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Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism

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CHAPTER

4 Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon: Dispensationalism and Millenarianism in the Thelemic Tradition¹

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the millenarian and apocalyptic understanding of history in the Thelemic tradition. It states that this understanding is described in Crowley's writings, mostly in his personal commentaries on *The Book of the Law*. It then argues that despite the severe anti-Christian nature of Thelema, the Thelemic millenarian view of history is actually deeply established in John Nelson Darby's dispensationalism, as well as in a Western esoteric understanding of biblical apocalypticism.

Keywords: [apocalyptic understanding](#), [millenarian understanding](#), [history](#), [Thelemic tradition](#), [anti-Christian nature](#), [dispensationalism](#), [John Nelson Darby](#), [Western esoteric understanding](#), [biblical apocalypticism](#), [Thelemic millenarian view](#)

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According to the British occultist Aleister Crowley, the vernal equinox of 1904 and the “reception” of *Liber AL vel Legis* (*The Book of the Law*) two weeks later marked a fundamental shift in the history of humankind.² A channeled text that consists of 220 short verses divided into three chapters, *The Book of the Law* identified Crowley as “the Beast 666,” the prophet of a new religion, “Thelema.” The then-current Age or Aeon of Osiris was characterized by the figure of a suffering and dying God, which the book proclaimed would be swept away by a vigorous new Age, the Aeon of Horus, “the Crowned and Conquering Child.”³

The core doctrines of this new creed of Thelema were expressed in three short dictums: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law,”⁴ “Love is the law, love under will,”⁵ and “Every man and every woman is a star.”⁶ *The Book of the Law* further warned that the transition from the Aeon of Osiris to the Aeon of Horus would not be a peaceful one; rather, it was envisioned in almost biblical terms as a time of catastrophe and disruption, marked by war, destruction, and chaos.

This chapter will discuss the apocalyptic and millenarian understanding of history in the Thelemic tradition, as described in the writings of Aleister Crowley, primarily in his own commentaries on *The Book of the Law*. I will argue that despite the fierce anti-Christian nature of Thelema, the Thelemic millenarian view of history is in fact deeply rooted in a Western esoteric understanding of biblical apocalypticism, as well as in the dispensationalism of John Nelson Darby. I will also briefly mention some post-Crowley reinterpretations of Thelemic dispensationalism.

The Birth of a New Aeon

Based on the revelations of *The Book of the Law*, Crowley saw human history as divided into three ages or aeons, each of which lasts for approximately two thousand years. These aeons mark evolutionary leaps in the development of humankind, and each is ruled by certain magical formulas.⁷ The new Aeon of Horus was preceded by the Aeons of Isis and Osiris, and it will in the future be superseded by a fourth aeon, that of Maat (Ma /Hrumachis), also termed the “Aeon of Justice.” In the text known as the “Old Commentary” (to *The Book of the Law*), Crowley explained the four aeons thus:

The Hierarchy of the Egyptians gives us this genealogy: Isis, Osiris, Horus.

Now the “pagan” period is that of Isis; a pastoral, natural period of simple magic. Next with Buddha, Christ, and others there came in the Equinox of Osiris; when sorrow and death were the principal objects of man’s thought, and his magical formula is that of sacrifice.

Now, with Mohammed perhaps as its forerunner, comes in the Equinox of Horus, the young child who rises strong and conquering (with his twin Harpocrates) to avenge Osiris, and bring on the age of strength and splendour.

His formula is not yet fully understood.

Following him will arise the Equinox of Ma, the Goddess of Justice, it may be a hundred or ten thousand years from now; for the Computation of Time is not here as There.⁸

The concept that religion developed through a series of stages or evolutionary leaps was consistent with contemporary scholarly literature on the history of religions. Darwin’s theory of evolution had been adopted by the leading scholars of the emerging disciplines of history of religions (or comparative religion) and anthropology, and religious thought was often believed to have evolved from matriarchy to patriarchy—the Aeons of Isis and Osiris in the terminology of *The Book of the Law*.

The Swiss antiquarian and anthropologist Johann J. Bachofen (1815–1887) further expounded the theory of a replacement of the “primitive” veneration of female generative power by a “rational” knowledge of male paternity and its subsequent shift from the worship of fertility goddesses (often envisioned as the Great Goddess) to the worship of male gods in his highly influential work *Das Mutterrecht* (the mother-right) in 1861. According to Bachofen, human culture has evolved in four stages. The first of these was a primitive, nomadic, and polyamorous “tellurian” stage in which an early version of the fertility goddess Aphrodite was the dominant deity. The second was the “mother-right” stage, described by Bachofen as a lunar phase centered on agriculture, law, and mystery cults. The dominant deity of this stage was the goddess Demeter, who was worshipped as the embodiment of fertility and femininity. Bachofen’s description of the “mother-right” stage would become highly influential for later understandings of a supposed matriarchy that was believed to have existed prior to the emergence of patriarchal cultural and religious systems.

According to Bachofer, the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy was marked by an intermediate, third stage, which he labeled the Dionysian. Dionysus was the principal god of this stage, which was marked by a

gradual masculinization of the earlier feminine traditions. The transitional process culminated in the fourth stage, the Apollonian. This was, according to Bachofer, the patriarchal “solar” stage, in which all traces of the matriarchal and Dionysian past were wiped out and modern civilization emerged.⁹

The theory that a widespread religious and cultural matriarchy once existed that then gave way to patriarchal religious systems, such as Christianity, was highly popular at the time of the reception of *The Book of the Law* in 1904.¹⁰ This theory was widely criticized during the second half of the twentieth century, however, and it is now largely discredited, although surviving versions of it can still be found in certain pagan and esoteric schools of thought.

Crowley’s understanding of the history of religious evolution was to a large extent influenced by the work of Sir James Frazer (1854–1941), the British anthropologist and historian of religion. Crowley adopted the unspoken but obvious postulate in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*—a work that Crowley described as “invaluable to all students”¹¹—that Christianity is in fact based on a primitive form of thought that is incompatible with a modern scientific worldview.¹² The main argument of *The Golden Bough* is that the theme of violent death and resurrection was central to many ancient eastern Mediterranean myths and rites, such as those of Adonis, Attis, Dionysus, and Osiris. According to Frazer, the dying-and-reviving gods were the main protagonists of a recurrent vegetational drama, which in “primitive societies” was often identified with priest-kings who incarnated the well-being of the community. In his analysis of the dying-and-reviving gods Frazer argues that the myths and rites were based on the logic of the “primitive mind,” which was less developed than the modern mind. The obvious target of Frazer’s criticism is, however, not ancient myths but contemporary Christianity. In the words of the Frazer scholar Robert Ackerman:

Frazer was interested in even bigger game than primitive-epistemology. For although in his survey of the dying-and-reviving gods of the eastern Mediterranean Frazer never mentions the name of Jesus, only the slowest of his readers could have failed to make the comparison between the pagan rites that result from an imperfect (because irrational) understanding of the universe and contemporary Christianity. Frazer employed the “objective,” scientific comparative method as a weapon to finally dispatch Christianity as an outworn relic of misunderstanding, credulity, and superstition.¹³

The formula of the dying and resurrecting God was, according to Crowley, an ignorant belief that stood in sharp contrast to the more advanced form of thinking that characterized the new age. Furthermore, Crowley argued that from a magical point of view, the magic of the old age was no longer efficient, since it was based on irrational thinking. This is expressed in *The Book of the Law* as “Abrogate are all rituals, all ordeals, all words and signs.”¹⁴ Crowley elaborated upon this passage in the following comment:

This verse declares that the old formula of Magick—the Osiris-Adonis-Jesus-Marsyas-Dionysus-Attis-et cetera formula of the Dying God—is no longer efficacious. It rested on the ignorant belief that the Sun died every day, and every year, and that its resurrection was a miracle.

The Formula of the New Aeon recognizes Horus, the Child crowned and conquering, as God. We are all members of the Body of God, the Sun; and about our System is the Ocean of Space. This formula is then to be based upon these facts. Our “Evil,” “Error,” “Darkness,” “Illusion,” whatever one chooses to call it, is simply a phenomenon of accidental and temporary separateness. If you are “walking in darkness,” do not try to make the sun rise by self-sacrifice, but wait in confidence for the dawn, and enjoy the pleasures of the night meanwhile.¹⁵

According to Crowley, the magic, or rather “magick” (to give it his preferred spelling), of the New Aeon differed from previous “old-aeonic” forms of magic in that it would be based upon a modern scientific worldview, whereas that of the Old Aeon was based on primitive and irrational thinking. Crowley

described his spiritual system as “Scientific Illuminism,” with the motto of his journal *The Equinox* reading, “The Method of Science, the Aim of Religion.”¹⁶

Magic had become the subject of serious study toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the disciplines of social anthropology and comparative religion. Crowley’s criticism of old-aeon forms of magic as something irrational was quite congruent with the contemporary academic viewpoints expressed in these disciplines. Writing in his influential study *Primitive Culture*, one of the leading scholars in the field, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), not only termed the belief in magic a “contemptible superstition” but also famously declared magic to be “one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind.”¹⁷

Tylor and, after him, Sir James Frazer are often referred to as the chief exponents of the “intellectualist school” in the study of magic—that is, they define magic as a specific form of thought based on an erroneous “pseudoscientific” belief in the potency of the association of ideas. Tylor views magic as nothing but a primitive form of thought that goes back to the earliest phases of human evolution. He dismisses modern occurrences of magical practices as surviving remnants of this archaic form of thought.

Its place in history is briefly this. It belongs in its main principle to the lowest known stages of civilization, and the lower races, who have not partaken largely of the education of the world, still maintain it in vigour. From this level it may be traced upward, much of the savage art holding its place substantially unchanged, and many new practices being in course of time developed, while both the older and newer developments have lasted on more or less among modern cultured nations. But during the ages in which progressive races have been learning to submit their opinions to closer and closer experimental tests, occult science has been breaking down into condition of a survival, in which state we mostly find it among ourselves.¹⁸

The notion of magic as antithetical to modern Western culture was to a large extent based on the premise that magic is a form of “primitive” superstitious (or nonrational) thought.¹⁹ This superstitious way of thinking was often described as associative thinking, in which similarity-based notions of causality constitute the *modus operandi* of magical practice. According to this pattern of belief, an act that resembles or imitates the desired object of — the magician will cause the desired object to occur. The concept of mental causation—that is, the conviction that the mind can influence the physical world—is of course inextricably intertwined with that of associative thinking. To use a stereotypical example: inserting a needle in a doll will not alone suffice to cause harm to an enemy—the efficacy of magic thinking is believed to be dependent on the intention of the magician. Although it was Tylor who first identified magic with associative thinking, it is Frazer’s elaboration on this that has made the deepest mark on the study of magic, with its well-known distinction of sympathetic magic into two categories, contagious and homeopathic. Furthermore, Frazer claimed that this type of thinking represents an archaic and primitive form of thought that preceded religious and scientific thinking, thus emphasizing the incompatibility of magic with a modern rational-positivistic worldview. Although Crowley shared Frazer’s criticism of (old-aeon) magic as based on primitive thought, he nevertheless held the view that old-aeon magic had been efficacious during the age of Osiris. The important things to note in the present discussion are that Crowley believed that the premises of magic and initiation changed with each new age or dispensation and that he shared Frazer’s belief that culture had evolved through three different stages: magic, religion, and science according to Frazer, and the Aeons of Isis, Osiris, and Horus according to *Liber AL*.

A Time of War

The notion of the coming of a New Age was by no means unique to Thelema and *The Book of the Law* but was in fact a common feature in the discourse of fin de siècle occult and religious movements.²⁰ However, the great majority of esoteric speculations concerning a New Age saw its emergence as a gradual and peaceful process. Scholars such as Wouter Hanegraaff have observed that the occultism (or secularized esotericism) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterized by, among other things, the impact of positivism and Darwinian evolutionism, which often took the form of a belief in personal transformation as well as societal change.²¹ The progress of humankind was seen as a result of spiritual evolution, a natural process that would lead to a continuously improving and more advanced society. The conscious application of a broad range of esoteric practices would, however, help speed up the process. This belief, which assumed various forms and was expressed in different ways, became a firmly embedded discourse of twentieth-century occultism.

p. 95 The New Age was commonly also defined in astrological terms, with the Age of Pisces said to be supplanted by the Age of Aquarius. The consequent evolutionary leap in the development of humankind was often portrayed as heralding a fundamental change in the understanding of the relationship between human beings and the universe. Such thought culminated in the blossoming of the New Age movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, with its characterization of the Age of Aquarius as the embodiment of holistic principles, in contrast to the dualism that it was suggested defined the Age of Pisces. The dualism of the preceding age was held to be responsible for the strife and conflict between patriarchal religious systems such as Christianity and Islam, whereas the New Age would be marked by peace and harmony.²²

While exponents of the Aquarian New Age seem to have viewed the transition between ages as generally harmonious, with the conflict of duality slowly replaced by the peace of unity, the birth of the New Aeon of Horus was described in very different terms. *The Book of the Law* describes the transition from the Old Aeon to the New as being marked by war and destruction. Crowley outlines this in the following seemingly prophetic passage, which he is said to have written in 1911, three years prior to the outbreak of World War I:

There is a Magical Operation of maximum importance: the Initiation of a New Aeon. When it becomes necessary to utter a Word, the whole Planet must be bathed in blood. Before man is ready to accept the Law of Thelema, the Great War must be fought. This Bloody Sacrifice is the critical point of the World—Ceremony of the Proclamation of Horus, the Crowned and Conquering Child, as Lord of the Aeon.

This whole matter is prophesied in the Book of the Law itself; let the student take note, and enter the ranks of the Host of the Sun.²³

According to Crowley, the reason for the destructive transition lay in the extreme divergence between the ethos of the Aeon of Osiris and that of Horus. Not only did the two aeons rely on fundamentally different magical formulas—that of sacrifice as opposed to that of the discovery of the True Will (Thelema)—but also, and perhaps most important, the blossoming of the Aeon of Horus necessitated freedom from the oppressive religious systems of the Old Aeon. To Crowley this meant in particular freedom from the restrictions of Christianity. By identifying his role of prophet of the New Aeon with the reviled Beast 666 of the book of Revelation, Crowley believed ↪ that he was seizing a cosmic task as the commander of the forces that would overthrow Christianity:

It is proper to obey The Beast, because His Law is pure Freedom, and He will give no command which is other than a Right Interpretation of this Freedom. But it is necessary for the development of Freedom itself to have an organization; and every organization must have a highly-centralized

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control. This is especially necessary in time of war, as even the so-called “democratic” nations have been taught by Experience.... Now this age is pre-eminently a “time of war,” most of all now, when it is our Work to overthrow the slave-gods.²⁴

It is clear not only that Crowley paid close attention to the many references in *The Book of the Law* to war, violence, and destruction but also that his interpretation of the violent and apocalyptic passages changed over time. Crowley wrote two significant verse-by-verse commentaries on *The Book of the Law*, termed by him simply the “Old Comment” and the “New Comment”; he also wrote a third titled “The Comment called D” (often referred to as “The Djeridensis Working”) and the “Short” or “Tunis Comment.” It is striking to see in these how Crowley’s interpretations of the most violent passages of the book changed over time.²⁵ The “Old Comment” was written before the outbreak of World War I and published in 1912 in his journal *The Equinox*, volume I, number 7. In the “Old Comment” Crowley tended to interpret the violent passages in a mystical way, as referring to spiritual exercises or qualities. In the “New Comment,” written in the early 1920s, however, the interpretation is radically historical and apocalyptic.

The violent language and symbolism is particularly striking in the third chapter of *The Book of the Law*. Fittingly, this chapter is attributed to the god Ra-Hoor-Khuit, who is described as a god of “war and vengeance.” Crowley acknowledged the difficulty of interpreting this chapter and admitted that many would find its more radical sentiments repugnant. In spite of this, when commenting upon the third chapter Crowley stressed the importance of interpreting it literally, although he would continue the search for more subtle, esoteric meanings.

Comment seems hardly necessary. The Great War [i.e., World War I] is a mere illustration of this text. The only nations which have suffered are those whose religion was Osirian, or, as they called it, Christian.²⁶

p. 97 In the “Old Comment” Crowley remarked that “this whole book seems intended to be interpreted literally ... yet a mystical meaning is easy to find.” Crowley thus seemed to be open to both literal and metaphorical interpretations, but it is clear that prior to World War I he preferred the mystical approach to *The Book of the Law*. Three short passages from the third chapter serve as a good entrance point to Crowley’s differing interpretations: “Choose ye an island!,” “Fortify it!,” “Dung it about with enginery of war!”²⁷

In the “Old Comment” these passages were taken as referring to the importance of concentrating the mind upon the chakras, whereas in the “New Comment” Crowley observed, “This phrase is curiously suggestive of the ‘mine-layer’ to those who have seen one in action.” Similarly in the “Old Comment” Crowley suggested that the part of verse 7 that states “I will give you a war-engine” should be taken as indicating that a new method of meditation would be imparted; in the “New Comment,” he wrote: “This suggests the Tank, the Island chosen being England. But this is probably a forthshadowing of the real Great War, wherein Horus shall triumph utterly.”²⁸

Table 4.1. Comparison of Crowley's "Old Comments" and "New Comments" on *Liber AL vel Legis*

<i>Liber AL vel Legis</i>	Old Comment	New Comment
AL III:4: "Choose ye an island!"	An Island = one of the Cakkras or nerve-centres in the spine.	This is a practical instruction; and, as a "military secret," is not in any way soever to be disclosed. I say only that the plans are complete, and that the first nation to accept the Law of Thelema Shall, by My counsel, become sole Mistress of the World.
AL III:5: "Fortify it!"	Fortify it = concentrate the mind upon it.	Fortify it = concentrate the mind upon it.
AL III:6: "Dung it about with enginery of war!"	Prevent any impressions reaching it.	This phrase is curiously suggestive of the "mine-layer" to those who have seen one in action.
AL III:7: "I will give you a war-engine."	I will describe a new method of meditation by which [See Verse 8, Old Comment].	This suggests the Tank, the Island chosen being England. But this is probably a forthshadowing of the real Great War, wherein Horus shall triumph utterly.

According to Crowley, the cosmic role of Thelema was not restricted to the overthrow of the old religions and the promotion of the new law; it also had the potential to have a direct effect on the global political situation. Crowley had political aspirations for Thelema and firmly believed that the first government to adopt it would become invincible. One of Crowley's German followers, Martha Kuntzel (1857–1941), translated *The Book of the Law* into German and allegedly sent a copy to Adolf Hitler in 1925. According to Crowley, the German dictator was sufficiently impressed with the book to correspond with Kuntzel about it for several years, although it seems most unlikely that this really happened. Crowley supposedly also tried to get in contact with Hitler in the fall of 1930 through his former disciple J. F. C. Fuller (1878–1966), while at the same time trying to reach out to Stalin through the journalist Walter Duranty (1884–1957).²⁹ There can be no doubt that these approaches were entirely opportunistic and driven solely by Crowley's ambition to spread Thelema rather than being indicative of any basic sympathy with the respective ideologies.³⁰

Reflecting on the previously cited passages of *The Book of the Law*, in his "New Comment" Crowley expressed his certainty that they affirmed the potential political potency of the creed of Thelema:

This is a practical instruction; and, as a "military secret," is not in any way soever to be disclosed. I say only that the plans are complete, and that *the first nation to accept the Law of Thelema Shall, by My counsel, become sole Mistress of the World.*³¹

p. 98 In a strange affirmation of his apocalyptic interpretation of *The Book of the Law*, Crowley also claimed that the publication of book itself could be directly linked to the outbreaks of a number of wars. Thus he suggested that the first four publications of the book led, respectively, to the Balkan War, World War I, the Sino-Japanese War, and World War II.³² Crowley saw these wars as necessary steps in the establishment of the New Aeon: humankind had to face a period of war, chaos, and destruction in order to free society from the shackles and restrictions of the old gods and to pave the way for a New Aeon of Light, Love, and Liberty. While this view of history stood in sharp contrast to other contemporary esoteric visions of the coming of a

New Age, it was—and continues to be—a recurrent discourse in many Christian premillenarian groups that viewed an apocalyptic period of tribulation as prerequisite to the inauguration of Christ's millennial reign.

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Christian Premillenarianism and Dispensationalism

Crowley was well acquainted with Christian premillenarianism as a result of the religious upbringing provided for him by his parents, who belonged to the fundamentalist evangelical sect known as the Plymouth Brethren.³³ This movement, founded by the Calvinist John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) during the first half of the nineteenth century, is characterized by a literal interpretation of the Bible and by a conservative theology centered on Darby's teachings of dispensationalism.³⁴

According to Darby's theology, the history of the world can be divided into a series of seven ages or dispensations. God relates differently to humanity in each of these dispensations and sets different lessons for humankind to learn. The dispensations are termed those of "Innocence" (up until the Fall), "Conscience" (from Adam to Noah), "Government" (from Noah to Abraham), "Patriarchal Rule" (from Abraham to Moses), "Mosaic Law" (from Moses to Christ), "Grace" (from Christ to the present day), and the "Thousand-Year Rule," which will be ushered in at the end of the ages. Darby was deeply interested in eschatology, and his theology emphasizes the imminent end-time. He held the premillennial view that the physical return of Christ to the earth would occur prior to the inauguration of the millennial rule. In this his thought differed from other forms of Christian eschatology, notably that of postmillennialism, which foresaw the millennial rule as occurring before the Second Coming.

Darby preached a pretribulational return of Christ, in which Christ would return to take up Christians into heaven by means of "the Rapture" immediately before the worldwide Tribulation. The theologian Jan S. Markham explains that Darby believed that the Bible stipulates that the Second Coming of Christ will be divided into two distinctive phases. The first is "the Rapture," when those born again in Christ rise and meet him in the skies, and the second is the "Visible Return," which will usher in the Thousand-Year Rule on earth. In between these two stages, Darby taught, there will be a seven year-period of tribulation, during which the Antichrist will rise to prominence.³⁵

Although Crowley rebelled against the religious views of his parents when still in his teens—and continued this revolt throughout his life—it is striking that two characteristic aspects of the religious worldview of the Plymouth Brethren, the importance placed on the study of the Holy Scripture and the notion of dispensationalism, are echoed in the religious system of Thelema. In Crowley's new religion the Holy Scripture of the Bible was replaced by *The Holy Books of Thelema*, the most important of which was *The Book of the Law*. The new dispensation was not that of the imminent period before the return of Christ, but rather the Aeon of Horus, formally inaugurated at the vernal equinox in 1904.

p. 100 It seems likely that Crowley's animosity toward Christianity was in part a reaction to the traumas of his upbringing in the cultic milieu of the Exclusive Branch of the Plymouth Brethren. According to his autobiography, Crowley had been relatively happy up to the age of eleven, when his father died and, in her grief, his mother strengthened her embrace of religion. Commenting on this pivotal point in his life, Crowley notes:

I accepted the theology of the Plymouth Brethren. In fact, I could hardly conceive of the existence of people who might doubt it. I simply went over to Satan's side; and to this hour I cannot tell why.³⁶

Crowley's attitude toward Christianity is actually much more complex than might be expected from someone who identified himself with the Beast of Revelation. In common with H. P. Blavatsky and other

occultists of the period, he seems to have maintained a profound respect for Christ as an individual who had attained enlightenment, although he remained skeptical as to the historical reality of the Christ figure as described in the Gospels. He also despised Christianity and its moral teachings, being particularly hostile to the Protestant and reformed churches. Although Crowley included discussion in his autobiography of his childhood experiences with the Plymouth Brethren and the various Brethren schools to which he was sent, he reserved his most outspoken and self-revealing exploration of this painful period of his life, which he called “a childhood in hell,” for the introduction to his epic poem *The World’s Tragedy* (1910):

I therefore hold the legendary Jesus in no wise responsible for the trouble: it began with Luther, perhaps, and went on with Wesley; but no matter!—what I am trying to get at is the religion which makes England to-day a hell for any man who cares at all for freedom. That religion they call Christianity; the devil they honour they call God. I accept these definitions, as a poet must do, if he is to be at all intelligible to his age, and it is their God and their religion that I hate and will destroy.³⁷

Concluding Remarks

p. 101 Throughout his life Crowley revisited the violent passages of *The Book of the Law*, and increasingly he viewed them as prophesying the world events that were unfolding around him. This became most evident toward the end of his life with the advent of World War II, an event that he claimed was a direct consequence of the 1937 publication of *The Book of the Law*. Thus in 1945, with the unleashing of the atomic bomb, he revised his opinion of the “war-engine” of *The Book of the Law* from “tank” to “atomic bomb.”³⁸ After Crowley’s death in 1947, Thelemites such as Karl J. Germer (1885–1962) and Marcelo R. Motta (1931–1987) reinterpreted certain of the apocalyptic passages of *The Book of the Law* in the light of the Cold War and anticipated an imminent World War III in which much of humanity might be annihilated by nuclear weapons.³⁹ During the 1950s, Germer, who had taken over the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) after Crowley, collaborated with Gerald Yorke, a former Crowley disciple and collector of his works, to make typescript copies of all the surviving Crowley letters, diaries, and manuscripts. One set of copies would be kept in London, another in the United States, and another in Australia, with the aim that at least one relatively complete body of the Beast’s writings might survive in the event of some global war or cataclysm.⁴⁰

Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), who had acted as Crowley’s personal secretary for a brief period near the end of the Beast’s life, participated in this project in the late 1940s and early 1950s by transcribing materials for Yorke and Germer. Starting in the late 1960s, Grant went on to collaborate with Crowley’s literary executor, John Symonds, in the publication of a number of significant works by the Beast. It was not long after this that Grant launched his own version of the OTO (later referred to as the Typhonian OTO and now called the Typhonian Order) and published the first volumes of his influential “Typhonian Trilogies.” Grant’s work is firmly rooted in the Thelemic tradition, although traditionalists within the movement perceive his work as unorthodox and idiosyncratic. Grant discusses *The Book of the Law* at length in various of his works, and it is clear that he shared Crowley’s belief that the transition from the Old Aeon to the New would be marked by violent upheaval. His perspective was possibly more apocalyptic than Crowley’s, for he predicted an imminent and global catastrophe. In his *Outside the Circles of Time* (1980) Grant suggests:

The significance of Crowley’s work ... is only now becoming apparent as the values of the old world, the old aeon, crumble away or undergo radical change. Furthermore the entire mass of humanity—not a mere handful of nations, however large and powerful—is now threatened with destruction as, once before, when it succumb to almost annihilation in the days of Atlantis. There are those who believe that it is already too late to avert a repetition of that catastrophe, although it is

considered possible for certain members of the human race to survive the holocaust and its effects.⁴¹

Grant's understanding of the mechanics of time also differed from Crowley's, for where Crowley had a relatively linear understanding of history as being divided by dispensations, Grant adopted a cyclical concept, apparently drawn from Hindu thought on the matter.⁴² Looking at events from that perspective, Grant suggested that humankind is facing the final phases of *Kali Yuga*, or the Black Age, and that the violence around us and the imminent catastrophe are the birth pangs of the New Aeon, interpreted as the *Satya*, or Golden Yuga. In a short text titled "Looking Forward," which he wrote in 2004 to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the reception of *The Book of the Law*, Grant seems to have embraced contemporary apocalyptic speculation about the Mayan calendar and the "end of time," which posits that the destruction of the world will happen toward the end of 2012.⁴³

The writings of Kenneth Grant are a good example of how the millenarian and dispensationalist themes of *The Book of the Law* are being reinterpreted by some post-Crowley Thelemites. A quick search of the Internet reveals a wide range of other contemporary interpretations, ranging from purely symbolic to literal and historical.

In summary, then, Crowley's understanding of history as a succession of aeons, or dispensations, can be seen as a reflection of the teachings of John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren that he encountered during his childhood. Darby's description of human history as divisible into a series of chronologically successive dispensations is paralleled by Crowley's succession of aeons. The Christian end-times theology of premillennialism, with its belief in the tribulation preceding the millennium, is reinterpreted as the birth pangs of the New Aeon of Horus. According to premillennial theology, the Christian faithful will be saved from the Tribulation by the Rapture. While there is arguably no direct Thelemic counterpart to this, certain passages in the first chapter of *The Book of the Law*—for instance, verse 58: "I give unimaginable joys on earth: certainty, not faith, while in life, upon death; peace unutterable, rest, ecstasy"—do appear to offer great reward to the true believers who accept the Law of Thelema. Finally, just as Christ will have a central role in the battle against Satan and the forces of evil according to Christian millennial and apocalyptic traditions, Crowley—as the Great Beast 666—claimed to be the commander of the forces that will overthrow the "slave-gods" of the Old Aeon. This (partly) inverted form of Christian premillennialism can thus be viewed as an interesting example of the ways in which Christian doctrines may consciously or otherwise be reinterpreted and adopted by contemporary esoteric new religious movements, and therefore how important it can be for scholars of Western esotericism to take Christian beliefs and practices into account.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Keith Richmond for his valuable comments and suggestions for this chapter.
2. *The Book of the Law* was first published in the third volume of [Aleister Crowley], *ΘΕΛΗΜΑ [Thelema]*, 3 vols. (London: privately printed, 1909), with the title "Liber L vel Legis sub figura CCXX as Delivered by LXXVIII unto DCLXVI." The facsimile of *Liber Legis* was first published in *The Equinox* I (7) (March 1912). *The Book of the Law* was published several times in Crowley's lifetime: 1913, 1926, 1936, 1937, and 1938. Numerous modern editions are in print.
3. For Crowley's own account of the reception of *The Book of the Law* in Cairo, 1904, see Aleister Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods* (London: OTO, 1936). The Latin title of *The Book of the Law* was initially *Liber L vel Legis*, but this was later changed to *Liber AL vel Legis* after Crowley's "magical son" Charles Stansfeld Jones (1886–1950) discovered in 1918 that AL is the secret key to *The Book of the Law*, which Crowley accepted in September 1919. For further information on this, see Frater Achad [Charles Stansfeld Jones], *Liber 31, and Other Related Essays* (San Francisco: Level Press, 1974).

4. *Liber AL vel Legis* I:40.
5. *Ibid.*, I:57.
6. *Ibid.*, I:3.
7. "Abrahamadabra is the Magick Formula of the Aeon, by which men may accomplish the Great Work. This Formula is then the 'reward' given by the God [Ra Hoor Khuit], the largesse granted by Him on His accession to the Lordship of the Aeon, just as INRI-IAO-LVX formula of attainment by way of Crucifixion was given by Osiris when he came to power in the last Aeon." Aleister Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries on "The Book of the Law,"* ed. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (Montreal: 93 Publishing, 1974), 257.
8. Aleister Crowley, "Liber Legis: The Comment," *The Equinox* I (7) (1912), 400. This comment to *The Book of the Law* is referred to as the "Old Comment."
9. Johann Jacob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Kraus und Hoffmann, 1861). For critical discussions of Bachofen's work, see Uwe Wesel, *Der Mythos vom Matriarchat: Über Bachofens Mutterrecht und die Stellung von Frauen in frühen Gesellschaften vor der Entstehung staatlicher Herrschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980); Josef Rattner and Gerhard Danzer, "Johann Jakob Bachofen und die Mutterrechtstheorie," in *Europäische Kulturbeiträge im deutsch-schweizerischen Schrifttum von 1850–2000* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), 9–28.
10. Joan Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), 263–80; Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
11. Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (Paris: Lecram Press, 1930), 211. For a discussion of the influence of Frazer upon Crowley, see Martin P. Starr, editor's introduction, in Aleister Crowley, *Golden Twigs*, ed. Martin P. Starr (Chicago: Teitan Press, 1988), vii–xv.
12. On Frazer, see Robert Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York: Garland, 1991); Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Glory, Jest and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*," PhD diss., Yale University, 1969.
13. Robert Ackerman, "Frazer, James G.," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 3192.
14. *Liber AL vel Legis* I:49.
15. Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 137.
16. For a detailed discussion of Crowley's positivistic and scientific understanding of magic, see chapter 3 in this collection, Marco Pasi's "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice."
17. Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 6th ed. (London: John Murray, 1920), 1:112.
18. *Ibid.*, 1:112–13.
19. As I have discussed elsewhere, the notion of magic as antithetical to Western society is based on four interlinked discourses: (1) magic is based on "primitive" superstitious (or nonrational) thought; (2) magic is something that originates from other parts of the world, and as such is a foreign element in Western culture; (3) magic is incompatible with the Christian faith; and (4) magic is inherently evil by nature. Henrik Bogdan, "Introduction: Modern Western Magic," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 12:1 (2012), 1–16.
20. Alex Owen, *The Place of the Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
21. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Study of Western Esotericism," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 490–519.
22. On the New Age and Western esotericism, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in*

the *Mirror of Secular Thought* ↪ (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

23. Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 96–97.
24. Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 122.
25. The “Old Comment” to *The Book of the Law* was published as Aleister Crowley, “*Liber Legis: The Comment*,” *The Equinox* I (7) (March 1912), 387–40[1]. The “New Comment,” written in 1920, and the incomplete “Commentary Called D[Jeridensis],” written at the Hotel du Djerid in the oasis of Nefta, Tunisia, in the autumn of 1923, remained unpublished during Crowley’s lifetime. They were published for the first time, together with the “Old Comment,” in Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*. The “Old” and “New” comments were also published as Aleister Crowley, *The Law Is for All: An Extended Commentary on “The Book of the Law,”* ed. Israel Regardie (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn, 1975); and Aleister Crowley, *The Commentaries of AL: The Equinox* V(1), ed. Marcelo Motta (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975). In 1945 Crowley contracted his friend Louis Wilkinson (1881–1966) to edit the lengthy commentary on *The Book of the Law* in popular form, which was published as Aleister Crowley, *The Law Is for All: The Authorized Popular Commentary to “The Book of the Law,”* ed. Louis Wilkinson and Hymenaeus Beta (Tempe, Ariz.: New Falcon, 1998). The “Short” or “Tunis Comment” was written in 1925 and published for the first time in [Aleister Crowley], *AL: The Book of the Law* (Tunis: privately printed, 1926), in a limited edition of eleven numbered copies. The text of this comment is included at the end of most later editions of *The Book of the Law*.
26. Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 258.
27. *Liber AL vel Legis* III:4–6.
28. Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 259.
29. See Crowley’s letter to David Curwen dated December 5, 1945, in Aleister Crowley and David Curwen, *Brother Curwen, Brother Crowley: A Correspondence*, ed. Henrik Bogdan (York Beach, Maine: Teitan Press, 2010), 89. See also Richard B. Spence, *Secret Agent 666: Aleister Crowley, British Intelligence and the Occult* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Feral House, 2008), 212–13.
30. See Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2013).
31. Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 259; emphasis added.
32. “THE FIRST PUBLICATION:
Nine months before the outbreak of the Balkan War, which broke up the Near East.
THE SECOND PUBLICATION:
Nine months before the outbreak of the World War, which broke up the West.
THE THIRD PUBLICATION
Nine months before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, which is breaking up the Far East.
↪ THE FOURTH PUBLICATION
6.22 a.m., December 22, 1937, e.v., nine months before the betrayal, which stripped Britain of the last rags of honour, prestige and security, and will break up civilization.
To repeat: “the event will establish the kingdom of the Crowned and Conquering Child over the whole earth, and all men shall bow to the Law, which is love under will.”
Aleister Crowley, *Thumbs Up! A Pentagram—A Pantacle to Win the War* (London: OTO, 1941), n.p.
33. For Crowley’s own account of his experiences with the Plymouth Brethren, see *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, ed. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (London: Arkana, 1989), 35–81; Aleister Crowley, *The World’s Tragedy* (1910; Scottsdale, Ariz.: New Falcon, 1991), xi–xxxiv. See also Aleister Crowley, *Crowley on Christ*, ed. Francis King (London: C. W. Daniel, 1974).
34. For information on the Plymouth Brethren, see James Patrick, *Primitivist Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996); Roy F. Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1968); Harold Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren, 1825–1850* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1967).
35. Jan S. Markham, *The Blackwell Companion to the Theologians*, vol. 2, *Enlightenment to the Twenty-First Century* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 43–44.

36. Crowley, *The Confessions*, 67.
37. Crowley, *The World's Tragedy*, xxxi.
38. Letter from Aleister Crowley to Louis Wilkinson, August 7, 1945. Warburg Institute, University of London.
39. Martin P. Starr, "A Hundred Years Hence: Visions of a Thelemic Future," *Starfire: A Journal of the New Aeon* 2:3 (2008), 151–54.
40. Yorke's collection is now deposited at the Warburg Institute, University of London.
41. Kenneth Grant, *Outside the Circles of Time* (London: Frederick Muller, 1980), 2.
42. Grant was also inspired by Charles Stansfeld Jones, who in the spring of 1948 began to receive a series of revelations that, according to Jones, inaugurated a new aeon, that of Ma-Ion or Maat. Within a year Jones had written approximately two hundred letters to his "witnesses" Gerald Yorke, Karl J. Germer, and Albert Handel, in which he discussed the revelations. See Frederick J. Kayser, *Son of the Magus: A Biographic Essay Composed from the Writings of Frater Achad* (unpublished, in the author's collection); Charles Stansfeld Jones, *The Incoming of the Aeon of Maat* (London: Starfire, forthcoming).
43. "It is the reception of the text which we know as 'the threefold book of Law' that the present gathering is set on remembering. The freedoms and ecstasies offered by Nuit and Her Son, Hadit, in chapters one and two, now begin to merge with the Mysteries of 'a god of war and Vengeance'—Ra-Hoor-Khuit—and it is the latter Mysteries which we now confront in the final phases of the kali Yuga—the 'Black Age' of Goddess Kali, the Night-Dark Mother of Time; of Time which is coming to an end, as also is the universe *as we know it*." Kenneth Grant, "Looking Forward!," *Starfire: A Journal of the New Aeon* 2:3 (2008), 13.