

THE POWER OF THE IMPURE: TRANSGRESSION, VIOLENCE AND SECRECY IN BENGALI ŚĀKTA TANTRA AND MODERN WESTERN MAGIC

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Summary

Since their first encounter with the complex body of texts and traditions called “Tantras,” Western scholars have been simultaneously repulsed and horrified, yet also tantalized and titillated by the deliberate use of normally impure and defiling substances in Tantric practice. Yet, with a few exceptions, they have made little headway in interpreting the deeper religious and social role of impurity, either in Tantric ritual or in the history of religions generally. This paper compares the role of ritual impurity and transgression in two very different traditions, widely separated both historically and geographically: the Śākta school of Tantra in Bengal (focusing on the 16th century *brāhmaṇ*, Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa) and modern Western magic (focusing on Aleister Crowley and the Ordo Templi Orientis). Specifically, I look closely at the manipulation of impure bodily substances—such as blood, semen and vaginal fluids—in sexual rituals and animal sacrifice. By playing off of these two examples in a kind of metaphoric juxtaposition, I hope to shed some new light on the role of impurity, transgression and secrecy in both cases and also in the comparative study of religion as a whole. Adapting some insights from Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault, I argue that the ritual use of impurity has much larger social and political implications, as a means of harnessing the tremendous power that flows through the physical universe, the human body and the social body alike.

He who is hesitant in the drinking [of wine] or is disgusted by semen and menstrual blood is mistaken about what is [in fact] pure and undefiled; thus he fears committing a sin in the act of sexual union. He should be dismissed—for how can he worship the Goddess...?

Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa, *Bṛhat-Tantrasāra*¹ (BTS 697)

¹ Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa, *Bṛhat-Tantrasāra*, ed. Śrī Rasikamohana Caṭṭopādhyāya (Calcutta: Navabhārata Publishers 1996), 697. This text will hereafter be referred to as BTS.

Transgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world . . . without the serpentine ‘no’ that bites into fruits and lodges contradictions at their core. It is the solar inversion of the satanic denial. . . [I]t opens the place where the divine functions.

Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression”²

In this article I would like to address two basic questions. The first is the role of impurity and transgression in religious rituals — that is, the use of substances that are normally prohibited and considered polluting by conventional social and religious standards.³ And the second is the role of comparison in the academic study of religion — that is, the juxtaposition of two or more phenomena in order to generate new insights and to re-configure our way of seeing the world, which is, I think, one of the things that characterizes what we as historians of religions do.

Specifically, I want to focus on the role of impurity in the ritual traditions of Hindu Śākta Tantra and modern Western magic. Since their first encounters with Indian religions in the 18th and 19th centuries, Western scholars have been simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the tradition of Tantra. A form or religious practice infamous for its deliberate use of impure substance and transgressive rituals, Tantra has long been for Western readers a source of both moral repugnance and tantalizing allure. In most early Orientalist scholarship and Christian missionary works, Tantra was regularly

² M. Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette, New York: Routledge, 62.

³ For a good overview of the role of transgression in religion, see Michael Taussig, “Transgression,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998, 349–364. The more important works on the topic include: Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, New York: Zone 1988; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* London: Routledge 1966; Roger Callois, *L’Homme et le sacré*, Paris: Gallimard 1950; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press 1984; Max Gluckman, “The License in Ritual,” in his *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, Oxford: Blackwell 1960; Peter Stallybrass and F.J. Gillen, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1986.

attacked as the worst confusion of sensuality and religion, and thus as the clearest symptom of the degeneration of Hinduism in modern times. It is “Hinduism arrived at its last and worst stage of medieval development,” as Sir Monier-Williams put it.⁴ Yet rather remarkably, in most of the contemporary popular literature, Tantra is now praised as a joyous celebration of the sensual body, offering a much-needed liberation of the body and sexuality. For most American readers today, Tantra is commonly defined simply as “spiritual sex,” or the use of sexual pleasure as a means to religious experience, and has as such been celebrated as a wonderfully transgressive spiritual path for a repressive Western society.⁵

And yet, as André Padoux has pointed out, the category of Tantra — imagined as a singular, unified, coherent tradition — is itself a relatively recent creation. It is, in fact, largely the production of Western scholars of the 19th century, who lumped together a wide array of diverse texts, traditions, and practices under the generic “ism” of Tantrism. And surely the equation of Tantra with “spiritual sex” is a very recent invention.⁶

So how, then, did Tantra come to be defined primarily as “spiritual sex” in the Western imagination? And why is it that Tantra has now become so popular in contemporary America, both in academic

⁴ M. Monier-Williams, *Hinduism*, London: SPCK 1894, 122–123.

⁵ On contemporary Western appropriations of Tantra, see Urban, “The Cult of Ecstasy: Tantrism, the New Age and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism,” *History of Religions* 39 (2000) 268–304.

⁶ “An objective assessment of Tantrism is not easy, for the subject is controversial and perplexing. Not only do . . . theorists give different definitions of Tantrism, but its very existence has sometimes been denied. . . . But it so happened that it was in texts known as *tantras* that Western scholars first described doctrines and practices different from those of Brahmanism . . . so the Western experts adopted the word Tantrism for that particular, and for them, repulsive aspect of Indian religion” (Padoux, “Tantrism, an Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, New York: MacMillan 1986, 14:271–272). For a detailed discussion of Western views of Tantra, see Urban, “The Extreme Orient: The Construction of ‘Tantrism’ as a Category in the Orientalist Imagination,” *Religion* 29 (1999) 123–146.

discourse and in popular culture? Indeed, not only has Tantra become one of the fastest growing trends in South Asian studies, but it now also saturates popular culture and new age spirituality, so that we now find pop-stars like Sting practicing Tantric sex and claiming to achieve five hour long orgasms. One need only browse the shelves of any book store or surf the internet to find entire lines of books, videos and other “ceremonial sensual merchandise,” bearing titles like “Tantric sex for Couples” and the “Multi-Orgasmic Man.” Is all this simply a case of cross-cultural voyeurism? Or are we in fact caught up in networks of neo-colonial or neo-imperialist exchange, the ultimate impact of which we have not yet even begun to fathom?⁷

That brings me to the second thing I wish to examine here, the problem of comparison and cross-cultural dialogue. Comparison, it seems, has become something that is often talked about but rarely done in the academic study of religion. Indeed, scholars of religions often seem to be so wary of the darker political implications of comparison, its ties to colonialism, fascism and other errors of our forefathers, that we often feel too terrified to step outside our narrow areas of historical specialization.⁸ However, as Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us, we really cannot avoid doing comparison; it is a basic part of the way the human mind works, how we make sense of otherness and difference, including how

⁷ This question is the starting point for my new book, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming 2003). There is an endless array of such popular Tantric books and videos; see for example Nik Douglas, *Spiritual Sex: Secrets of Tantra from the Ice Age to the New Millennium*, New York: Pocket Books 1997, which includes an appendix with over 20 pages of Tantric web-sites on the Internet.

⁸ For discussions of the problems and promise of comparison, see Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2000); Hugh B. Urban, “Making a Place to Take a Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith and the Politics and Poetics of Comparison,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12 (2000) 339–378.

we understand other religions.⁹ So we might as well get on about doing it well and in an ethically responsible, politically self-conscious way.

Here I would follow the lead of Wendy Doniger, who suggests that comparison is perhaps best done not from the “top down” as a search for transcendent archetypes or universal patterns, in the style of Mircea Eliade; rather, it is more useful to begin from the bottom up, as it were, with more mundane physical things like the human body, food or sexuality.¹⁰ Moreover, the point of a good comparison is not to uncover some transcendent identity or hidden archetype connecting two phenomena; rather, comparison is better used like a good metaphor. As Smith puts it, comparison does not tell us “how things are,” but instead, like a metaphor, tells us how things might be *re-visioned* or *re-described*.¹¹ It is thus a tool or heuristic device that we use to shed light on particular theoretical problems in our academic imagining of religion.

⁹ “That comparison has at times led us astray there can be no doubt; that comparison remains the method of scholarship is likewise beyond question” (Smith, *Map is not Territory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978, 240–241).

¹⁰ As Doniger argues, “The great universalist theories were constructed from the top down: that is, they assumed certain continuities based about broad concepts such as . . . a High God or an Oedipal complex. . . . The method I am advocating is, by contrast, constructed from the bottom up. It assumes certain continuities not about overarching human universals but about particular narrative details concerning the body, sexual desire, procreation . . . and death, details which . . . are at least *less* culturally mediated than the broader conceptual categories of the universalists” (*The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth*, New York: Columbia University Press 1998, 59).

¹¹ “Comparison does not tell us how things ‘are’ . . . Like models and metaphors, comparison tells us how things might be ‘re-described’ in Max Black’s term. . . . A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. . . . Comparison provides the means by which we ‘revision’ phenomena as our data . . . to solve *our* theoretical problems” (*Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990, 52). See also Fitz John Porter Poole, “Metaphors and Maps: Towards Comparison in the Anthropology of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986) 411–457; Urban, “Making a Place to Take a Stand,” 339–378.

So what I would like to do in this essay is to undertake a metaphoric comparison of my own, by juxtaposing two traditions that would seem on the surface to be quite radically different and widely separated both historically and geographically. I will begin with a discussion of Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa, one of the most influential later Tantric authors, who lived and wrote in the 16th century Bengal. Here I will focus primarily on his esoteric ritual practices, and specifically, his use of transgressive bodily substances such as blood, semen and menstrual fluid. I will then use that as a metaphoric foil to shed light on the practices of one of the 20th century's most infamous and controversial figures: Aleister Crowley. Known in the popular press as the "Great Beast" and the "wickedest man in the world," Crowley was also one of the most important figures in the transmission of Tantra to the West. To conclude, I will suggest that this comparison sheds important light on the larger questions of secrecy and transgression in religion generally. Adapting some insights from Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault, I will examine the role of transgression as a means of unleashing and harnessing an awesome source of power that lies within the physical cosmos, the human body and the social order alike. More important, however, I will also argue that transgression also operates in very different ways in these two cases; for the "power of the impure" always functions differently in relation to specific historical contests and political interests. Finally, I will suggest that this comparison also sheds some revealing light onto our own contemporary obsessions with sex, secrecy and transgression in late capitalist consumer society at the turn of the millennium.

I. The "Conservative Character" of Tantra: Impurity, Transgression and Sacrifice in Bengali Śākta Tantra

O Mother! at your holy lotus feet I pray that I have not transgressed all the Veda and Artha Śāstras and destroyed your worship; with this fear, I have revealed the meaning of many profound matters. Please forgive me for whatever sins I have incurred by revealing these secret things. . . . Forgive me, for, with an ignorant heart, I have revealed the most secret things of your Tantra.

Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa, *Br̥hat-Tantrasāra* (BTS 722)

O Devī, this *Kula-dharma* must always and in all places be carefully kept secret, like the child born of one's mother's paramour.

*Kulārṇava Tantra*¹²

The large body of diverse texts and traditions known as “Tantra” have long had a rather scandalous and controversial reputation in both the Indian and Western imaginations. Infamous for its use of normally prohibited substances like meat and wine and its explicit violation of class laws, Tantra has been alternately condemned and celebrated; once attacked by Christian missionaries and Hindu reformers as “an array of magic rites drawn from the most ignorant and stupid classes,”¹³ Tantra has in our own generation been praised as “a cult of ecstasy, focused on a vision of cosmic sexuality.”¹⁴ Although it has been defined in many different ways, Tantra centers in large part around the concept of *śakti* — power or energy, in all its many forms. *Śakti* is the power that creates, sustains and destroys the entire universe, but it is also the power that flows through the social and political world, as well. Tantric ritual seeks to harness and exploit this power, both as a mean to spiritual liberation and as a means to this-worldly benefits, such as wealth, fame and supernatural abilities. As Douglas Brooks summarizes, “The Tāntrika conceives of the world as power. The world is nothing but power to be harnessed.”¹⁵

¹² *Kulārṇava Tantra*, ed. Arthur Avalon, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas 1965, XI.84.

¹³ J.N. Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1920, 200.

¹⁴ Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, Greenwich: New York Graphics Society 1973, 9; cf. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, New York: Meridian Books 1956, 576. As Pratapaditya Pal observes, “We . . . have gone from one extreme to the other. While early scholars were unnecessarily apologetic about some of the sexual . . . practices of Tantra, modern scholars revel in the sexual aspects” (*Hindu Religion and Iconology According to the Tantrasāra*, Los Angeles: Vichitra Press 1981, vi).

¹⁵ Douglas Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantrism in South India*, Albany: SUNY 1992, xix. See also Hugh B. Urban, “The Path of Power: Impurity, Kingship and Sacrifice in Assamese Tantra,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001) 777–816; Alexis Sanderson, “Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir,” in *The Category of the Person*:

One of the most important later figures in the later consolidation and systematization of Tantra was the 16th century *brāhmaṇ* from Bengal, Mahāmahopādhyāya Śrī Kṛṣṇānanda Vāgīśa Bhaṭṭācārya, better known simply as Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa.¹⁶ Kṛṣṇānanda is most famous as the author of the one of the largest and most important compendiums of Tantric practice entitled the *Brhat Tantrasāra*, or the “Great Essence of the Tantras” (hereafter BTS), which is still today one of the most widely used texts for Hindu ritual and iconography.¹⁷ Despite its importance, this Sanskrit text has never been translated into any Western language — though this is perhaps due to the fact that it consists of over 700 pages of highly technical ritual details.

The social and religious context of 16th century Bengal was a shifting, rather volatile one, and in fact, a period that was not entirely favorable to Hindu *brāhmaṇs* like Kṛṣṇānanda. Indeed, as the Bengali historian M.R. Tarafdar puts it, “Brahmanism was passing through a

Anthropological and Philosophical Perspectives, eds. M. Carrithers, S. Collins, and S. Lukes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985.

¹⁶ On Kṛṣṇānanda’s importance as an authority on ritual and iconography, see Chintaharan Chakravarti, *The Tantras: Studies in their Religion and Influence*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak 1963, 66–67. There is at present some debate over the precise dates of Kṛṣṇānanda’s life, some identifying him as a contemporary of Śrī Caitanya (d. 1533), some placing him in the first half of the 16th century and others putting him in the latter part of that century; however, the most common opinion is that the *Brhat-Tantrasāra* was composed sometime between 1585 and 1600. See S.C. Banerji, *Tantra in Bengal: A Study in its Origin, Development and Influence*, New Delhi: Monohar 1992, 78–79; Pal, *Hindu Religion and Iconology*, 3ff.; D.C. Sircar, *The Śākta Pīṭhas*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas 1973, 74–80; Dineścandra Bhaṭṭācārya, “Āgamavāgīśa Bhaṭṭācāryer Kāl Nirṇaya,” *Prabāśī*, Bhadra (1948).

¹⁷ The oldest known manuscript of the *Tantrasāra* is dated Śaka 1554 (1632 CE). The text exists in numerous editions, most notably those of P. Tarkaratna (Calcutta 1927); S.C. Mukherjee (Calcutta 1928); Ramakumāra Rāya (Varanasi: Prācya Prakāśanā 1985); Sadāśiva Śāstrī (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series 1990). For the purposes of this essay, I rely primarily on the Sanskrit and Bengali edition of Śrī Rasikamohana Caṭṭopādhyāya (Calcutta: Navabhārata Pub. 1982).

precarious state of existence.”¹⁸ Not only had Bengal been under Muslim rule for several hundred years, displacing *brāhmaṇic* authority and royal patronage, but a number of powerful, non-*brāhmaṇic* movements emerged in 16th century Bengal. Foremost among these was the popular devotional revival of Śrī Caitanya, who challenged the ritualism and elitism of *brāhmaṇic* orthodoxy, calling for a simple, personal and affective relationship with God. In response, many *brāhmaṇs* of that time, such as the great legal scholar, Raghunandana, had begun to promote an extremely rigid, socially conservative interpretation of Hindu law, in an apparent attempt to defend *brāhmaṇic* power from the rising threats of Islam and popular devotionalism. As Pratapaditya Pal concludes in his study of the *Bṛhat Tantrasāra*,

There was a need to adopt a strong orthodox line . . . because of the great social and religious changes . . . in Bengal. . . . The gradual disintegration of Buddhism . . . the appearance of the Muslims on the political scene and the conversion of masses of people to Islam . . . made it imperative for someone like Kṛṣṇānanda to make some effort to organize and stabilize the Hindu religion.¹⁹

One of the most striking things about Kṛṣṇānanda, however, is that he was both a highly respected Brahman, renowned as an expert on Hindu law, and a secret practitioner of the most esoteric and transgressive rituals of Tantra. In other words, he led a kind of double life, appearing in the exoteric public sphere as a pure Brahman and

¹⁸ M.R. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494–1583 AD: A Socio-Political Study*, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan 1965, 186. On the Bhakti revival of Caitanya, its social implications and its appeal to the lower classes, see Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1966, 41ff; S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press 1942, 29ff.

¹⁹ Pal, *Hindu Religion and Iconology*, 4–5. See also Bhabatosh Bhattacharya, “Raghunandana’s Indebtedness to His Predecessors,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 19, no. 2 (1953) 175–176.

in the esoteric private sphere as a *tāntrika*.²⁰ Like Raghunandana, Kṛṣṇānanda was also a respected *brāhmaṇ*, who was very much concerned with defending traditional *brāhmaṇic* authority.

One of the most powerful new challenges to emerge in this period was the devotional revival inspired by Caitanya, which also took his home town of Navadvīpa as one of its main centers of activity. In fact, there is a popular legend that Caitanya and Kṛṣṇānanda knew each other and developed a deep rivalry. According to this story, the two were fellow students at the grammar school of Gaṅgadāsa, and later, after they had each become prominent theologians, they met for a debate. Apparently, the Vaiṣṇava saint could not tolerate the Tantric teachings of Kṛṣṇānanda, for “Caitanya was so infuriated by the arguments of Kṛṣṇānanda that he attacked him with a stick and drove him away.”²¹ Whether or not this story is true, it is a telling commentary on the animosity between Śākta Tantra and Vaiṣṇava bhakti: “Śākta Tantrism had a hard fight against rival religious movements like the Vaiṣṇava revival. . . . The Vaiṣṇava revival became an ideological guide for protest against the bloody ritualism of the Śākta aristocrats.”²²

In marked contrast to most popular images of Tantra as a subversive, anti-social force, Kṛṣṇānanda presents a highly conservative view of Tantric practice. While he clearly advocates the use of the infamous five M’s and bloody rites of animal sacrifice, he also has strict rules about who can and cannot participate and which rites are prescribed for particular social classes. There is a strong “double norm” at work in Kṛṣṇānanda’s attitude toward gender and caste.²³ In the esoteric

²⁰ For good discussion of this sort of “double life” among other important *tāntrikas*, see Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom*, and Sanderson, “Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir.”

²¹ Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 43.

²² Sanjukta Gupta, Teun Goudriaan, and Dirk Jan Hoens, *Hindu Tantrism*, Leiden: Brill 1979, 27.

²³ For a good discussion of a similar double norm at work in South Indian Tantra, see Douglas Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantra*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990: “Tantrism . . . does not intend to be revolutionary in the sense of establishing a new structure of social

realm of Tantric ritual, ordinary laws of class and purity seem to be suspended or even eradicated altogether: “In the use of wine and sexual intercourse,” Kṛṣṇānanda states, “one should make no distinction of caste” (BTS 697). Yet despite this seemingly egalitarian ideal, he also makes it clear that impure substances like wine and meat can only be consumed by non-twice born castes; above all, a *brāhmaṇ* must never compromise his purity by consuming meat or wine. “The offering of [wine] is only for *śūdras* . . . a *brāhmaṇ* should never offer wine to the Great Goddess. No *brāhmaṇ* . . . should ever consume wine or meat” (BTS 696). Moreover, he states quite clearly that women and *śūdras* have no right to any Vedic ceremonies (BTS 20f).

Many of Kṛṣṇānanda’s rituals center around explicit and calculated violations of conventional laws of purity. One of the most important Tantric rites — which is still today performed routinely in many parts of Bengal — is the rite of animal sacrifice. The sacrifice of animals, of course, goes at least as far back as the Vedas and was at one time the heart of *brāhmaṇic* ritual practice. However, the Tantric sacrifice would appear to deliberately transgress, violate and in many ways completely invert the model of sacrifice described in the Vedas. As Madeleine Biardeau has pointed out, the traditional Vedic sacrifice involved the offering of a pure victim, often identified with the primordial Man, Puruṣa, primarily to pure, male deities. The *tāntrik* sacrifice, conversely, is offered to the Goddess in her most frightening, terrible and violent forms as the one who combats evil and handles impurity, such as Durgā, the fierce battle queen, Kālī, the black mistress of Time and Death, and Chinnamastā, the Goddess who severs her own head as she stands upon a copulating couple.

[T]he Goddess — who calls battle the sacrifice of battle — fears neither blood nor wine. She fears neither impurity nor violence. . . . The violence of the goddess . . . becomes transformed in her ritual into blood sacrifice. . . . The low tasks are left

egalitarianism . . . It opens its doors only to a few who . . . seek to distinguish and empower themselves” (70).

to the Goddess so that the purity of the god may be maintained, and extreme Śāktism, known as Tantrism, glorifies her.²⁴

The *Bṛhat Tantrasāra* is in fact one of the most important manuals on the iconography of the Goddess, particularly in her most powerful forms such as Dakṣiṇākālī and Śmaśāna Kālī—a terrifying Goddess who “always lives in the cremation ground” holding a “cup filled with wine and meat,” and a “freshly cut human head” while she “smiles and eats rotten meat” (BTS 461).

According to the classical paradigm of the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas, the animal to be sacrificed must be of one of the five pure, that is, domestic animals, namely: a man, a horse, a bull, a ram or a he-goat. It most emphatically should *not* involve wild, undomesticated, impure animals; in fact, if one does so, it is said that father and son will be set at odds and criminals will terrorize the countryside.²⁵ The Tantric sacrifice, conversely, often uses specifically impure victims; in fact, the buffalo, which is considered one of the most impure of animals, is one of the most common and most important sacrificial offerings in Tantric ritual:

The buffalo . . . is a savage beast . . . a stranger to human society and to the sacrificial world. Although the Vedic literature knows of it . . . it does not count it among the permitted (domestic) animals offered in sacrifice. But it is apt, by this fact, to play the role of the principle that is antithetical to the Goddess, the incarnation of total evil.²⁶

²⁴ Biardeau, “Devi: The Goddess in India,” in *Asian Mythologies*, ed. Yves Bonnefoy, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993, 98.

²⁵ Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, New York: Oxford University Press 1994, 250. “If [the priest] were to perform the sacrifice with the jungle animals, father and son would separate, the roads would run apart, the borders of two villages would be far distant, and ravenous beasts, man-tigers, thieves, murderers and robbers would arise in the jungles” (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 13.2.4.1–4).

²⁶ Madeleine Biardeau and Charles Malamoud, *Le Sacrifice dans l’Inde Ancienne*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France 1976, 146–147. “This is far from the Vedic sacrifice. . . . The victim is an asura, an evil being whom one must get rid of. . . . The

Finally, the manner in which the victim is killed is also a deliberate violation of Vedic norms. In the Vedic rite, the animal must be killed in an unbloody manner, usually strangled with as little violence as possible. As J.C. Heesterman has argued, the later Vedic ritual tradition made a systematic effort to rationalize, marginalize and ultimately excise altogether the impure aspects of the sacrifice. In place of a violent bloody beheading, the later *brāhmaṇic* ritual centers around an unbloody, purified and sanitized system of ritual rules: “Death and disintegration have been eliminated. . . . Death has been rationalized away.”²⁷ This is particularly clear, Heesterman suggests, in the treatment of the head in the Vedic rite; rather than a bloody beheading, the Vedic rite insists on a bloodless strangling outside the sacrificial enclosure.²⁸ Indeed, “the beheading of an animal is expressly said to be a demonic act.”²⁹

In the Tantric sacrifice, conversely, the animal is beheaded in a quite bloody manner inside the sacrificial grounds, with a single blow to the neck. Indeed, the entire ritual focuses on the severed head

victim represents an evil that must be gotten rid of, and this evil seems to be associated with the Goddess” (Biardeau, “Devi: The Goddess in India,” 97).

²⁷ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1985, 46.

²⁸ “What we know as Vedic sacrifice is not sacrifice tout court . . . on a par with its normal practice as we find it to the present day in India. . . . Usually the victim is immolated by cutting off the head. This was originally also the case in the Vedic sacrifice . . . but the Vedic texts explicitly reject this procedure. Instead they prescribe that the victim be killed by suffocation outside the sacrificial enclosure” (Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict*, 87).

²⁹ O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1976, 155. “It is forbidden to make offerings of the victim’s head” (Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict*, 46; see SB 1.2.1.2). Curiously, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* does describe a ritual of burying five heads—the heads of a man, horse, ox, sheep and goat—in the five directions of the bottom layer of the fire altar (SB VIII.5.2.1). Heesterman argues that this is evidence of an older, pre-*brāhmaṇic* sacrifice based on violent beheading which was later rationalized and replaced by the non-violent ritual of the *brāhmaṇas* (*The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993, 73).

and the blood, which are then offered to the Goddess. According to Kṛṣṇānanda, the result of this violent, bloody offering of an impure victim is the unleashing of awesome spiritual power. Indeed, the sacrifice can be used not only to achieve any worldly benefit, such as wealth or fame, but also for more malevolent purposes. In fact, Kṛṣṇānanda devotes a good deal of attention to the infamous six acts of black magic, namely, *utsādāna* (destruction), *vidveṣaṇa* (causing enmity), *māraṇa* (killing), *uccāṭana* (expulsion), *stambhana* (causing paralysis), *vaśīkaraṇa* (bringing under control), and *mahāhāni karaṇa* (causing great ruin) (BTS 505–509, 561–563). By unleashing the terrible power of the Goddess through sacrificial violence, the *tāntrika* can slay his enemies, enchant women and ultimately even “bring the entire region under control” (BTS 507f.). For example, Kṛṣṇānanda describes several procedures for disposing of one’s enemies, including blood sacrifice to the Goddess. The victim is explicitly identified with the enemy, and the bloody decapitation and dismemberment of the beast becomes the surest means to slay one’s political, military or financial opponent:

He should infuse it with the spirit of the enemy, saying, “this is my enemy whom I hate, in the form of this beast.” Reciting the mantra, “Destroy, O Great Goddess, *sphēṅ sphēṅ*, devour, devour!” he should place flowers on the head of the victim.... Reciting the mantra, “Āḥ Huṃ Phaṭ,” he should behead [the victim].... [H]e should offer the blood and head to the Goddess Durgā. (BTS 509)

In sum, the Tantric sacrifice seems to involve a series of calculated, structural inversions of many older Vedic paradigms: an impure, wild victim is substituted for a pure one; a bloody beheading is substituted for a non-violent strangling; the wrathful, violent Goddess takes the place of the pure male God, etc. These could be outlined as described in Table 1.

However, the most powerful and explicitly transgressive Tantric rites are the secret left handed practices (*vāmācāra*), which involve the intentional manipulation of impure substances; these include the well-known “five M’s” (*pañcamakāra*), namely, meat (*māṃsa*), wine (*madya*), fish (*matsya*), parched grain (*mudrā*) and sexual intercourse

TABLE 1

	Vedic Sacrifice	Tantric sacrifice
Victim	Domestic animal	Wild animal
Status of victim	Pure	Impure
Means of killing	Unbloody strangling outside the ritual enclosure	Bloody beheading inside the ritual enclosure; offering of head and blood to the Goddess
Deity	Pure male deity	Goddess, handler of impurity

(*maithuna*) (BTS 698–703). And for Kṛṣṇānanda, the last of these appears to be the most important, occupying as it does the last 25 pages of his text (significantly more than any of the other Ms, which are treated fairly briefly). As Kṛṣṇānanda observes, “the pleasure derived from sexual union is of the nature of Supreme Bliss” (BTS 703). The ritual of *maithuna*, however, is a kind of deliberately inverted sexual act, which involves intercourse not only with high class partners but also with untouchables, prostitutes, and various other mixed and low classes (BTS 694).

From the standpoint of mainstream Hindu Bengali culture, of course, this mingling of unmarried partners in violation of class relations is the worst imaginable transgression. As Ronald Inden and Ralph Nicholas have observed in their study of Hindu life cycle rites (*samskāras*) in Bengal, proper marriage and sexual relations between compatible castes are crucial to the larger social order; the married couple is believed to be joined as one body, sharing the same bodily substances and so incorporated into the larger social body.³⁰ Thus, an improper relation or an improper combination of coded bodily substances such as semen and blood would threaten to upset the whole delicate balance of the social body; indeed, it has “the capacity to ruin the entire order of

³⁰ Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986, 23–47. “The marriage of man and woman . . . makes their previously unrelated bodies the same body” (*ibid.* 23).

jātis in the community. . . . [T]he improper combination of coded bodily substances entailed the improper combination of worship and occupational substances as well.”³¹ Yet this in a sense the explicit point of the Tantric rite.

It is important to note, however, that Kṛṣṇānanda does in fact still maintain his highly conservative and elitist double norm even when it comes to the rite of *maithuna*. Thus, while he prescribes intercourse in violation of class laws for most practitioners, he also insists that *brāhmaṇs* should still have intercourse only with *brāhmaṇ* partners (BTS 694). In other words, his seemingly radical, transgressive rites are still in many ways careful circumscribed, particularly for those at the top of the social hierarchy, such as *brāhmaṇs* like himself.

Having consecrated the female partner as an embodiment of the Goddess, the *tāntrika* then engages in a ritualized form of intercourse that is explicitly compared to a sacrificial ritual: Unlike many later forms of Tantric practice, which involve non-ejaculation and retention of semen, Kṛṣṇānanda’s ritual reflects a different and probably older form of sexual practice, which even has precedents in early Vedic rites.³² Here the central act is the ejaculation of semen into the female vagina, which is likened to ladling the oblation onto the sacrificial fire.

As he releases his semen, he should say the great *mantra*, “Drunken, and clinging to the two hands of the Light and the Sky, *śrucā!* I make the offering of *dharma* and *adharma* into the blazing fire of the Self, *svāhām!*” . . . Sexual union is the libation; the sacred precept is the shedding of semen. (BTS 702)

The aim of the ritual, however, is not the conception of a child; rather, the goal is first to ejaculate into the vagina and then to carefully extract

³¹ Ronald B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1976, 52.

³² On this point see David Gordon White, “Tantric Sects and Tantric Sex: The Flow of Secret Tantric Gnosis,” in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson, New York: Seven Bridges Press 1999, 249–270. Sexual union is also compared to a sacrificial rite in much earlier texts such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* VI.4.12. See Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1969, 254–255.

the combined semen and menstrual fluid, called the *kula dravya* or lineage substance.

In India generally, bodily fluids, and above all sexual fluids, are considered both powerful and potentially polluting, as the ambivalent leftovers that overflow the boundaries of the body. In the Tantric rite, however, the sexual fluids are the ultimate source of power. According to Kṛṣṇānanda, this *kula dravya* is the most awesome and dangerous of substances; in fact, he specifically refers to it using the term *ucchiṣṭa* — that is, the sacrificial “remnant” or “leftover.”

With the sacrificial elements, the semen, unbroken grains of rice, perfume, flowers, O Deveṣī, he should worship the Goddess in the vagina. . . . With incense, lamps and various food offerings, the Kula adept should honor her in various ways, and then he should [consume] the remnants [*ucchiṣṭa*] himself. (BTS 703)

As Charles Malamoud points out, *ucchiṣṭa* is a technical term used in the Vedic sacrifice to refer to that portion of the victim that is left over once all the offerings have been made. Like leftovers generally in India, it is considered impure and polluting; but at the same time, it is also considered to be the powerful “seed” that gives birth to the next sacrifice: “Power is . . . derived from forces that are contaminating; these forces belong to the violent substratum of chaos out of which the world has emerged. . . . The sacrifice produces new life — the divine seed — from the disintegration of a previous existence. . . . It is the impure remainder of the sacrifice that gives birth to the new life produced from death.”³³ The same aura of dangerous power surrounds the left-over of the Tantric rite or sexual sacrifice. If consumed outside the secret ritual, it will send one to the most terrible of hells: “Apart from the time of worship, one must never touch a naked Śakti. And apart from the period of worship, the nectar must never be drunk by adepts. Touching it, their lives are lost, and drinking it, they would go to hell. Thus is the Kula worship” (BTS 704); but once placed in

³³ David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, 347. See Charles Malamoud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press 1996, 7–10.

a sacrificial vessel and consecrated by the Goddess, the *kula dravya* is transformed into divine nectar, *amṛta*. By consuming this nectar, he writes, the *tāntrika* will enjoy supreme bliss and fulfillment of all worldly and otherworldly desires.

Then with great effort, he must obtain the precious Kula nectar. For with that divine nectar, all [the gods] are pleased. Whatever the wise man desires, he will immediately attain. . . . Having purified the Kula substance, which has the nature of Śiva and Śakti, and having deposited this nectar of life, which is of the nature of the Supreme Brahman, in a sacrificial vessel, [he attains] the eternally blameless state free of all distinctions. (BTS 703)

At this point, one might begin to wonder: what does the female partner get out of all of this? What's in it for the woman? Ironically, Kṛṣṇānanda has relatively little to say about the woman. Although she is considered an embodiment of the supreme power of the Goddess and her body is infused with a variety of divine forces, she seems to have little role other than as a tool to be manipulated in esoteric ritual. Kṛṣṇānanda states quite clearly, in fact, that women and *śūdras* have no right to any Vedic ceremonies (BTS 20f.). In any case, although she is temporarily empowered in the esoteric space of the ritual, she must return to her usual place of submission in the public social world. She is, in a sense, the raw source of energy to be extracted and consumed by the male *tāntrika*, who realizes the awesome power of the Goddess within himself.³⁴

All of this, however, leaves us with a basic question: what is the point of all this transgression and inversion of normal laws? Above all, why would a respected male *brāhmaṇ* like Kṛṣṇānanda be interested in any of this? Well, it was at least in part, I would suggest, a response to the particular social and political situation in which he lived, during a period of Muslim rule, amidst the spread of rival religious movements that did not favor *brāhmaṇs* like Kṛṣṇānanda. As Douglas Brooks has

³⁴ On this point, see Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy and Power in Colonial Bengal*, New York: Oxford University Press 2001, ch. 2. As Brooks observes, "Women . . . are made subordinate to and dependent on males and their ritual role is . . . limited to being a partner for male adepts" (*Auspicious Wisdom*, 25–26).

argued in the case of South Indian Tantra, many conservative *brāhmaṇs* turned to these esoteric rituals at a time when their own traditional status and privileges were most threatened by rival religious and political forces. “Tantric ritual continues to provide a means by which Brahman society perpetuates the perception of itself as privileged in the midst of radical social changes that do not always privilege Brahmins.”³⁵ With its elaborate ceremony and sacrifices, Tantra thus *reaffirmed* the traditional of *brāhmaṇs* as ritual experts, at a time when it was most being called into question.

At the same time, however, Kṛṣṇānanda was also engaged in ritual manipulations of impurity, handling the dangerous power of polluting substances like buffalo blood, semen and menstrual fluids. As Mary Douglas observed in her classic study, *Purity and Danger*, “The danger risked by boundary transgression is power. The vulnerable margins which threaten to destroy order represent powers in the cosmos. . . . Ritual which can harness these . . . is harnessing power indeed.”³⁶ By systematically violating and deliberately inverting normal laws of purity, the *tāntrika* unleashes the terrible power of the Goddess in her most awesome forms, as the ultimate power that creates and devours the universe. In so doing, he also asserts his own super-human power to transcend the boundaries of pure and impure, clean and unclean, to overstep the limitations of the social order and physical universe alike. As Alexis Sanderson has argued in his study of Kashmir Śaivite Tantra, the aim of this transgression is precisely to attain a kind of “unfettered super-agency through the assimilation of their lawless power in occult manipulations of impurity.”³⁷

³⁵ Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom*, 188. On this point, see also Hugh B. Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry,” *Numen* 44 (1997) 1–38.

³⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 190–191.

³⁷ Sanderson, “Purity and Power,” 200–201. “We witness the strategies by which . . . radical sects were brought in from the visionary fringes to . . . areas of orthodox self-representation. . . . [T]he visionary power of the heterodox self is recoded . . . to be inscribed *within* the orthodox social identity . . . in such a way that it reveals the

In sum, the esoteric rituals of Tantra are by no means always the subversive, anti-social force that most early European scholars believed them to be. At least in the case of Kṛṣṇānanda in 16th century Bengal, I would suggest, they played a highly *conservative* role.³⁸ These secret, transgressive rites were in fact a means to reassert his own elite power, precisely at a time when it was most threatened by rival religious and political forces.

II. *Unleashing the Beast: Aleister Crowley and Western Sexual Magic*

The sexual act is a sacrament of Will. To profane it is the great offense. All true expression of it is lawful; all suppression or distortion of it is contrary to the Law of liberty.

Aleister Crowley, *The Law is for All*³⁹

What I would like to do now is jump forward about 400 years and to the other side of the planet, to look at the role of secret ritual and transgression in modern Western magic — and in particular, in the work of the notorious Great Beast, 666, Aleister Crowley. Infamous throughout the popular press as the “king of depravity, arch-traitor and drug fiend,” Crowley is today one of the most influential figures in the revival of Western occultism and neo-pagan witchcraft. Yet surprisingly, despite many popular and hagiographic works on Crowley, he has seldom been taken seriously by modern scholarship, and even scholars of Western esotericism have typically dismissed

latter as a lower nature within the one person. . . . The tradition sustains its ‘power’ behind the appearance of conformity” (*ibid.* 191).

³⁸ On this point, see Gupta et al., *Hindu Tantrism*: “Anti-caste statements should never be read outside their ritual context. Returned to ordinary life, no high caste Tantric would think of breaking social taboos. . . . The ritual egalitarianism of Tantrism in practice acted as a caste-confirming . . . force” (32). See also the works of Brooks and Sanderson cited above.

³⁹ Crowley, *The Law is for All: The Authorized Popular Commentary on Liber AL Vel Legis sub figura CCXX, The Book of the Law*, Temple, AZ: New Falcon Publications 1996, 42. “We refuse to regard love as shameful and degrading. . . . To us it is the means by which the animal may be made the Winged Sphinx which shall bear man aloft to the House of the Gods” (*ibid.* 49).

him as either a demented pervert or a ridiculous crank.⁴⁰ However, as his most recent biographer, Lawrence Sutin, has persuasively argued, Crowley was far more than the satanic drug fiend attacked by the media; he was in fact a striking reflection of some of the most important literary, philosophical and cultural forces of the early 20th century.⁴¹ So what I hope to do here is to use my comments on Bengali Tantra as a metaphoric foil to shed some new light on Crowley and to suggest that there is perhaps some deeper method to his apparent madness.

Born in 1875, the son of a minister in the highly puritanical Plymouth Brethren sect, Edward Alexander Crowley expressed some of the deepest tensions within the British Victorian era as a whole. A child raised in strict Christian morality, he would later turn to the occult arts and to extremes of sexual excess. Well educated at Trinity College in Cambridge, Crowley inherited a large amount of money while still young and was therefore free for many years to pursue his passions of poetry, mountain-climbing and the occult arts. While still at Trinity, he would also adopt the name “Aleister” (an homage to the hero of Shelley’s poem, “Alastor, the Spirit of solitude”) and also publish his first book of poetry and his infamous erotic collection, *White Stains* (1898).

⁴⁰ For example, Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman’s volume on *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York: Crossroad 1992, makes not even a single reference to Crowley.

⁴¹ Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 2000. In addition to Crowley’s own autobiography (*The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, ed. John Symonds, New York: Hill and Wang 1969), there are many popular biographies; see John Symonds, *The Great Beast: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, New York: Roy Pub. 1952; and *The Magic of Aleister Crowley*, London: Frederick Muller, Ltd. 1958; Francis King, *The Magical World of Aleister Crowley*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1977; Gerald Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast: the Life, Work and Influence of Aleister Crowley*, York Beach, ME: Weiser 1989. Crowley’s classic work on “Magick” generally is his *Magick in Theory and Practice*, New York: Castle Books 1960, though he wrote a huge amount of other works on the subject which cannot all be cited here.

Crowley's first initiation into the world of esotericism and magic occurred in 1898, when he was introduced to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. An eclectic order combining elements of Kabbalah, Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, the Golden Dawn attracted a number of famous artists and intellectuals of the day, including Irish poet, W.B. Yeats. Rather significantly, however, Crowley would leave the movement and become mired in a series of lawsuits after he published a full description of the most secret rites of the Golden Dawn in his own journal, *Equinox*.⁴² Revealing secrets, we will see, was something of an obsession for Crowley.

However, it was in 1904 that Crowley received his first great revelation and the knowledge that he was in fact to be the herald of a new era in history. According to his own account, his guardian angel, Aiwass, appeared to him dictated a text called the *Book of the Law* or *Liber AL vel Legis*.⁴³ According to the Book of the Law, we have now entered the third great age in history: the first aeon was that of Isis, based on matriarchy and worship of the mother goddess; the second aeon was that of Osiris, during which the patriarchal religion of suffering and death (namely Christianity) was dominant. Finally, with the revelation of the Book of the Law, the corrupt age of Christianity had come to an end, and a new aeon of the child, Horus, was born. The guiding principle of this new era is the law of Thelema, derived from Greek, meaning Will. According to Crowley's maxim: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law." In place of servile submission to some imaginary God, the law of Thelema is the full affirmation of the Self and the free expression of the individual will: "The Law

⁴² Colin Wilson, *The Occult*, New York: Vintage Books 1973, 362.

⁴³ Actually, the revelation came first through Crowley's wife, Rose, during their trip to Cairo, when the voice of the god Horus allegedly began to speak through her. She later revealed that the being speaking through her was an emissary of Horus named Aiwass, and Crowley eventually claimed to have received the *Book of the Law* directly from Aiwass without Rose's mediation.

of Thelema avows and justifies selfish-ness; it confirms the inmost conviction of each one of us that he is the centre of the cosmos.”⁴⁴

Despite his claim that “every man and woman is a star,” however, Crowley’s ideal social order was far from egalitarian and in fact quite elitist. Rejecting the principles democracy and equality as effete, emasculated left-overs of Christianity, he asserted power of the strong over the weak, the aristocratic over the dull service masses. As he wrote in 1937, in his *Scientific Solution to the Problem of Government*, the true ruler has no use for absurdities such as *liberté, égalité, fraternité* or the assertion that all men are equal or that woman is equal to man:

The ruler asserts facts as they are; the slave has therefore no option but to deny them passionately, in order to express his discontent.... The Master (... the Magus) does not concern himself with facts ... he uses truth and falsehood indiscriminately, to serve his ends. Slaves consider him immoral, and preach against him in Hyde Park.⁴⁵

Crowley had high hopes that his new law of Thelema would be adopted by the major political figures of his day and so become the foundation for a new social order of the future. According to his own notes, he believed that the nation that first accepted the Book of the Law would become the leading nation the world. In fact, he initially saw Hitler and the rising power of fascism as a possible vehicle for spreading his law of Thelema.⁴⁶ He read and made copious notes on Hitler’s own writings, which he found much in agreement with his

⁴⁴ Crowley, *The Confessions*, 873, 939. “The company of heaven is Mankind, and its unveiling is the assertion of the ... godhead of every man and every woman!” (*The Law is for All*, 25).

⁴⁵ Crowley, *The Book of Lies, which is also falsely called Breaks*, New York: S. Weiser 1952, 100. “The only solution of the Social Problem is the creation of a class with the true patriarchal feeling” (*ibid.* 172).

⁴⁶ He was particularly fascinated by Hitler’s comment that, “Our revolution is not merely a political and social revolution; we are at the outset to form a tremendous revolution in moral ideas and in men’s spiritual orientation.” Crowley’s comment was simply: “AL, the whole book.” Similarly, next to Hitler’s statement, “After all these centuries of whining about the protection of the poor and lowly it is about time

Law of Thelema;⁴⁷ and he tried several times to have copies of his work placed in Hitler's hands, suggesting that it would provide "a philosophical basis for Nazism."⁴⁸ Quite remarkably, however, when his attempts to sway the Führer failed, Crowley would just as eagerly try to sell his Law of Thelema to the British government, as the most necessary way to counter the growing German threat.⁴⁹

The key to Crowley's Law of Thelema—and also the primary reason for the scandalous reputation that followed him—was his practice of sexual magic. For Crowley, sex is the most powerful force in human nature and the supreme expression of the will; but it has been stupidly repressed by the Church and so given birth to all manner of social and psychological ills:

Mankind must learn that the sexual instinct is . . . ennobling. The shocking evils which we all deplore are principally due to the perversions produced by suppressions. The feeling that it is shameful and the sense of sin cause concealment, which is ignoble and internal conflict which creates distortion,

we decided to protect the strong against the inferior," Crowley wrote an enthusiastic "Yes!" (Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 48).

⁴⁷ Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 376, 377.

⁴⁸ "One of my colleagues informed me . . . that the Fuhrer was looking for a philosophical basis for Nazi principles. . . . Some of my adherents in Germany are trying to approach the Fuhrer with a view to putting my Book of the Law in its proper position as the Bible of the New Aeon. I expect that you will be in close touch with the Chancellor . . . and I should be very grateful if you would put the matter before them. . . . Hitler himself says emphatically in *Mein Kampf* that the world needs a new religion, that he himself is not a religious teacher, but that when the proper man appears he will be welcome" (Crowley, Letter to George Sylvester Viereck, July 31, 1936 [O.T.O. Archives], cited in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 378).

⁴⁹ "The Law of Thelema is an altogether new instrument of Government, infinitely elastic, in the proper hands, from the very fact of its scientific rigidity. I offer this Law to His Most Gracious Majesty in my duty as a loyal and devoted subject and I suggest that it be adopted secretly by His Majesty's Government so that I may be supported by the appropriate services in my efforts to establishing this Law as the basis of conduct, to the better security and . . . government of the Commonwealth" (Crowley, "Propositions for consideration of H.M. [His Majesty's] Government," October 1936, quoted in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 380).

neurosis and ends in explosion. We deliberately produce an abscesses and wonder why it is full of pus, why it hurts, why it bursts in stench and corruption.

The Book of the Law solves the sexual problem completely. Each individual has an absolute right to satisfy his sexual instinct as is physiologically proper for him. The one injunction is to treat all such acts as sacraments.⁵⁰

Crowley's sexual magic is itself a complex melding of both Eastern and Western traditions; in fact, Crowley would become one of the most important figures in the transmission of Tantra to the West—though with significant reinterpretations and transformations. As early as 1902, Crowley had been introduced to Tantra during his travels in India and Sri Lanka.⁵¹ But he would also combine his knowledge of Tantric practices with a very different tradition of sexual magic emerging in the West. Much of this derives from an American named Paschal Beverly Randolph, the son of a wealthy Virginian father and a slave mother, who lived from 1825–1875. A well-known spiritualist, Randolph also developed the most influential system of effectual alchemy or sexual magic in modern times. According to Randolph, the moment of orgasm is the most intense and powerful experience in human life, for it is the moment when the soul is suddenly opened to the divine realm and the breath of God infuses life into this world. In Randolph's words, "True sex power is God power."⁵² As such, the power of orgasm can be used

⁵⁰ Crowley, *Confessions*, 874–875; cf. *The Law is for All*, 51.

⁵¹ See Crowley, "The Temple of Solomon the King," *Equinox* I (4) (London 1910), 150. Crowley's main texts on sex magic include: *Of the Nature of the Gods; Liber Agape, the Book of the Unveiling of the Sangraal de Arte Magica*, and *Of the Homunculus*, most of which are included in Francis King, ed., *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.*, New York: Samuel Weiser 1973. On Crowley's possible Tantric influences, see Urban, "The Omnipotent Oom: Tantra and its Impact on Modern Western Esotericism," *Esoterica: The Journal of Esoteric Studies* 3 (2001) 218–259; Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 92, 127, 141, 188. As Symonds suggests, "His greatest merit was to make the bridge between Tantrism and the Western esoteric tradition and thus bring together Western and Eastern magical techniques" (Introduction to *The Confessions*, xxv).

⁵² Randolph, *The Ansairctic Mystery: A New Revelation Concerning Sex!*, Toledo: Toledo Sun, Liberal Printing House, n.d. [c.1873]), reprinted in John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth Century American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian*

for a variety of this-worldly and otherworldly ends: both to achieve mystical experience and to create magical effects, such as financial gain or winning the affections of straying lover.⁵³

Randolph's teachings on sex magic were then passed to a number of European secret societies and esoteric brotherhoods, the most important of which was the Ordo Templi Orientis or O.T.O., founded by Karl Kellner and Theodor Reuss in the late 19th century.⁵⁴ According to the Reuss, the secret of sexual magic is in fact the innermost heart of all esoteric traditions and the key to all occult mysteries. As the O.T.O. proclaimed in the journal, *Oriflamme*, in 1912,

One of the secrets which our order possesses in its highest grades is that it gives members the means to re-erect the temple of Solomon in men, to re-find the lost Word. . . . Our Order possesses the Key which unlocks all Masonic and Hermetic

and Sex Magician, Albany: SUNY 1997, 317. See also Randolph, *Eulis! The History of Love: Its Wondrous Magic, Chemistry, Rules, Laws, Modes and Rationale; Being the Third Revelation of Soul and Sex*, Toledo: Randolph Publishing Co. 1974; *Magia Sexualis*, Paris: Robert Telin 1931.

⁵³ Randolph lists over a hundred uses for sexual magic, which include everything from acquiring money to the secret of domestic happiness. One of the most striking features of Randolph's sexual magic is his insistence that both partners must have an active role and that both must achieve orgasm for the magic to be successful: "For the prayer to be effective the paroxysm of both is necessary. . . . [T]he woman's orgasms should coincide with man's emission, for only in this way will the magic be fulfilled" (*Magia Sexualis*, 76–78).

⁵⁴ Kellner claims to have been initiated by an Arab fakir and two Indian yogis, from whom he learned "the mysteries of yoga and the philosophy of the left hand path which he called sexual magic" (Symonds, *The Magic of Aleister Crowley*, 95). On Reuss and his knowledge of Tantra, see A.R. Naylor, ed., *Theodor Reuss and Aleister Crowley, O.T.O. Rituals and Sex Magick*, Thames: Essex House 1999. Peter Koenig argues that the O.T.O. was not founded by Kellner but only formed after his death under Reuss' leadership. Kellner was the head of a small group known as the "Inner Triangle" and did practice some quasi-Tantric rites in the attempt to create the "elixir, that is: male and female sexual fluids" ("Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O.," available online at <http://www.cyberlink.ch/~koenig/spermo.htm>). On the O.T.O., see Peter-Robert Koenig, "The OTO Phenomenon," *Theosophical History* 4, no. 3 (1992) 92–98; Frater U.D., *Secrets of Western Sex Magic*, St. Paul: Llewellyn 2001, 3ff.

secrets, it is the teaching of sexual magic and this teaching explains all the riddles of nature, all Masonic symbolism and all religious systems.⁵⁵

Eventually, the O.T.O. would also develop a complex series of grades of initiation, the highest of which focused auto-erotic, heterosexual and homosexual magic.

Crowley became involved with the O.T.O. beginning in 1910, and would soon become its most infamous and influential leader. According to Crowley, sex magic is the most powerful of all magical operations, for it is the raw power of human creativity, which, when combined with the power of the human will, has the potential to bring into being anything that one desires:

[I]f this secret [of sexual magic] which is a scientific secret were perfectly understood, as it is not by me after more than twelve years' almost constant study and experiment, there would be nothing which the human imagination can conceive that could not be realized in practice. . . . If it were desired to have an element of atomic weight six times that of uranium that element could be produced.⁵⁶

Many of Crowley's sexual rites centered around explicit transgressions and calculated inversions of conventional morality and religious practice. For example, one of the most elaborate rituals that he de-

⁵⁵ *Oriflamme* (1912) 18, reproduced in R. Swinburne Clymer, *The Rosicrucian Fraternity in America: Authentic and Spurious Organizations*, Quakertown: The Rosicrucian Foundation, n.d., II 541. For a good discussion of Reuss' sex magic, see Koenig, "Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O.": "The whole body was considered Divine . . . and the sexual organs were meant to fulfill a peculiar function: a Holy Mass was the symbolic act of re-creating the universe. . . . Sexually joining is a shadow of the cosmic act of creation. Performed by adepts, the union of male and female approaches the primal act and partakes of its divine nature."

⁵⁶ Crowley, *The Confessions*, 767. Most of the sexual rites were revealed in the VIII, IX and XI of the O.T.O. degrees. As Koenig comments, "Crowley's VIIIth degree unveiled . . . that masturbating on a sigil of a demon or meditating upon the image of a phallus would bring power or communication with a divine being. . . . The IXth degree was labelled heterosexual intercourse where the sexual secrets were sucked out of the vagina and when not consumed . . . put on a sigil to attract this or that demon to fulfill the pertinent wish" ("Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O.").

signed for the O.T.O. was a full scale Gnostic Mass — a complex, highly choreographed ceremony. In the course of the ritual, the semen and menses are symbolized by the sacred host, as the priest pierces the priestess with his “sacred lance,” symbolizing the supreme union of male and female energies.

In the Gnostic Mass, semen and menses—which may be transformed into physico-spiritual essences (the Great Work or Summum Bonum) by those in possession of the secret—are symbolized by the Priest (who bears ‘the Sacred Lance’) and the Priestess. . . . These two partake of the sacred Cake of Light and Cup of Wine. During the ritual, the Priest parts a sacred veil with his Lance and embraces the knees of the Priestess, who has removed her robes to embody the sacred nakedness of the Goddess.⁵⁷

However, Crowley’s most explicitly transgressive practices began in the years between 1920 and 1923, when he founded his own Abbey of Thelema at a farmhouse in Sicily. According to his diaries from this period, Crowley believed that he had transcended all moral boundaries and all material distinctions, such that even the most defiling of substances became for him divine. Thus, he describes one performance of his Gnostic mass in which the sacred Host was replaced with the excrement of his consort, Leah Hirsig, which she then forced him to eat as the true Body of God. As Crowley recounts,

My mouth burned; my throat choked, my belly wretched; my blood fled wither who knows. . . . She ate all the body of God and with Her soul’s compulsion made me eat. . . . My teeth grew rotten, my tongue ulcered, raw was my throat, spasm-torn my belly, and all my Doubt of that which to Her teeth was moonlight and to her tongue ambrosia; to her throat nectar, in her belly the One God.⁵⁸

On another occasion, Crowley describes the performance of a blood sacrifice involved both ritual and sexual transgression. The ceremony

⁵⁷ Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 234. See also Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four Parts I–IV*, York Beach: Samuel Weiser 1997, 267–269, and Theodor Reuss’ translation of Crowley’s Gnostic Mass: “Die Gnostische Messe,” in P.R. Koenig, *Der Grosse Theodor Reuss Reader*, Munich 1997.

⁵⁸ John Symonds and Kenneth Grant, eds. *The Diaries of Aleister Crowley: The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, London: Duck Editions 2001, 235.

was to consist in the beheading of a goat at the very moment that it ejaculated as it had intercourse with his Scarlet Woman, so that the drinking of its blood could be a true “drinking thereof from the Cup of our Lady of Whoredom.”⁵⁹ Unfortunately, the goat seemed uninterested in performing the sexual part of the ritual, and Crowley was forced to complete that portion himself.

Clearly, Crowley was going somewhat against the grain of the conventional values of the Victorian world in which he was born. As Patricia Anderson observes in her study of 19th century British sexual attitudes, much of the discourse of the Victorian era was particularly focused on the importance of heterosexual marriage for the stability of society; in an era that valued economic productivity, generation of capital and restraint in consumption, healthy sexuality had to be useful, productive and efficient: “normal heterosexuality appeared in one guise . . . attraction between men and women that led to marriage and family. Normal sex was consistent with the values of Victorian industrial society — it was another mode of production.”⁶⁰ Crowley, it would seem, set out deliberately to destroy that useful, productive social order through the most extreme acts of consumption and excess.

Despite their deliberately shocking and offensive character, however, Crowley’s rituals were by no means simple orgiastic hedonism or mindless antinomianism. On the contrary, these were elaborate, choreographed ceremonies that required the strict observation of laws of sanctity before the explosive energy of transgressive violence and sexuality could be unleashed. These were rites that depended, not unlike the Śākta Tantric rituals, on a clear logic of structural inversion and systematic violation of basic social categories. Thus, the Christian bread and wine are replaced by semen and menstrual blood; the

⁵⁹ Crowley, July 19, 1921 diary entry, O.T.O. archives, quoted in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 293.

⁶⁰ Patricia Anderson, *When Passion Reigned: Sex and the Victorians*, New York: Basic Books 1995, 17–18. See also John Maynard, “Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion,” *University of Hartford Studies in Literature* 19 (1987) 61.

body of Christ is replaced by the excrement of a woman; conventional marriage and intercourse are replaced by bestiality and blood sacrifice.

Much like the Bengali *tāntrikas*, moreover, Crowley found in these explicit acts of transgression the key to a tremendous source of power. Through these occult manipulations of impure substances, such as semen, blood, and excrement, he claimed to have unleashed a magical will that could fulfill any spiritual or material desire, from intercourse with the gods to financial well-being. (In fact, many of his sexual magical operations were performed with the explicit aim of coming up with some quick cash when he had begun to deplete his bank account).⁶¹

A Sorcerer by the power of his magick had subdued all things to himself. . . . He could fly through space more swiftly than the stars. Would he eat, drink, and take his pleasure? There was none that did not obey his bidding. In the whole system of ten million times ten million spheres upon the two and twenty million planes he had his desire.⁶²

In his most exalted moments, Crowley believed that he could achieve a supreme spiritual power: the power to conceive a divine child or spiritual fetus that would transcend the mortal failings of the body born of a mere woman. This goal of creating an immortal child, Crowley suggests, lies at the heart of many esoteric traditions through history:

This is the great idea of magicians in all times: To obtain a Messiah by some adaptation of the sexual process. In Assyria they tried incest . . . Greeks and Syrians mostly bestiality. . . . The Mohammedans tried homosexuality; medieval philosophers tried to produce homunculi by making chemical experiments with semen. But the root idea is that any form of procreation other than normal is likely to produce results of a magical character.⁶³

⁶¹ Crowley suggests that, among other things, one might use sexual magic to “perform an operation to have \$20,000,” by focusing all one’s will upon an object at the moment of orgasm, one can powerfully influence the course of events and achieve the desired goal (Symonds, *The Magic of Aleister Crowley*, 141–142).

⁶² Crowley, *The Book of Lies*, 63.

⁶³ Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice*, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent 1911, 385–386. On the creation of alchemical androgynes, see Urban, “Birth Done

In sum, the secret of sexual magic has the potential to unleash a power of truly messianic proportions, a power that heralds the dawn of the new aeon.

As we can see in this passage, Crowley seems to have regarded women as rather limited and ultimately expendable companions in spiritual practice. Though he used a variety of female partners or “Scarlet women” in his magical rites, he seems to have regarded the highest stages of practice as rituals of homosexual intercourse.⁶⁴ He was, moreover, notorious for his psychological and physical exploitation of women, and for his generally condescending, at times quite misogynistic attitude toward women generally. As he put it, “women, like all moral inferiors, behave well only when treated with firmness, kindness and justice.”⁶⁵

III. *The Power of the Impure: The Play of Taboo and Transgression*

In the region where the autonomy of the subject breaks away from all restraints, where the categories of good and evil, of pleasure and pain, are infinitely surpassed . . . where there is no longer any form or mode that means anything but the instantaneous annihilation of whatever might claim to be a form or mode, so great a spiritual energy is needed that it is all but inconceivable. On this scale, the chain releases of atomic energy are nothing.

Bataille, *The Accursed Share*⁶⁶

Better: Conceiving the Immortal Fetus in India, China and Renaissance Europe,” in *Notes on a Maṇḍala: Essays in Honor of Wendy Doniger*, ed. Laurie Patton, New York: Seven Bridges Press 2002.

⁶⁴ On Crowley’s views toward homosexuality, see Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 183–184. Thus the highest XI degree of Crowley’s O.T.O passed beyond the stages of auto-erotic and heterosexual practice to that of homo-erotic practice. See König, “Spermo-Gnostics and the O.T.O.”; Frater U.D., *Secrets of Western Sex Magic*, 138.

⁶⁵ Crowley, *Confessions*, 370. Elsewhere he notes, “Women are nearly always conscious of an important part of their true Will, the bearing of children. To them nothing else is serious by comparison” (*The Law is for all*, 133). See also Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 359, 199, 329–330.

⁶⁶ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 2, 183–184.

Secrecy lies at the very core of power.

Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*⁶⁷

I would like to pause here and offer some comparative reflections on these two examples of Bengali Tantra and modern Western magic, widely separated as they are both historically and geographically. Obviously, I am by no means suggesting that these two cases are in any way the same, nor I am suggesting that they are each temporal reflections of some transcendent archetype or universal pattern. Rather, beginning from the ground up instead from the top down, I am suggesting that they are each manipulating the body and physical substances in ways that shed some useful light on one another. By juxtaposing these two cases like a metaphor, playing upon both their striking differences and their surprising similarities, I think we can gain new insight into both phenomena, as well as new light on a larger theoretical problem in the study of religion. The result, I hope, is something like what Paul Ricoeur calls the experience of *semantic shock*, or the sudden flash of insight that results from a truly striking metaphor.⁶⁸

In both the cases of Śākta tantra and Crowleyian magic, we find esoteric rituals that center in large part around the manipulation of bodily substances that are normally considered impure and defiling, such as blood, semen, menses and excrement; both involve systematic violations and structural inversions of ordinary laws of purity and ritual sanctity, through violence, bloodshed and sexual transgression; and both do so with the primary goal of unleashing an awesome source of power that shatters the boundaries of the mundane physical world and social order alike.

Here I would like to adapt but also critically modify some of the ideas of Georges Bataille, who has written some of the most widely

⁶⁷ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, New York: Viking Press 1962, 290.

⁶⁸ "The strategy of metaphorical discourse is aimed not at facilitating communication . . . but rather at challenging and even shattering our sense of reality through reflective redescription" (*A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdes, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1991, 32).

influential work on the concept of transgression. As Bataille suggests, transgression is not a matter of simple hedonism or unrestrained sexual license. Rather, its power lies in the dialectic or play (*le jeu*) between taboo and transgression, sanctity and sacrilege, through which one systematically constructs and then oversteps all laws. It is thus analogous to eroticism. Not a matter of simple nudity, eroticism arises in the dialectic of veiling and unveiling, clothing and striptease, between the creation of sexual taboos and the exhilarating experience of overstepping them. So too, in ecstatic mystical experience or religious rites, such as blood sacrifice, carnivals, etc., one must first create an aura of purity before one can defile it with violence, transgression and the overturning of law. "The prohibition is there to be violated";⁶⁹ for it is the experience of over-stepping limits that brings the blissful sense of continuity and communion with the other. As Bataille comments, quoting Marquis de Sade,

It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier. Fear invests [the forbidden act] with an aura of excitement. There is nothing, writes de Sade, that can set bounds to licentiousness. The best way of enlarging and multiplying one's desires is to try to limit them.⁷⁰

For Bataille, the ultimate aim of transgression is not mere sensual pleasure, rather it is the transgression of the very boundaries of the self, the expenditure without hope of return, which shatters the limits of the finite human consciousness and merges it with the boundless continuity of the infinite. It is this experience of transgression and radical expenditure that links eroticism to the ultimate experience of infinite continuity, that of death itself. As Bataille concludes, "Eroticism is assenting to life up to the point of death."⁷¹ This

⁶⁹ Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco: City Lights 1986, 64. For other important discussions of transgression, see Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 2, 89–111; *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985, and *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2001, 26–75, 133–152, 185–195.

⁷⁰ Bataille, *Erotism*, 48.

⁷¹ Bataille, *Erotism*, 1.

fusion of death and sensuality in the act of transgression is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the *tāntrik* image of Chinnamastā — the Goddess who severs her own head and stands upon a copulating couple — or in Crowley's ritual of beheading a goat as it engages in intercourse with a woman.

However, while I find Bataille's comments on transgression generally useful, I would also like to extend and critique them in two ways. First, I want to look more closely at the role of secrecy in all of this: how does concealment function in relation to transgressive ritual practice? There is of course the obvious fact that some of these activities — such as consuming menstrual blood or copulating with goats — are not entirely acceptable by either Hindu or Victorian British social standards and could only take place behind closed doors. But more importantly, I would suggest, secrecy also serves to *intensify and optimize* both the taboo and the transgression, both the laws that forbid such acts in the public world and the titillating power derived from violating them in esoteric ritual. As Michael Taussig nicely put it,

What is essential to realize is how secrecy is intertwined with taboo (and hence transgression) to create a powerful yet invisible presence (indeed, the presence of presence itself) and how essential this is to what we mean by religion.⁷²

For secrecy *magnifies* the aura of dangerous mystery that surrounds the prohibition, and so also the explosive power that results from violating it.⁷³ Secret ritual, we might say, functions like a kind of spiritual slingshot, which is first stretched as tightly as possible and then suddenly released, in order to propel one into ecstatic liberation. Or to use perhaps an even more apt metaphor, the transgressive ritual acts like a form of *socio-nuclear fission*; that is to say, it first *exaggerates*

⁷² Taussig, "Transgression," 355.

⁷³ "Secrecy (that lies at the very core of power) [is] a potent stimulus to creativity, to what Simmel called the magnification of reality, by means of the sensation that behind the appearance of things there is a deeper, mysterious reality that we may here call the sacred, if not religion" (Taussig, "Transgression," 356); see also Georg Simmel, "Secrecy," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt Wolff, New York: Free Press 1950.

and then *shatters* the laws that make up the social organism at its most fundamental atomic level, thereby releasing an explosive burst of energy.

Second, I would also like to suggest some criticisms of Bataille's model of transgression, which is, I think, ultimately inadequate. For what Bataille does not really acknowledge is that transgression is very often tied, not just to ecstatic mystical experience or the liberating bliss of expenditure, but also to real and often asymmetrical relations of power. In particular, Bataille glosses over the fact that transgression does not benefit all individuals equally; for while it may be empowering and liberating for some individuals, it is often oppressive and exploitative for others.⁷⁴ Indeed, in his major work on economic and political history, *The Accursed Share*, Bataille seems to have a kind of romantic nostalgia for the good old days of human sacrifice and ritual warfare, before the ecstatic power of transgressive violence was co-opted by modern capitalism. Thus he describes the practice of human sacrifice among the Aztecs as a cruel but divinely motivated search for continuity, which actually frees the victim from his finite, isolated individuality and merges him with the boundless continuity of death:

[I]n his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy*. . . . Religion is this long effort and this anguished quest: it is always a matter of detaching from the *real* order, from the poverty of things, and of restoring the *divine* order. . . . The meaning of this profound freedom is given in destruction, whose essence is to consume profitlessly whatever might remain in the progression of useful works. Sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Not unlike the Śākta *tāntrikas*, and not unlike Crowley, Bataille sought a kind of Nietzschean transvaluation of all values, transcending the limited moral boundaries of good and evil. In contrast to the "popular morality" of the servile and the meek, Bataille called for a form of "sovereign" and ecstatic experience, through "intoxication, erotic effusion, laughter, sacrificial effusion [and] poetic effusion." Such sovereign and ecstatic experiences are attained specifically by means of destruction and violence, the shattering of ethical and physical boundaries, with or without the consent of that which is destroyed: "In laughter, sacrifice or . . . eroticism, effusion is obtained through a modification, willing or not, in the order of objects . . . [S]acrifice, in general, destroys beings" (*The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, 94).

⁷⁵ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 2, 57–58.

In contrast to Bataille, I would emphasize that transgressive acts such as sacrifice and sexual rituals are typically empowering and liberating only for certain individuals, and often oppressive and even exploitative for others. In both the cases of Bengali Tantra and Crowleyan magic, the transgressive rites were in fact quite androcentric, arguably misogynistic and exploitative of the female body. Both, moreover, used esoteric ritual as a means of asserting an essentially patriarchal, elitist social vision, in which the supreme power belongs to the few who possess secret knowledge and dare to overstep the moral boundaries that confine ordinary human beings. In sum, they each exercised a basic double-norm: on the one hand, they asserted the essential divinity of all human beings and even celebrated the divine status of women and lower classes in the realm of secret ritual; yet they also ultimately re-asserted the superior status of a small group of elites, those few initiates who are strong enough to handle this powerful but dangerous esoteric knowledge.

As in the case of any good metaphor, however, this comparison has also highlighted some important differences between these two examples. For this has also been, in effect, an *historical comparison* — that is, an examination of how certain religious ideas are transformed or reinterpreted when they pass from one social and historical setting to another. Perhaps most importantly, Kṛṣṇānanda's secret rituals were, at least in part, an attempt to reassert his own *brāhmaṇic* status and to reinforce a traditional, class-based social hierarchy in the face of a changing historical context. For Kṛṣṇānanda, strict secrecy was a necessary part of his need to conceal a private realm of transgressive ritual, while protecting his status in mainstream society. Crowley, conversely, proclaimed the destruction of an older religious and social order, which would give birth to a new aeon, with the new Law of Thelema. For Crowley, sexual rituals were the ultimate symbol of his rejection of traditional Christianity morality and his assertion of the godhood of the individual Will. At the same time, Crowley took an apparent delight in revealing secrets, publicly proclaiming his violation of morality and convention. For Crowley, who was always something of an exhibitionist, the ultimate transgression was that of revealing the most terrify-

ing secrets in order to shock the world. In sum, both Kṛṣṇānanda and Crowley employed strikingly similar kinds of esoteric rituals, based on explicit acts of transgression and manipulation of impure bodily substances; yet they did so for very different, apparently opposite, reasons — the one to reinforce the status quo, and the other to demolish it.

Conclusions and Comparative Comments

We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have . . . carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos.

Michel Foucault⁷⁶

To conclude, I would like to offer some broader comparative comments on the impact of Tantra and Crowleyian magic on America today. In the years since his death, Crowley's sexual magic has become increasingly influential in American pop-culture and new religious movements; in fact, it has also been increasingly combined with, perhaps hopelessly confused with, Indian Tantric traditions. Most of the popular books now being sold under the label of "Tantra" are really for the most part meldings of Crowleyian sex magic with Indian erotic manuals such as the *Kāma Sūtra* (which in fact has virtually nothing to do with Tantra), usually with a healthy dash of the *Joy of Sex* thrown in.⁷⁷ As one enthusiastic neo-Tāntrik guru, Swami Nostradamus Virato, puts it, "the art of Tantra could be called spiritual hedonism, which says eat drink and be merry but with full awareness!"⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, 57. On the point, see also Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 2, 408.

⁷⁷ There is a vast array of such books; see for example: Douglas, *Spiritual Sex*; Christopher S. Hyatt, and Lon Milo Duquette, *Sex Magic, Tantra and Tarot: The Way of the Secret Lover*, New Falcon Pub. 1991; Christopher S. Hyatt and S. Jason Black, *Tantra Without Tears*, New Falcon Pub. 2000; Donald Michael Kraig, Linda Falorio, Tara Nema, *Modern Sex Magick: Secrets of Erotic Spirituality*, St. Paul: Llewellyn Pub. 1998.

⁷⁸ Swami Nostradamus Virato, "Tantric Sex: A spiritual Path to Ecstasy," reprinted on the "Church of Tantra" Website (<http://www.tantra.org>).

Indeed, the phrase “American Tantra” is now even a registered trademark, representing a whole line of books, videos and other products through its on-line gift shop.

Thus the category of Tantra is a striking illustration of the strange global circulation of religious ideas, the dialectical play of representations and misrepresentations at work between cultures in our own era of globalization and transnationalism. In the course of its complex journey to the West, Tantra has been progressively transformed from something concerned primarily with secrecy and power to something concerned primarily with sensual pleasure and a liberation of sexuality for a repressive western world. Indeed, even the transgressive power of Tantric ritual itself has now been transformed into a series of commodities that one can purchase on-line — for example, through Tantra.com’s E-sensual’s catalogue, which offers a complete “Tantric Pleasuring Package” for a mere \$198.⁷⁹ As such, Tantra has emerged as a new spiritual form remarkably well adapted to the current social-economic situation — the situation that some have described as post-Fordism, post-industrial society, disorganized capitalism or late capitalism.⁸⁰ As Bryan S. Turner, Mike Featherstone and others argue, the late 20th century witnessed a significant shift from an earlier mode of capitalism — based on the Protestant ethic of inner-worldly asceticism, hard work, thriftiness and accumulation — to a new form of late capitalism or postindustrial society — based on mass consumption, physical pleasure and hedonistic enjoyment. In consumer culture the body

⁷⁹ <http://www.tantra.com/tantra2/index.html>. On this point, see Urban, “The Cult of Ecstasy,” and *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power*, chapter 6. For “American Tantra™” see Paul Ramana Das’ and Marilena Silbey’s web-site “Third Millennium Magic” (<http://www.3mm.com>).

⁸⁰ On the concept of late capitalism, see Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, New York: Basic Books 1973; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press 1991; Scott Lash and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity 1987; William Halal, *The New Capitalism*, New York: Wiley 1986; Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, London: NLB 1975; Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, London: Blackwell 1989.

ceases to be an unruly vessel of desire that must be disciplined and subjugated; rather, the body is the ultimate source of gratification and fulfillment. "The new consumptive ethic . . . taken over by the advertising industry celebrates living for the moment, hedonism, self-expression, the body beautiful, progress, freedom from social obligation."⁸¹ With its ideal wedding of spirituality and physical pleasure, divine transcendence and sexual indulgence, these new forms of Tantra/Sex Magick are a striking illustration of what we might call "*the spiritual logic of late capitalism.*"

As such, I would suggest that Crowley and his contemporary are a particularly clear example of what Michel Foucault has called the "repressive hypothesis" — namely, the belief that sexuality has been prudishly repressed by western society and that what is most needed now is an ecstatic liberation of our true sexual nature. Yet in fact, Foucault argues, we have perhaps not so much "liberated" sexuality in any radical new way, but rather simply continued a long history of preoccupation with and discourse about sexuality, which has been described, debated, classified and categorized in endless, titillating detail. "What is peculiar to modern societies," he writes, "is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as *the secret.*"⁸² Yet what we *have* perhaps done is to push sex to the furthest possible extremes — to extremes of transgression and excess, not resting until we have shattered every law, violated every taboo:

⁸¹ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Sage 1990, 114. As Turner comments, "The new leisure consumption and body-beautiful culture stimulate a whole new market around hedonistic personal life-styles, making the body a target of advertising and consumer luxury. . . . In the growth of a consumer society with its emphasis on the athletic/beautiful body we see a major transformation of values from an emphasis on the control of the body for ascetic reasons to the manipulation of the body for aesthetic purposes" (*Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology*, London: Routledge 1992, 164–165, 47).

⁸² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, New York: Vintage 1978, 35.

The twentieth century will undoubtedly have discovered the related categories of exhaustion, excess, the limit and transgression—the strange and unyielding form of these irrevocable movements which consume and consummate us.⁸³

To close I would like to quote a passage from Leslie Shepherd, who edited Crowley's infamous semi-autobiographical novel, *The Diary of a Drug Fiend*. Crowley and his sexual practices, Shepherd suggests, are perhaps an allegory for modern Western society as a whole, and perhaps foreshadowed the consumptive, destructive, transgressive forces in late capitalist society at the turn of the millennium. "It is just as well that Crowley was ahead of his time; had he been unleashed today," amidst our own obsessions with sex and transgression in contemporary consumer society, "he might have taken the world by storm."⁸⁴ Perhaps there is still a good chance that he might.

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⁸³ Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, 69.

⁸⁴ Shepherd, Introduction to *The Diary of a Drug Fiend*, Hyde Park: University Books 1970, vii–viii.

