



BRILL

ARIES – JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY  
OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM 21 (2021) 69–93



brill.com/aries

# Proximal Authority

## *The Changing Role of Leah Hirsig in Aleister Crowley's Thelema, 1919–1930*

*Manon Hedenborg White*

Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden

*manon.hedenborg.white@sh.se*

### Abstract

In 1920, the Swiss-American music teacher and occultist Leah Hirsig (1883–1975) was appointed ‘Scarlet Woman’ by the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), founder of the religion Thelema. In this role, Hirsig was Crowley’s right-hand woman during a formative period in the Thelemic movement, but her position shifted when Crowley found a new Scarlet Woman in 1924. Hirsig’s importance in Thelema gradually declined, and she distanced herself from the movement in the late 1920s. The article analyses Hirsig’s changing status in Thelema 1919–1930, proposing the term *proximal authority* as an auxiliary category to Max Weber’s tripartite typology. Proximal authority is defined as authority ascribed to or enacted by a person based on their real or perceived relational closeness to a leader. The article briefly draws on two parallel cases so as to demonstrate the broader applicability of the term in highlighting how relational closeness to a leadership figure can entail considerable yet precarious power.

### Keywords

Aleister Crowley – Leah Hirsig – Max Weber – proximal authority – Thelema

## 1 Introduction

During the reign of Queen Anne of Great Britain (1665–1714), Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough (1660–1744), was the second most powerful woman in the kingdom. As the queen’s favourite, the Duchess overcame many restrictions hampering women of the time. Sarah’s relationship with the queen eventually soured due to a combination of political differences and Anne’s growing

preference for Sarah's cousin Abigail Masham (c. 1670–1734), leading Sarah and her husband to be dismissed from the court.<sup>1</sup> Almost two centuries later, 1960s America witnessed the emergence of a new religious movement initially known as the Children of God and, later, as The Family International, founded by David Brandt Berg (1919–1994). In 1969, Berg began a sexual relationship with his secretary and convert Karen Zerby (b. 1946), known as Maria within the movement. This prompted a revelation for Berg, who declared that his then-wife, Jane (née Miller, 1922–2011), represented a corrupt 'Old Church'. He cast her out of his inner circle to make way for the 'New Church', to which he linked Maria, who became his second wife. Berg elevated Maria to a central position within the movement, and she effectively became its spiritual leader after his death.<sup>2</sup>

Early-twentieth-century esotericism provides a similar case of influence gained and lost via shifting personal affections: that of the Swiss-American music teacher and occultist Leah Hirsig (1883–1975); disciple, magical partner, and lover of the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). As Crowley's appointed 'Scarlet Woman' from 1920, Hirsig was his right-hand woman during a formative period when Crowley co-founded (with Hirsig) a religious commune devoted to his religion, Thelema; underwent a key initiation; and penned numerous important texts, several of them with Hirsig's aid. However, Hirsig's position shifted when Crowley appointed a new lover as his Scarlet Woman in 1924. Despite her own efforts to the contrary, Hirsig's importance in Thelema waned over the following years, and she distanced herself from Crowley and the movement in the late 1920s. The present article will analyse Leah's changing status in Thelema 1919–1930. I will propose the term *proximal authority* in order to highlight how relational ties to a leader can both enable and condition a precarious form of secondary leadership, and suggest that this term has broader applicability within the study of esotericism and religion.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Max Weber defines authority as 'the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) from a given source will be obeyed by a given group of persons'.<sup>3</sup> He distinguishes between three types of authority based on the differing legitimacy claims typically made by each. The first type, charismatic

1 Harris, *Passion for Government*, *passim*.

2 Chancellor, 'Family for the Twenty-First Century'; Vance, *Women in New Religions*, 77–100.

3 Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 324–325.

authority, is accorded a person due to some (perceived) talent, trait, or aspect perceived as inherent in their being. Charismatic religious leaders are often viewed as divinely appointed.<sup>4</sup> Emerging religious movements are frequently characterised by charismatic authority. Following the leader's death or loss of charisma, new religions are faced with the challenge of the 'routinisation of charisma', that is, the transmission of authority to new forms of leadership.<sup>5</sup> These generally follow what Weber indicates as two other main types of authority: traditional, where the leader is selected via (what is held to be) time-honoured custom; and rational-legal, where power is bureaucratically derived from a specific office.<sup>6</sup> Weber's model is ideal-typical, and he suggests the possibility for mixed and additional forms of authority.

Weber notes that charismatic leaders often enlist 'disciples' to help enact their will, selecting them based on these disciples' own charismatic qualifications.<sup>7</sup> This may be taken to suggest that charisma (*sensu* Weber) is potentially inherent, though Weber takes care to stress that charisma is utterly dependent on others' acceptance of the charismatic claim.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Roy Wallis has stressed that charisma should be seen as a 'social construction arising from the advancement and acceptance of a charismatic claim'. Wallis indicates the central role of a 'committed elite' of adherents in bolstering charisma.<sup>9</sup> In singling out followers worthy of particular attention, they too are perceived as chosen, thus creating a bond of loyalty compelling 'elite' adherents to support and reaffirm the charismatic claim.<sup>10</sup> Competition among the charismatic leader's chosen ones may inspire affection for others close to the leader while they are in 'good standing', but also a 'readiness to ... attack them when they fall from favour', so as to advance one's own standing.<sup>11</sup>

This article takes as its starting point the precarious position inhabited by one such 'elite' disciple, scrutinising the mechanisms through which relational closeness may simultaneously enable and limit authority. I propose the term *proximal authority* to denote authority ascribed to or enacted by a person based on their real or perceived relational closeness to a leader.<sup>12</sup> As suggested

4 Ibid., 358–360.

5 Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol 2, 246–254; Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 363–366, *passim*.

6 Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 328–329, *passim*.

7 Ibid., 360–361.

8 Ibid., 359.

9 Wallis, 'Social Construction of Charisma', 26, 33, *passim*.

10 Ibid., 35.

11 Ibid., 38.

12 In my usage of the term 'proximal', there are parallels to religious studies scholar Erika

by the example of Sarah Churchill in the introduction, proximal authority need not exclusively derive from closeness to charismatic authority; the “primary” leader’s authority may also derive from a traditional or rational-legal claim (though a detailed discussion of such examples exceeds the scope of the present article). This being said, the particular importance of affect in the construction of charisma may render proximal authority more likely to arise from closeness to a charismatic leader. Indeed, monarchs of Queen Anne’s era arguably inhabited aspects of charismatic as well as traditional authority, and future research (based on a broader range of cases) may determine the likelihood of proximal authority emerging in relation to traditional and rational-legal types of leaders.<sup>13</sup> Rather than a fourth type on par with Weber’s three, I suggest proximal authority may represent an auxiliary category, highlighting how other forms of authority tenuously spill over by virtue of relationality.

### 3 Background: The Scarlet Woman and the Goddess Babalon

Growing up within the dispensationalist movement, the Plymouth Brethren, Aleister Crowley studied the biblical Book of Revelation from a young age. Rebelling against his conservative upbringing, he identified himself with the Beast 666.<sup>14</sup> Spring 1904 found Crowley on honeymoon in Cairo with his first wife Rose (née Kelly, 1874–1932). One night, Crowley performed an invocation to impress his bride. Instead, Rose went into a trance, repeating ‘They are waiting for you’. She later qualified the one awaiting was the god Horus. Sceptical, Crowley brought Rose to the Boulak Museum and bid her to indicate the god. He was stunned as Rose led him to an ancient funerary tablet with the item number 666, bearing an image of Horus. On the Spring Equinox, Crowley invoked the god. Rose later told him to prepare to take dictation, and over the course of April 8–10, Crowley penned *The Book of the Law* (later given the technical title *Liber AL vel Legis*), dictated to him by a discarnate entity named

---

Appellos’ notion of ‘religious proximity’, denoting a stratifying mechanism in religious movements that ascribes authority based on perceived closeness to a transcendent other or others. Appellos’ concept has much in common with Weber’s charisma. Appellos, ‘Religion och intersektionalitet.’ My usage of the term ‘proximal authority’ differs from Appellos’ approach in that I am concerned with the ways authority is both structured and made precarious by relational proximity to a human other. As such, my concept has applicability beyond religious movements.

13 For a discussion of sacredness in relation to monarchic power, see Geertz, ‘Centers, Kings and Charisma’.

14 Rev. 13 [κJV]; Crowley, *Confessions*, 44.

Aiwass.<sup>15</sup> The text heralds the advent of a new era characterised by the maxim 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law', and the related 'Love is the law, love under will'.<sup>16</sup>

*Liber AL* became the foundational document of Crowley's religion Thelema (Greek for 'will'). The book is divided into three chapters, attributed, respectively, to the goddess Nuit; the god Hadit; and the god Ra-Hoor-Khuit. It heralds two additional characters, inspired by Revelation: the 'prince-priest the Beast' (i.e., Crowley) as prophet of the new aeon; and the 'Scarlet Woman', in whom 'is all power given'.<sup>17</sup> Though frequently used as a pejorative euphemism for the Roman Catholic Church, or for a prostitute or sexually immoral woman, this title in *Liber AL* signifies the Beast's feminine counterpart, charged with aiding him in realising the new aeon. The lengthiest exposition of the Scarlet Woman's role is found in Chapter III of the text, which presents her as a counter-image to the Victorian-Edwardian ideal of feminine modesty, chastity, and domesticity, instead spurring her to assertiveness and promiscuity:

III: 43. Let the Scarlet Woman beware! If pity and compassion and tenderness visit her heart; if she leave my work to toy with old sweetnesses; then shall my vengeance be known. I will slay me her child: I will alienate her heart: I will cast her out from men: as a shrinking and despised harlot shall she crawl through dusk wet streets, and die cold and an-hungred. 44. But let her raise herself in pride! Let her follow me in my way! Let her work the work of wickedness! Let her kill her heart! Let her be loud and adulterous! Let her be covered with jewels, and rich garments, and let her be shameless before all men! 45. Then will I lift her to pinnacles of power: then will I breed from her a child mightier than all the kings of the earth. I will fill her with joy: with my force shall she see & strike at the worship of Nu: she shall achieve Hadit.<sup>18</sup>

15 For Crowley's account of this chain of events, see Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods*, 70–88; 94–118. The text was first published as 'Liber L vel Legis sub figura CCXX as Delivered by LXXVII unto DCLXVI'. Aleister Crowley, *ΘΕΛΗΜΑ* [Thelema], vol. 3, London: privately printed 1909. In 1919, Crowley changed the Latin title to *Liber AL vel Legis*, following a discovery by his disciple Charles Stansfeld Jones, alias Frater Achad. Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods*, 98–103. For simplicity, I will refer to the text simply as *Liber AL*.

16 *Liber AL* I:40, 57. *The Book of the Law* has been printed in a number of editions which vary in pagination but remain consistent in numeration. For this reason, the text is quoted herein by chapter and verse. For my own reference, I have used the 2004 'centennial' edition, see Crowley, *The Book of the Law*.

17 *Liber AL* I:15.

18 *Liber AL* III:43–45.

On the basis of *Liber AL*, Crowley claimed a form of charismatic authority as the prophet of Thelema, while his interpretation of the Scarlet Woman's role changed over time. He initially viewed it as a reference to Rose, who brought him into communication with Aiwass. Around their divorce in 1909, however, Crowley's interpretation was shifting, as evinced by Crowley's first substantial attempt at an explanatory commentary to *Liber AL*—a task prescribed in the book itself and which eluded Crowley for most of his life.<sup>19</sup> In the 'Old' Comment, written around 1909–1911, Crowley wrote that the Beast and Scarlet Woman were not 'persons', but 'titles of office'.<sup>20</sup> This realisation was seemingly prompted by two factors: firstly, the dissolution of Crowley's relationship with Rose; and secondly, his meeting with the cosmetics entrepreneur Mary Desti (née Dempsey, 1871–1931), alias Virakam. In autumn 1911, Desti transmitted a series of communications to Crowley from the entity Abuldiz. Crowley discovered Desti was in possession of a blue robe almost identical to one Rose had worn in Cairo. Believing that Rose had fulfilled the negative prophecy of *Liber AL*, Crowley took this as a sign that Virakam was destined to be her successor.<sup>21</sup> Desti aided Crowley in the writing of his *Book Four*, receiving co-authorial credit.<sup>22</sup>

Crowley thus came to view the Scarlet Woman as a transferable office. In 1915, Crowley affixed the title to the American poet, journalist, and model Jeanne Foster (1879–1970), alias Hilarion, viewing her as the mother of his 'magical son', Charles Stansfeld Jones, alias Frater Achad (1886–1950). Foster was succeeded by the suffragist and Doctor of Pharmacy, Roddie Minor (1884–1979), alias Ahitha, who transmitted a series of messages from the entity Amalantrah in spring 1918. She was followed in 1919 by Bertha Almira Bruce (born c. 1898), who ran a boarding house in Detroit and helped finance Crowley's publishing endeavours in the U.S.. Crowley sometimes revised his opinion of who had been a Scarlet Woman after the fact. Around 1917–1918, he believed the Russia specialist Marie Lavrov (née Röhlings, b. 1891), alias Olun, to be a candidate, later describing her as a 'doubtful case'.<sup>23</sup> Though Crowley did not have a formalised set of criteria, the Scarlet Women were generally his sexual and magical partners, many of whom he viewed as having mediumistic abilities.<sup>24</sup>

19 *Liber AL* I:36, III:39–40.

20 Crowley, 'Liber Legis. The Comment'.

21 Crowley, *Confessions*, 677.

22 See Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA*.

23 Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 103; Crowley, *Magical Record*, 145.

24 For Crowley's list of Scarlet Women until spring 1923, see *Ibid.*, 103. For his discussion of succession, Kelly, and Desti, see Crowley, *Confessions*, 677–678.

Crowley also came to view the Scarlet Woman as the earthly office of the Thelemic goddess Babalon, whom he first envisioned in 1909. Inspired by a favourable reinterpretation of the Whore of Babylon from Revelation (17), Babalon in Crowley's system represents the formula of passionate union with all of existence. In Crowley's initiatory order A.:A.:, Babalon is linked to the ordeal of crossing the Abyss—a terrifying void separating the manifest from the numinous, and inhabited by the demon Choronzon. By surrendering and annihilating one's ego, metaphorically draining one's blood into Babalon's cup, the seeker can be reborn as a Magister Templi on the other side, in the City of the Pyramids. More concretely, Babalon is linked to the sacredness of liberated (and, particularly, female) sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

Sexuality played a crucial role in Crowley's thought and magical practice. In 1912, he was made the British head of the initiatory fraternity Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), by the order's head, Theodor Reuss (1855–1923). OTO claimed to possess the 'key' to all masonic and Hermetic teachings: sexual magic, taught in the order's higher degrees.<sup>26</sup> From 1914 on, Crowley explored sexual magic systematically with a variety of male and female partners (including his Scarlet Women).<sup>27</sup> His technique was relatively simple: by focusing one's intent at the point of orgasm, Crowley believed one could attain any spiritual or material goal, and he contended: 'God is merely a name for the sex instinct'.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4 Leah Hirsig, Scarlet Woman No. 6

The youngest of nine siblings, Leah Hirsig was born in Trachselwald, Switzerland on April 9, 1883. In 1885, Leah's mother Magdalena (née Luginbühl) brought Leah and her five sisters to New York City, where Leah worked as an elementary school teacher of music in the Bronx from 1904.<sup>29</sup> On November 13, 1917, she gave birth to a son—Hans Hammond, of unknown fatherhood, in St

25 See Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice*, 148–153, 159–171. The role of Babalon in Crowley's thought has been analysed in Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*, 35–123.

26 Reuss, *I.N.R.I.*

27 See e.g., Crowley, *Magical Record*, *passim*.

28 Crowley, 'Review of Heavenly Bridegrooms'.

29 Passenger list, St Laurent, 1885, Ancestry.com, *New York, Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820–1957* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010; Leah Hirsig, U.S. Passport Application, October 14, 1919, Ancestry.com. *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795–1925* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007; Board of Education of the City School District of New York, Record extract, October 15, 1980, OTO Archives.

Petersburg, Florida, where her sister Fanny lived.<sup>30</sup> Her decision to give birth out of state was possibly motivated by the regulations against married women and mothers working as teachers at the time.<sup>31</sup> By 1919, she had begun attending law classes at New York University.<sup>32</sup>

On January 11, 1919, Leah and one of her sisters visited Crowley at his studio in the bohemian and anarchist haven of Greenwich Village.<sup>33</sup> Leah and Crowley became lovers, and she took the magical name Alostrael. A few months later she was pregnant. In autumn 1919, she resigned from her position as a teacher and boarded an Atlantic steamer bound for Europe.<sup>34</sup> On board, she befriended a French governess and widow, Augustine Louise Hélène Shumway (née Fraux, 1894–1990), nicknamed Ninette, traveling with her son, Howard (b. 1916).<sup>35</sup>

Leah and Crowley reunited in France, and their daughter Anne Lea (nicknamed Poupée) was born on February 26, 1920.<sup>36</sup> At this time, Crowley considered locations for a more permanent residence. The *I Ching* indicated the town of Cefalù on the north coast of Sicily.<sup>37</sup> In the company of Ninette and Howard Shumway and Leah's son Hansi, Crowley continued to Cefalù where he rented a villa overlooking the town. Leah and Poupée arrived on April 14, and she and Crowley marked the inauguration of their Abbey of Thelema with an act of sexual magic.<sup>38</sup>

In June 1920, Crowley pondered the question of the Scarlet Woman. He felt Bertha Bruce had failed, and considered whether her successor might be the Hollywood actress Jane Wolfe (1875–1958), with whom he had been corresponding.<sup>39</sup> Crowley arranged to meet her in Tunis, but a miscommunication delayed their encounter.<sup>40</sup> Alone in Tunis, he reassessed. In his diary, Crowley wrote: 'Have I been a blind bat, and is 31-666-31 [Leah] the heroine of CCXX [*Liber AL*]?' He consulted the *I Ching*, which seemed to confirm this inkling. The revelation sent Crowley into a creative euphoria. That night, he stayed awake

30 Hirsig, Passport Application; September 29, in Leah Hirsig, 'Three Chapters in My Life', 1924, b.1., Aleister Crowley Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse.; 'Visitor is Noted Miniature Artist', *St Petersburg Times*, August 9, 1925.

31 See e.g., Carter, 'Becoming the "New Women"', 49–57.

32 Crowley, *Confessions*, 792.

33 *Ibid.*, 792.

34 Hirsig, Passport Application.

35 *Ibid.*, 857.

36 *Ibid.*, 856; Crowley, *Magical Record*, 97.

37 Crowley, *Magical Record*, 98–99.

38 *Ibid.*, 107.

39 *Ibid.*, 131–132.

40 *Ibid.*, 179 ff.



writing a lascivious poem exalting his new chosen one.<sup>41</sup> A few nights later, Crowley worked astral sexual magic with Leah as his envisioned partner, offering the ritual as an ‘act of worship to my Scarlet Whore Alostrael’.<sup>42</sup> On July 8, Crowley and Leah reunited in Palermo, celebrating with a ‘prolonged and most orgiastic’ sex magical working. The object: to mark their ‘nuptial’ after Leah’s ascension to the role of Scarlet Woman.<sup>43</sup>

Leah’s elevation to Scarlet Woman strengthened her importance in the Thelemic movement. She assumed several illustrious titles, including Grand Secretary General of O.T.O., 8°=3° or Magister Templi, Praemonstratrix of A.:A.:, and one of a few persons authorised to reconstitute the Order of Thelemites, a third organisational structure inspired by A.:A.:, in the event of Crowley’s death.<sup>44</sup> During summer 1920, Crowley and Leah worked sexual magic with the aim of Leah learning to use her power, and Crowley took a vow of Holy Obedience to her. Together, they embarked on a series of increasingly transgressive sex magical rituals involving sadomasochism, gender bending, and coprophagia.<sup>45</sup> Leah received a series of messages that Crowley believed originated from Amalantrah, Abuldiz, and Aiwass—the entities that had communicated with previous Scarlet Women. Crowley asked Leah for instructions from Aiwass, and he considered her transmissions superior to those of Roddie Minor and Mary Desti, and comparable to Rose Kelly’s communications of 1904. These proceedings imply Crowley continually ascribed prophetic potential to the Scarlet Woman, though in terms of authority it is significant that the pair interpreted the visions together, with Crowley seemingly often taking a decisive role. Jane Wolfe arrived in the midst of these experiments, beginning her magical training under Crowley’s tutelage.<sup>46</sup>

Tragedy intervened in October 1920, when Poupée died, and the newly pregnant Leah suffered a dangerous miscarriage.<sup>47</sup> After her recovery, the couple resumed their magical work, with the aid of Crowley’s newly arrived disci-

41 Ibid., 192–194; Aleister Crowley, ‘Lea Sublime’, 1920, OS N1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

42 Crowley, *Magical Record*, 200.

43 Ibid., 212.

44 See Cecil Frederick Russell, Letter to Morrill Goddard, September 25, 1922, OTO Archives; Aleister Crowley, ‘The Constitutions of the Order of Thelemites’, OTO Archives; Aleister Crowley, Leah Hirsig, and Norman Mudd, Letter to Adam Gray Murray, August 8, 1924, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London. The Order of Thelemites existed principally on paper during Crowley’s lifetime.

45 Crowley, *Magical Record*, 229–242, *passim*.

46 Ibid., 232, 242–259.

47 Ibid., 280–282; see also Crowley, *Confessions*, 867–868.

ple Cecil Frederick Russell (1897–1987).<sup>48</sup> In late November, Crowley, Russell, and Leah commenced the Cephaloedium Working—a series of magical operations involving invocations of Tahuti and Hermes. The proceedings were also to include a *ménage à trois* between Russell, Crowley, and Hirsig. Russell, however, was not responsive to Crowley’s seduction, and Crowley proclaimed the working a failure on January 20, 1921.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, Russell later commented admiringly on Leah’s ritual proficiency.<sup>50</sup>

The Cephaloedium Working was partly intended to inspire Crowley to pen a satisfactory commentary to *Liber AL*. This task had continued to elude Crowley, who enlisted the assistance of Leah, Russell, and Wolfe.<sup>51</sup> The resulting ‘New’ Comment is a lengthier interpretation of *Liber AL*, which Crowley was nonetheless dissatisfied with.<sup>52</sup> Spring 1921 marked two additional transformations for Crowley and Leah: with her as presiding witness, Crowley took the Oath of an Ipsissimus (the highest degree of A.:A.); and Leah was ceremonially proclaimed Babalon.<sup>53</sup>

May 1922 found Crowley sojourning in England. That summer, he dictated the novel *Diary of a Drug Fiend* to Leah, who transcribed.<sup>54</sup> A tale of drug excess and redemption, the novel features an Abbey of Thelema governed by Crowley’s fictionalised alter ego, Basil King Lamus, with thinly veiled versions of the Abbey’s actual inhabitants. Leah appears in the novel as Lamus’ companion Lala, and she is mentioned in the dedication as ‘Alostrael, Virgin Guardian of the Sangraal’.<sup>55</sup>

Crowley and Leah returned to the Abbey that autumn, which also witnessed the arrival of Crowley’s student Frederick Charles Loveday, alias Raoul, and his wife Betty May (1893–1955). On February 16, 1923, Raoul died after drinking water from a polluted spring.<sup>56</sup> As Crowley was temporarily ill, Leah took

48 Crowley, *Magical Record*, 289–292.

49 Aleister Crowley, ‘The Book of the Cephaloedium Working’, 1920–1921, O.S.A.1., Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

50 Russell, Letter to Morrill Goddard.

51 Crowley, ‘Cephaloedium Working’. See Wolfe, *Cefalù Diaries*, December 20, 1920, for Wolfe’s comments about the Scarlet Woman.

52 The ‘New Comment’ has been published in Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*.

53 Cf. Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 370. Leah’s diaries reference these events cursorily. See April 28, 1924, in Leah Hirsig, ‘Alostrael’s Visions’, 1923–1924, OSDD1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London; and September 28, 1924, in Hirsig, ‘Three Chapters’.

54 Richmond, *Progradior Correspondence*, 94, 100; July 1, in Aleister Crowley, ‘Typescript Diaries’, 1922, OSH3: 32, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

55 Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*.

56 February 23 in Crowley, ‘Typescript Diaries’, OSH3: 33.

charge. At midnight, on the Spring Equinox, she entered the Abbey temple and uttered the Word of the Equinox. This was an important procedure—since 1907, Crowley had selected a ‘Word’ at the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes, which he believed significant to the ensuing half-year. The means by which the Word was rendered differed from one Equinox to another. A.:A.: members in good standing were entitled to the Word, which functioned as a password of affiliation.<sup>57</sup> Crowley ceremonially approved Leah’s declaration from his bedside.<sup>58</sup> This again exemplifies Leah’s ability to enact authority as Scarlet Woman, as well as how this authority was linked to Crowley’s favour.

In the wake of Loveday’s death, Crowley was expelled from Italy by order of the Italian authorities. He and Leah travelled to Tunis, where they were soon joined by Norman Mudd (1889–1934), a disciple of Crowley’s as well as a Cambridge-educated mathematician, who became Leah’s close friend.<sup>59</sup> In Tunis, Crowley returned to the conundrum of the comment, in whose production he believed Mudd and Leah should take crucial roles.<sup>60</sup> Crowley decided to withdraw temporarily from the practical affairs of the Thelemic community, leaving its management in Leah’s and Mudd’s hands.<sup>61</sup> On August 30, Crowley dictated the ‘Comment K’, a brief comment based on a meditation on each verse of *Liber AL*, in which the Beast and Scarlet Woman are described as ‘the sole authorized exponents’ of the doctrine of Thelema.<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting that this passage seems to connote equivalent authority for both offices. However, the ‘Comment K’ appears to have left very little mark on the Thelemic movement; I have not found any evidence that Crowley distributed it among his followers, and Thelemic doctrine during his lifetime was clearly interpreted in a way that permitted the Beast to appoint and depose the Scarlet Women according to his own judgment.

In Tunis, Crowley worried that Leah’s continuing ill health was caused by magical mismanagement. He asked Mudd for advice, and Mudd responded that Crowley had erred in confining Leah to what he felt was a ‘semi-sequestered life of general service and magickal cooperation’, when *Liber AL* implied the Scarlet Woman should be ‘a second, almost independent, rock of offence in the world’. Mudd, who had fallen in love with Leah, also suggested she

57 See e.g., Richmond, *Progradior Correspondence*, 71; ‘Words of the Equinox’, n.d., NS 92, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

58 N.d., Crowley, ‘Typescript Diaries’, OSH3: 33.

59 Crowley, *Magical Diaries*, 72.

60 *Ibid.*, 67–69.

61 *Ibid.*, 66, 82.

62 *Ibid.*, 136–138.

should fulfil the commandment to be 'adulterous' by being married to Crowley, and committing adultery with other men.<sup>63</sup> Though Crowley had previously speculated the role of Scarlet Woman may require legal adultery, he was not impressed by Mudd's suggestion.<sup>64</sup>

In October, Leah and Crowley took a magical retirement to Nefta, during which Crowley made a fresh attempt at the comment, with Leah's help. The resulting 'Djeridensis Comment' is named after the Hotel Djerid where they were staying. In contrast to the 'Comment K', Crowley in the 'Djeridensis Comment' defines the Scarlet Woman as 'any woman that transmits my Solar Word and Being', highlighting both transferability and the dependence of the office on Crowley's authority.<sup>65</sup> This did not impact the prophetic potential of the Scarlet Woman's role: over the following weeks, Leah experienced a series of visions, which informed Crowley's work on the comment. Crowley believed she was in direct contact with the Secret Chiefs, and she conversed with Aiwass about passages in *Liber AL*.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Crowley had decisive authority in terms of interpreting the visions. For example, one of Leah's communications suggested an alteration to the original text of *Liber AL*, which was never incorporated.<sup>67</sup>

In late December, Crowley embarked for France. Leah was delighted to return to Cefalù, where she poured herself into magical work with Ninette Shumway, Crowley's student Adam Gray Murray, and Ninette's lover Arturo Sabatini.<sup>68</sup> Under the influence of cannabis, Leah wrote an invocation to Ra-Hoor-Khuit, which she recited aloud for 11 consecutive days.<sup>69</sup> In March 1924, Leah joined Crowley in France, where they spent the summer.

63 Norman Mudd, Letter to Aleister Crowley, October 11, 1923, OS D10, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

64 N.d. January/February 1922, in Crowley, 'Typescript Diaries', OSH3: 29.

65 Aleister Crowley, 'The Commentary Called D(jeridensis) Provisionally by 666', 1923, OS 16, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London. See also Crowley, *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 307.

66 October 20–November 11, 1923, in Aleister Crowley, 'Typescript Diaries', OSH4: 44, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London; Hirsig, 'Alostrael's Visions'.

67 November 3, 1923, in Hirsig, 'Alostrael's Visions'; cf. *Liber AL* 1:45.

68 Leah Hirsig, Letters to Aleister Crowley, January 19 and February 11, 1924; and to Blanche Conn, February 17, 1924, all in OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London. See also February 10–19, March 20 in Hirsig, 'Alostrael's Visions'.

69 February 8–19, 1924, in Hirsig, 'Alostrael's Visions'.

## 5 The Passing of the Torch: Leah Hirsig as the Former Scarlet Woman

On 16 September 1924, Crowley marked the beginning of a new era with a novel *Scarlet Woman*: Dorothy Olsen (1892–1963). For Crowley, Olsen was a revitalising influence who transformed ‘death-magnetism’ into ‘new Life’. So, on September 20, he did what he claimed was ‘the only possible course, though seemingly inhumane’; he left Leah.<sup>70</sup> Distraught, Leah sought to accept the situation. She wrote to Crowley, renouncing the title of *Scarlet Woman* and passing it to the “‘Scarlet Concubine of his desire’, the daughter of Babalon’. She signed the note as Babalon.<sup>71</sup>

Leah desired a ceremony to mark the changing of the guard, and it appears she saw the end of hers and Crowley’s relationship close to the Equinox as significant. She recalled that the Word of the Equinox five years previously (in 1919) had been the double word *Ahitha-Alostrael*, linking the magical names of Roddie Minor and herself. Thus, she felt the current Equinox ceremony should be conducted with herself and Olsen, and called on her and Crowley. When the new lovers did not materialise, Leah reasoned that her own letter of renunciation provided the requisite link. Nevertheless, she stressed that the title of *Scarlet Woman* must be transferred voluntarily.<sup>72</sup>

Curiously, Crowley seemingly did not consider *Ahitha-Alostrael* the Word for autumn 1919 (though it may have been one of the oracles he usually took at the same time).<sup>73</sup> Regardless, Leah’s emphasis on the connection between herself and a previous *Scarlet Woman* is significant. In requesting a ceremonial acknowledgment of the link between herself and Olsen, and in writing a letter explicitly transferring her title, Leah proposed that a new *Scarlet Woman*’s authority was contingent on the approval of the old one. Ostensibly the first *Scarlet Woman* to claim as much, her request challenged what appears to have been generally accepted among the early Thelemites: the gods chose Crowley; Crowley chose the *Scarlet Woman*. In other words, she suggested the *Scarlet Woman* role should not solely be defined by Crowley’s whim. Though Jane Wolfe had previously questioned why the *Scarlet Woman* could not be ‘as unique and designated an individual’ as Crowley, the other Thelemites (including Wolfe) appear mostly to have accepted Crowley’s decision.<sup>74</sup>

70 September 16–20, 1924, in Crowley, ‘Typescript Diaries’, OSH4: 48.

71 September 21, in Hirsig, ‘Three Chapters’.

72 September 21 and 28, 1924, in Hirsig, ‘Three Chapters’.

73 ‘Words of the Equinox’.

74 Wolfe, *Cefalù Diaries*, December 20, 1920.

After Crowley and Olsen embarked for Tunis, Leah summoned Norman Mudd to Paris. He arrived on September 30, and they became lovers.<sup>75</sup> Over the coming days, Leah tried to understand her relationship to Crowley, Mudd, Olsen, and the previous Scarlet Women. She reasoned that Olsen and Mudd were hers and Crowley's magical children, and that she should devote herself to her 'son' as Crowley had done to her 'daughter'.<sup>76</sup> She and Mudd conducted a magical wedding, making love and feasting on an assortment of foods, and Leah created a seal of Babalon, affixing it to Mudd's penis.<sup>77</sup>

In early November, Mudd returned to London.<sup>78</sup> At his behest, Leah assumed a short-lived mentorship of an A.:A.: probationer, Ida de Houghton Crooke (b. 1866).<sup>79</sup> Throughout this period, Leah maintained an almost daily practice of meditation, ritual magic, and study of Crowley's writings.<sup>80</sup> She consecrated herself as the bride of Chaos, swearing her devotion to the cause of Thelema, and reaffirmed her Magister Templi and Scarlet Woman oaths.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, Leah seemingly had not relinquished the notion of being the Scarlet Woman. To Mudd, she wrote of her 'Formula' as the Scarlet Woman authorising her to 'do what I bloody well please *always with the aid and approval of* [Ra-Hoor-Khui]'.<sup>82</sup> Referring to the god of *Liber AL's* third chapter as the guarantor of Leah's role can be read as an attempted claim to independent charismatic authority.

As a result of Leah's dismissal, her status in Thelema changed radically. While the role of Scarlet Woman arguably imbued her with a form of secondary charisma, her loss of influence attendant to her dismissal from scarlet womanhood indicates she did not wield independent charismatic authority. Instead, her leadership was contingent on Crowley's favour. In (re)claiming the title of Babalon for herself and Olsen as her magical daughter, Leah constructed a nar-

75 September 30, 1924, in Hirsig, 'Three Chapters'.

76 October 1–2, 1924, in Hirsig, 'Three Chapters'.

77 October 4–6, 8, 1924, in Hirsig, 'Three Chapters'.

78 November 3, 1924, in Hirsig, 'Three Chapters'.

79 November 7 and December 3, Hirsig, 'Three Chapters'; Leah Hirsig, Letter to Norman Mudd, November 9, 1924, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

80 January 6 and 11, 1925, Leah Hirsig, 'Diary of ? Known on Earth as Leah Hirsig, Dec 29/24 e.v.', 1924, OS DD3, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

81 December 14 and 20, 1924, in Leah Hirsig, 'New Magical Record', OS DD1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London, and December 29, 1924 and January 17, 1925, in Hirsig, 'Diary of ?'. Leah appears to have been the first to take an explicit oath as Scarlet Woman. It was likely of her own design.

82 Leah Hirsig, Letter to Norman Mudd, December 4, 1924, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London. Emphasis in original.

rative that made sense of her own role, placing herself almost on equal terms with Crowley as the Beast, and decidedly above the new Scarlet Woman in rank. Her construction of a lineage, and emphasis on her relationship to her predecessors and successor can be interpreted as an attempt to stress a traditional (although this tradition was very new) basis for the Scarlet Woman's authority, lessening its dependence on romantic-sexual proximity to Crowley. However, there is no evidence the other Thelemites (perhaps with the exception of Mudd) accepted her logic. In the context of Thelema, the Scarlet Woman's authority was clearly contingent on Crowley's approval, and Leah's removal from this office correspondingly diminished her ability to impact Thelemic doctrine, including the notion of the Scarlet Woman.

## 6 From Disciple to Apostate: Leah in Thelema 1925–1930

In February 1925, Leah joined Crowley and Olsen in Tunis.<sup>83</sup> That spring, Olsen experienced a series of magical visions guided and transcribed by Hirsig and Crowley's student William George Barron, by whom Leah soon became pregnant.<sup>84</sup> When Crowley and Olsen left for Europe, Leah lacked the funds to follow, remaining in Tunis. Though frustrated with Crowley, she continued to aid his cause and maintained her magical practice. She sought the guidance of her Holy Guardian Angel, studied the Holy Books of Thelema, and conducted numerous autoerotic sex magical operations with the aim of returning Barron to her side (seemingly unsuccessfully). Burning incense of red sandal and benzoin, she performed the Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram and reaffirmed her 8°=3° Oath.<sup>85</sup>

In summer 1925, Leah joined Crowley, Mudd, and Olsen in Weida, Germany, to defend Crowley's position at a gathering of occult leaders, who held mixed feelings towards him. In August, Leah was one among eight signatories to 'Ein Zeugnis der Suchenden' (Testament of a Seeker), a declaration aimed at Theosophists and announcing Crowley as the 'Teacher of the World', also including Olsen and Mudd.<sup>86</sup> This move can be interpreted as an attempt to

83 February 3–5, in Hirsig, 'Diary of ?'.

84 Dorothy Olsen, Aleister Crowley, and Leah Hirsig, 'Visions of Dorothy Olsen', OSDD5, and Crowley, 'Typescript Diaries', OSN4: 48, both in Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

85 Leah Hirsig, 'Diary of Alostrael 31-666-31, Started May 8, 1925', OS DD4, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

86 Quoted in Birven, 'Moderne Okkultisten', 261–262.

build on the publicity generated by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater in their campaign to promote Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) as World Teacher, inspired by the Buddhist notion of the coming bodhisattva, Maitreya.<sup>87</sup>

Following the conference, Mudd and Leah stayed on in Leipzig. On December 4, 1925, Leah gave birth to Barron's son, Alexander. That winter, Mudd came to doubt Crowley's prophet status, and revoked his signature to 'Ein Zeugnis' in February 1926.<sup>88</sup> In response to Mudd's persistent critiques, Crowley penned the 'Tunis Comment', warning against discussing the contents of *Liber AL*. In so doing, Crowley emphasised his claim to sole charismatic authority by limiting opportunities for dissent. Leah tried to placate Crowley, who instead started viewing both her and Mudd as potentially treacherous, possibly feeling Leah's failure to disavow Mudd constituted an implicit challenge to his authority.<sup>89</sup>

In spring 1926, Leah journeyed on to Switzerland to stay with her relatives. The extent of her magical practice over the following year is unclear, though she remained in correspondence with Crowley, Wolfe, Shumway, and Mudd.<sup>90</sup> She continued to receive the Word of the Equinox, indicating she was still considered an A.:A.: member in good standing, and Crowley gifted her a special copy of *Liber AL* with the comment for her 43rd birthday.<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, by August of 1927, Leah's faith in Crowley was faltering, and she asked him for evidence of his prophet status and for the divine origin of *Liber AL*.<sup>92</sup> Crowley responded that she had violated the Tunis Comment, and was cut off from all communication until she reaffirmed her loyalty to him, circulating this message among the other Thelemites.<sup>93</sup> This exemplifies how the Tunis Comment could be invoked to reinforce Crowley's charismatic monopoly. In

87 See e.g., Santucci, 'The Theosophical Society'.

88 Norman Mudd, Letter to Martha Küntzel, February 24, 1926, NS 116a, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.

89 Leah Hirsig, Letter to Aleister Crowley, March 17, 1926, OS E12, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute; Aleister Crowley, Letter to Karl J. Germer, February 22, 1926, OTO Archives.

90 E.g., Leah Hirsig, Letter to Jane Wolfe, October 28, 1926, OS E12, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

91 Leah Hirsig, Letter to Aleister Crowley, May 23, 1926, OS E12, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

92 Leah Hirsig, Letters to Aleister Crowley, July 28 and August 4–5, 1927, OS E12, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.

93 Aleister Crowley, Draft of circular letter, August 8, 1927, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London. See also Aleister Crowley, Letter to Karl J. Germer, August 8, 1927, OTO Archives.



response, Leah returned her copy of *Liber AL*, circulating a letter (similar to Mudd's) retracting her signature to 'Ein Zeugnis'.<sup>94</sup>

Leah effectively vanished from the movement after this interchange. In December 1929, she formally renounced all claims to the title of Scarlet Woman in a circular.<sup>95</sup> Her final known communication to Crowley (signed by her, but written in Mudd's handwriting) is dated September 6, 1930, and addressed from Escorial, Spain. In this letter, Leah declared all of her previous vows to Crowley 'defunct', and demanded he perform a ceremony absolving her of obligations to him.<sup>96</sup>

There are scant records of Leah's movements over the following years. She eventually settled in Bern, Switzerland, resuming her career as a teacher of music and English. There is no indication she had any contact with the Thelemites after 1930, though she maintained at least one habit from those days: using astrological glyphs to mark the days of the week in her diary.<sup>97</sup> Leah Hirsig died in Meiringen, Switzerland on February 22, 1975.

## 7 Discussion: Authority and Proximity in Early Thelema

Emerging religions have often offered heightened opportunities for female leadership.<sup>98</sup> This applies to many of the occult orders of the *fin-de-siècle*, including OTO and A.:A.:. Many of Crowley's most important disciples during the twentieth century were women, who challenged contemporary norms of feminine respectability by pursuing higher education, working for a living, travelling widely, eschewing nuclear family life, and taking numerous lovers. However, Leah's case illustrates how Thelema—like other forms of occultism at this time—was not immune to gendered inequalities.<sup>99</sup> The Scarlet Woman's authority could be questioned on account of her gender, and the early female Thelemites grappled with reproductive inequalities such as lack of access to

94 Leah Hirsig, Letter to Aleister Crowley, August 18–19, 1927, OS E12, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

95 Leah Hirsig, Letter to Aleister Crowley et al, December 1929, NS 74, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

96 Leah Hirsig, Letter to Aleister Crowley, September 6, 1930, OS EEL, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

97 Leah Hirsig, Diary February 1973, private collection.

98 E.g., Palmer, *Moon Sisters*; Wessinger, *Women's Leadership*; Vance, *Women in New Religions*.

99 Cf. Dixon, *Divine Feminine*; Lowry, *Invisible Hosts*, *passim*; Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, 91–92, *passim*.

safe and reliable contraception and abortions as well as the social stigma facing unwed mothers in the early twentieth century.

The case of The Family International, indicated in the introduction, illustrates how romantic closeness can inspire doctrinal evolution in religious movements. Laura Vance notes that the movement has emphasised heterosexual couples in its leadership structure from the outset.<sup>100</sup> David Berg's relationship with Karen Zerby (alias Maria) prompted his revelation about the 'Old' and 'New' churches, which accorded sacredness to Berg's divorce and remarriage.<sup>101</sup> In Crowley's case, the dissolution of his marriage to Rose appears to have prompted a re-interpretation of the Scarlet Woman as a transferable office.

While Crowley's teachings around the Scarlet Woman remained largely consistent from 1911 on, the role of Scarlet Woman meant different things in practice. Some Scarlet Women, such as Jeanne Foster and Roddie Minor, had a short-lived involvement in Thelema, while others—such as Rose Kelly and Mary Desti—had a stronger impact. The longevity and extent of Leah's influence in the Thelemic movement surpassed that of most previous bearers of the title, as well as of those who came after.<sup>102</sup> As a leader within the movement, she issued instructions that the other Thelemites obeyed; made pronouncements that influenced Crowley's magical teachings and practice; and instructed other Thelemites in magic. This indicates the authority Leah was able to wield as Scarlet Woman was not only grounded in the role itself (as conceived by Crowley prior to his relationship with Leah), but that her own personality, skills, and interests made her adept at inhabiting and formulating this role as a source of authority. The particular dynamics of Leah's and Crowley's relationship also appear to have prompted him to assign a more prominent organisational position to the Scarlet Woman during her term.

Wallis has indicated the importance of the 'committed elite' to charismatic leadership. He notes the reciprocity characterising such relationships; the inner circle 'secure recognition for the leader', and thus for themselves, as their significance is enhanced by their closeness to the leader.<sup>103</sup> In early Thelema, Crowley was considered prophet and mouthpiece of the gods, thus presenting a textbook case of Weberian charismatic authority. Crowley relied on a cadre

100 Vance, *Women in New Religions*, 82, 96, 99–100.

101 Cf. Wallis, 'Social Construction of Charisma', 31; Chancellor, 'Family for the Twenty-First Century'.

102 E.g., Dorothy Olsen (1924–1926), Maria Theresa Ferrari de Miramar (1929–1930), Hanni Jaeger (1930–1931), Bertha Busch (1931–1932/1933), and Pearl Brooksmith (1933–1936).

103 Wallis, 'Social Construction of Charisma', 38.

of dedicated followers who supported his charismatic claim, some of whom he singled out as special. In this way, some of the Scarlet Women wielded a sort of extended charisma, though their influence, as I have stressed, was contingent on Crowley's favour. In other words, the Scarlet Woman's role did not entail independent charisma, but rather what I propose to call proximal authority, that is, authority ascribed to or enacted by a person based on their real or perceived relational closeness to a leader.

As closeness to the leader is determinative of proximal authority, the latter is inevitably conditioned. As noted above, Leah's claim that her own voluntary surrender of the Scarlet Woman title was necessary to guarantee the passing of the torch can be interpreted as an attempt to contest Crowley's right to depose the Scarlet Woman on a whim. By invoking a link to previous Scarlet Women and suggesting a ritual of transferral, Leah treated (or indicated the possibility of) the role as being routinised via tradition. If effected, her suggestions would potentially have mitigated Crowley's decisive power in the matter of the Scarlet Woman's identity, and the importance of relational proximity to the title. Crucially, however, neither Crowley nor Olsen worried about Leah's approval. As Leah's relational proximity to Crowley weakened, so did her ability to issue commands that were heeded, and Crowley's appointment of his new Scarlet Woman was largely accepted by the others, and did not result in a splintering of the movement. This parallels the case of David Berg's first wife Jane.

Returning to the first parallel example from the introduction, we can note that Sarah Churchill's status as the Queen's favourite allowed her to transcend many hindrances to women's political influence during Anne's reign. In fact, historian Frances Harris notes that the Duchess of Marlborough was 'better placed than any female subject in England at the beginning of Anne's reign ... to exercise influence'.<sup>104</sup> In this way, proximal authority may rupture or override other stratifications of power to the advantage of the leader's confidante, who may be perceived as a legitimate emissary of the leader, or be ascribed privileged insight, despite lacking access to traditional or rational-legal claims to authority. Though the possibility of proximal authority is not limited to women,<sup>105</sup> the concept may be especially productive for understanding how

104 Harris, *Passion for Government*, 4.

105 A historical example of a man gaining influence in a similar way is the Swedish nobleman Gustav Adolf Reuterholm (1756–1813), who wielded immense power 1792–1796 in Sweden by virtue of being the favourite of Duke-regent Charles (later Charles XIII of Sweden), who acted as regent on behalf of his nephew, Gustav IV Adolph, during this period. After Gustav IV claimed the throne in 1796, Reuterholm's position declined. See Lekeby, *Gustaviansk mystik*.

members of marginalised groups can enact agency. For instance, where formal patterns of authority are structured by gender and class (or birth), close relations with the leader can be a pathway to influence for a select few.

Harris argues that Sarah's mistake was not to 'recognise that the essential prerequisite' for her influence was 'her personal friendship with the Queen'; consequently, she lost both.<sup>106</sup> As is similarly illustrated by the cases of Leah and Jane Berg, and as I have stressed above, proximal authority is precarious; the social milieu is primarily loyal to the original leader, whose changed attitude to their confidante can cause immediate loss of status. Indeed, the currently chosen may advance their status by distancing themselves from the leader's former favourite, possibly explaining why Crowley's effective excommunication of Leah after she questioned his charismatic claim in 1927 was not challenged. Rather than weaken his status, Leah's denouncement of Crowley was seemingly accepted as evidence of her own unworthiness.

Wallis' assertion regarding how 'elite' followers secure their own influence by supporting the leader's claim can also be true in the inverse, as viewed through the lens of proximal authority. A successful attempt to weaken the original leader weakens the efficacy of relational proximity as a legitimising rationale for authority—the proximal claim, as it were. Thus, it can be difficult for proximal authority to transcend the leader it derives from. However, it is not impossible. Kate Bowler has shown how wives of Evangelical megachurch pastors in the U.S. navigate ideals of femininity and gender complementarity, and can gain a sort of borrowed power in communities that, generally, do not see women as fit to preach. Though women are rarely the main preachers of Evangelical megachurches, Bowler observes a notable exception being some widows of megachurch pastors, who take over their husbands' ministry without being perceived to violate the generally conservative gender roles of the movement.<sup>107</sup>

A parallel example can be seen in The Family International: over time, Maria became sufficiently prominent to issue her own doctrinal pronouncements. After Berg's death in 1994, she effectively became the spiritual leader of the movement, alongside her partner, Peter Amsterdam (Steven Douglas Kelly, b. 1951).<sup>108</sup> Maria's authority has been transformed further after Berg's death, one of her main innovations being to emphasise the importance of prophetic ability for each member. Frequently, Maria assigns individuals to channel prophetic

106 Harris, *Passion for Government*, 4. After Anne's demise, Sarah and her husband regained favour at the court of King George I.

107 Bowler, *Preacher's Wife*, *passim*.

108 Chancellor, 'Family for the Twenty-First Century'.

cies pertaining to topics she decides merit exploration, asking follow-up questions and discerning which revelations should be implemented.<sup>109</sup> In 2010, Maria and Peter Amsterdam dismantled the movement's communal living structure in favour of online organisation in a process known as 'the Reboot'.<sup>110</sup> This evinces how proximal authority can sometimes be transformed into more stable forms of power when the "primary" leader passes away, so long as the latter and their favourite are still on good terms, or perceived to be. Had Crowley died while he and Leah were lovers, Leah may have decided to enact her authority to re-convene the Order of Thelemites. If so, her authority within the movement may have become more stable, though this remains hypothetical.

In this article, I have proposed the concept of proximal authority, based on a case study of how the temporary chosen one of a charismatic esoteric leader gained a precarious yet influential position. Through brief parallels to other contexts, I have indicated the broader applicability of this concept. Proximal authority is neither unique to Thelema nor exclusive to the (female) confidantes of charismatic (male) leaders; it can derive from closeness to other forms of authority, and is not gender-specific. Further exploration is needed to determine how the concept can shed light on patterns of leadership and its informal and unstable structuration via affectual ties in other forms of esotericism, new religious movements, and other social contexts.

After Crowley's death, Thelema has transformed into an international milieu of several thousand, comprising formalised orders where authority is legitimised mostly according to traditional or rational-legal logics, and loosely connected groups and solitary practitioners. Over the twentieth century, interpretations of the Scarlet Woman have shifted, partly through the influence of feminism and the increasing visibility of women as producers of esoteric thought and ritual. Today, the term Scarlet Woman is not only used in a historical sense to connote the women Crowley ascribed the title to, but in reference to a magical role theoretically open to any woman (or in some cases, any person), or as an ideal of feminine sexual liberation, and which is not contingent on any other magician's approval.<sup>111</sup> This highlights how authority in esoteric groups is not structured in a vacuum, and can be both restricted and enhanced by societal gender logics. It is unclear to which extent proximal authority is important in contemporary Thelema and related esoteric currents, and I hope that future research will explore such questions.

109 Shepherd & Shepherd, 'Grassroots Prophecy in The Family International'.

110 Borowik, 'From Radical Communalism to Virtual Community'.

111 Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*, 203–320, 328–331.

## Acknowledgments

This article has been funded by Vetenskapsrådet (Swedish Research Council), as part of the project 'Power through Closeness? Female Authority and Agency in a Male-Led New Religion' (reg. nr. 2018-00439).

## Bibliography

### *Unpublished Works*

- 'Words of the Equinox', n.d., NS 92, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Board of Education of the City School District of New York, Record extract, October 15, 1980, OTO Archives.
- Crowley, Aleister, 'Lea Sublime', 1920, OS N1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Crowley, Aleister, 'The Book of the Cephaloedium Working', 1920-1921, O.S.A.1., Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Crowley, Aleister, 'The Commentary Called D(jeridensis) Provisionally by 666', 1923, OS 16, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Crowley, Aleister, 'The Constitutions of the Order of Thelemites', OTO Archives.
- Crowley, Aleister, Draft of circular letter, August 8, 1927, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Crowley, Aleister, Leah Hirsig, and Norman Mudd, Letter to Adam Gray Murray, August 8, 1924, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Crowley, Aleister, Letters to Karl J. Germer, February 22, 1926, and August 8, 1927, OTO Archives.
- Crowley, Aleister, Typescript Diaries, OS H3-H4, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, 'Alostrael's Visions', 'Magical Diary of Alostrael 31-666-31', and 'New Magical Record', 1923-1924, OS DD1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, 'Diary of ? Known on Earth as Leah Hirsig, Dec 29/24 e.v.', 1924, OS DD3, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, 'The Magical Diary of Babalon, September 25 to October 28, 1924', 1924, OS DD2, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, 'Three Chapters in My Life', 1924, b.1., Aleister Crowley Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse.
- Hirsig, Leah, Diary 1973, private collection.
- Hirsig, Leah, Letter to Aleister Crowley et al, December 1929, NS 74, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.

- Hirsig, Leah, Letter to Blanche Conn, February 17, 1924, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, Letter to Jane Wolfe, October 28, 1926, OS E12, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, Letter to Norman Mudd, November 9, December 4, 1924, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, Letters to Aleister Crowley, January 19, February 11, 1924; September 6, 1930, OS EE1, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, Letters to Aleister Crowley, March 17, 1926, May 23, 1926, July 28, August 4–5, 18–19, 1927, OS E12, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Hirsig, Leah, U.S. Passport Application, October 14, 1919, Ancestry.com. *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795–1925* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007.
- Hirsig, Leah, 'Diary of Alostrael 31-666-31, Started May 8, 1925', OS DD4, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Mudd, Norman, Letter to Aleister Crowley, October 11, 1923, OS D10, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Mudd, Norman, Letter to Martha Küntzel, February 24, 1926, NS 116a, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.
- Olsen, Dorothy, Aleister Crowley, and Leah Hirsig, 'Visions of Dorothy Olsen', OS DD5, Gerald J. Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute, London.
- Passenger list, St Laurent, 1885, Ancestry.com, *New York, Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820–1957* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.
- Russell, Cecil Frederick, Letter to Morrill Goddard, September 25, 1922, OTO Archives.

### *Published Works*

- 'Visitor is Noted Miniature Artist', *St Petersburg Times*, August 9, 1925.
- Appelros, E., 'Religion och intersektionalitet', *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 26:2/3 (2005), 69–80.
- Birven, H., 'Moderne Okkultisten und Magier: Meine Begegnung mit dem Meister Theion', *Hain der Isis* 8/9 (1930), 261–262.
- Borowik, C., 'From Radical Communalism to Virtual Community: The Digital Transformation of the Family International', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 22:1 (2018), 59–86.
- Bowler, K., *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2019.
- Carter, P., 'Becoming the "New Women": The Educational Rights Campaigns of New York City Schoolteachers', in Altenbaugh, R. (ed.), *The Teacher's Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth Century America*, 39–57, London: Flamer Press 1992.

- Chancellor, J., 'A Family for the Twenty-First Century', in: Lewis, J.R., and Petersen, J.A. (eds.), *Controversial New Religions*, 2nd. ed., 13–38, New York: Oxford University Press 2014.
- Crowley, A., 'Liber Legis. The Comment', *Equinox* 1:7 (1912), 387–400.
- Crowley, A., 'Review of Heavenly Bridegrooms. By Theodore Schroeder and Ida Craddock', in: Crowley, A. (ed.), *The Blue Equinox: The Equinox Vol. III No. I*, 280–281, San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser 2007.
- Crowley, A., *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser Inc. 1970.
- Crowley, A., *Magick: Liber ABA*, ed. Hymenaeus Beta, York Beach, ME: S. Weiser 1994.
- Crowley, A., *The Book of the Law: Liber Al vel Legis: With a Facsimile of the Manuscript as Received by Aleister and Rose Edith Crowley on April 8, 9, 10, 1904 e.v. Centennial Edition*, York Beach: Red Wheel/Weiser 2004.
- Crowley, A., *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, London: Arkana 1989.
- Crowley, A., *The Equinox of the Gods*, London: OTO 1936.
- Crowley, A., *ΘΕΛΗΜΑ [Thelema]*, vol. 3, London: privately printed 1909.
- Crowley, A., *The Magical and Philosophical Commentaries on The Book of the Law*, ed. J. Symonds and K. Grant, Montreal: 93 Publishing 1974.
- Crowley, A., *The Magical Diaries of Aleister Crowley: Tunisia 1923*, ed. S. Skinner, York Beach, ME: S. Weiser 1996.
- Crowley, A., *The Magical Record of the Beast 666: The Diaries of Aleister Crowley 1914–1920*, ed. J. Symonds and K. Grant, Montreal: 93 Publishing 1974.
- Crowley, A., *The Vision and the Voice: With Commentary and Other Papers: The Equinox, Volume IV Number II*, ed. Hymenaeus Beta, York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser 1998.
- Dixon, J., *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2001.
- Geertz, C., 'Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power' in: Aron, R., Shils, E., Ben-David, J., Nichols Clark, T., *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of Edward Shils*, 150–171, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1977.
- Harris, F., *A Passion for Government: The Life of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991.
- Hedenborg White, M., *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism*, New York: Oxford University Press 2020.
- Kaczynski, R., *Panic in Detroit: Blue Equinox Centennial Edition*, n.p.: R. Kaczynski 2019.
- Kaczynski, R., *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, 2nd. ed., Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2010.
- Lekeby, K., *Gustaviansk mystik*, Stockholm: Vertigo Förlag 2010.
- Lowry, E., *Invisible Hosts: Performing the Nineteenth-Century Spirit Medium's Autobiography*, Albany: SUNY Press 2017.



- Owen, A., *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004.
- Palmer, S., *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press 1994.
- Reuss, T., ed., *I.N.R.I./Jubilaeums-Ausgabe Der Oriflamme*, Berlin; London 1912.
- Richmond, K., ed., *The Progradior Correspondence: Letters by Aleister Crowley, Frank Bennett, C.S. Jones, & Others*, York Beach, Me.: Teitan Press 2009.
- Santucci, J., 'The Theosophical Society', in: Hanegraaff, W.J. (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, 1114–1123, Leiden: Brill 2006.
- Shepherd, G., & Shepherd, G., 'Grassroots Prophecy in the Family International', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10:4 (2007), 38–71.
- Vance, L., *Women in New Religions*, New York: New York University Press 2015.
- Wallis, R., 'The Social Construction of Charisma', *Social Compass* 29:1 (1982), 25–39.
- Weber, M., *Economy and Society, Volume 2*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press 1978.
- Weber, M., *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, transl. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, New York: Free Press 1947 [1922].
- Wessinger, C., *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2007.
- Wolfe, J., *The Cefalù Diaries 1920–1923*, Sacramento: Temple of the Silver Star 2017.