. The challenge remains to increase the participation of women speakers in mixed-gender national and international forums. As we encourage women to speak, we can also encourage women to write in the Thelemic philosophical tradition.

### **Reading Crowley**

Reading Crowley means reading his texts and striving to understand what he meant. The term "reading" also has a specific meaning to feminist philosophy. Reading involves listening, understanding, and responding.<sup>35</sup> It means paying attention to context. Who was this person? What did he feel, how did he live, what choices did he make? What type of culture did he inhabit and how did this affect his worldview? How did the people he knew live and act?

Reading Crowley also means understanding the impact his texts have on people who encounter them today. Crowley's language is often extreme. He dared everything. His example points the way to our freedom. Many of us are drawn to the flaming passion of his words. They are at times searingly beautiful.

At other times they are terrifying, particularly for women. We must acknowledge the discouraging impact that Crowley's words can have on women. We have no way to measure how many women screen themselves out of Thelemic fraternity because of this discouragement. Women outsiders who might otherwise be attracted to the law of freedom refuse to enter into the agreement to read themselves into male language and imagery, and refuse to tolerate Crowley's sometimes harsh and violent language describing women and femaleness. Even within the tradition it is difficult for feminists to read, and speak, texts such as the proclamation of Nuit during Mass, "ye shall gather goods and store of women and spices,"<sup>36</sup> which seems to treat women as property.

This experience is often invalidated by insiders as a failure to understand Crowley or the context within which he wrote. However difficult it may be, with the insider's understanding of the texts, we must validate this experience. Our first step must be to acknowledge that it is much more difficult for women to study Thelemic texts than for men to do so, not because women lack the intellectual or magical capacity, but because many texts seem to assume that only men are meant to use them and do not portray women's capacities in a positive light.

Insider readings sometimes assert that Crowley's work aligns with feminist spirituality. It is the task of feminist Thelema to articulate this alignment. Feminist Thelema must create a context within which women can study historical Thelemic texts without fear, and with the assurance that Thelema as practiced today is intellectually, magically, and spiritually empowering for women.

Finally, it is important to make a distinction between Aleister Crowley's life and writings, the institutions which he shaped, and the practice of Thelemic philosophy and religion today. Crowley is not synonymous with Thelema. Outsider analyses and critiques focus nearly exclusively on Crowley's work while ignoring any other Thelemic philosophers as well as the significant gender balance in the modern practice of Thelemic fraternity and religion.

### **Thelemic gender complementarity**

An initial formulation of feminist Thelema might be:

Every person is free to express their Will in every sphere.

Those of us participating in Thelemic philosophy and religion are uniquely placed to develop a metaphysical theory of true (integral) gender complementarity. Thelema is profoundly interested in gender. Thelemic religion includes images of female deity. Thelemic institutions include and in some cases require participation by women. This includes participation of women in positions of authority in significant numbers. Also, although Thelemic philosophy and religion display

elements of gender polarity, and gender neutrality and fractional complementarity masking an underlying gender polarity, the system is founded on a bedrock of sex unity. Further, Thelema contains elements which can be articulated into a true gender complementarity, recognizing the unique experience of the embodied individual while granting divinity and magical effectiveness to every gender.

Aristotle's understanding of the relationship of men and women was founded on incorrect information about the nature of human generation. When we update this information we have a system which comes closer to accommodating the experience of living human beings.



A metaphysics of gender complementarity at a minimum should explore the following principles:

- Women and men contribute equally to the generation of new life.
- Men and women are not different species but are both fundamentally human.
- There are differences between women and men, biological and cultural.
- We do not yet understand which differences are learned and which are innate.
- Gender is a spectrum which does not always divide into two. The cultural and biological markers of men and women overlap.
- Women and men possess reason and intuition.
- Men and women embody earth, water, fire, and air.
- All humans, women, men, and intersexuals, are whole in themselves.

Articulating a metaphysics based on these principles is the great challenge of our age.

## **Feminist Thelemic dialogue**

The U.S. Grand Lodge Strategic Plan includes the vision to establish relationships with the greater social communities, especially including the broader charitable community. Thelema shares the cause of freedom with many other movements. Thelemic groups can benefit from studying and establishing relationship with the sex positive movement, the feminist and women's spirituality movements, and the alternative religion and Neo-Pagan movements. These movements seek the freedom of religion and sexual freedom which Thelema requires to flourish.

Thelema has much to contribute to these movements as well. Many Thelemites rightly point out that Neo-Pagans fail to understand the history of the religious movement and the great debt that is owned by all the magical communities to Aleister Crowley's work. Thelema also makes explicit the relationship between sexual freedom and personal freedom.

Thelema, the law of freedom, is the most shocking and liberating philosophy that humans have invented. I believe Thelema is robust enough to accommodate true gender complementarity while remaining effective as a magical and religious philosophy. Feminist discussion need not



and should not result in a winner and a loser, or a diminished presence in the world, but serve to open a dialogue which generates new perspectives and opens new vistas of freedom for all.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>"Feminist Thelema Background: Feminism", <http://www.brandywilliams.org/papers/feministbackground.html>

<sup>2</sup>Sabazius X' and AMT IX'. "History of Ordo Templis Orientis." US Grand Lodge, OTO. 2006. <http://oto-usa.org/history/html>.

<sup>3</sup>Baphomet and Son, Appendix IV, "The Rolls of the O.T.O. Contained in the *Golden Book*."

<sup>4</sup>To break down further: 10 camps had 6 male and 4 female masters, 21 oases had 15 male and 6 female masters, and 10 lodges had six male and 3 female masters. I am indebted to brother Michael Kolson for these statistics. I am also indebted to him for reading and commending on drafts of this work. His insight, information, and willingness to engage in dialogue have been invaluable.

<sup>5</sup>T. Apiryon. "History of the Gnostic Catholic Church." *The Invisible Basilica*. 1995. [http://www.hermetic.com/sabazius/history\\_egc.htm](http://www.hermetic.com/sabazius/history_egc.htm).

<sup>6</sup>Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, p. 111.

<sup>7</sup>Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 19

<sup>8</sup>Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, p. 127

<sup>9</sup>Reilly, *A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality*

<sup>10</sup>Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*

<sup>11</sup>Narayanan, p. 66

<sup>12</sup>Revelation 17:4 and 17:6.

<sup>13</sup>Crowley, *Vision and the Voice*, p. 149-150

<sup>14</sup>Crowley, *Vision and the Voice*, p. 150

<sup>15</sup>Crowley, *The Law is for All*, p. 311

<sup>16</sup>Equinox III 10, p. 167

<sup>17</sup>Equinox III 10, p. 167

<sup>18</sup>Equinox III 10, p. 167

<sup>19</sup>Tau Apiryon, *Mystery of Mystery*, p. 93

<sup>20</sup>Tau Apiryon, *Mystery of Mystery*, p. 93

<sup>21</sup>Brian Easlea, *Witch Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy*

<sup>22</sup>Sister Allen, *Concept of Woman II part one*, p. 17

<sup>23</sup>Sister Allen, *Concept of Woman I*, p. 80-81.

<sup>24</sup>Sister Allen, *Concept of Woman I*, p. 95-97.

<sup>25</sup>Sister Allen, *Concept of Woman II part one*, p. 101

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<sup>26</sup> Sister Allen, Concept of Woman I, p. 114-115

<sup>27</sup> Sister Allen, Concept of Woman I, p. 94-95

<sup>28</sup> Marianne van de Winjngaard, Reinventing the Sexes, p. 1-2

<sup>29</sup> Law is for All, p. 305

<sup>30</sup> "On the Proper Path for Woman," *Liber Aleph*, p. 171

<sup>31</sup> Tau Apyron and Soror Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, p. 62

<sup>32</sup> Duquette, *Magick of Thelema*, p. 129

<sup>33</sup> Seckler, "Jane Wolfe: Her Life with Aleister Crowley"

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.hermetic.com/sabazius/FGMV1N3.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Andrea Nye proposes reading as a response to systems based on Aristotelian logic. Nye, *Words of Power*, p. 183

<sup>36</sup> One of the participants at the OTO Women's Symposium 2006 suggested reading "stores of women" as dowry or other women's property.