

VISIONS OF FREEDOM, PRACTICES OF THE “FLESH”: A PERFORMATIVE APPROACH TO THE THELEMIC GNOSTIC MASS AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RECONFIGURATIONS

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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ABSTRACT

Taking into consideration the emergency of new esoteric religiosities and ritual practices from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, that is, a set of magical-religious practices and discourses which represents Western's rejected knowledge, New Age movement being its main representative, this article aims to analyze the thelemic gnostic mass and its contemporary reconfigurations as performances that allow those who practice them an active transformation of the self and of the world, establishing a being-in-the-world according to values like individual and sexual freedom. The gnostic mass is one of the main rituals of *Thelema*, magical-religious system founded and developed by Aleister Crowley since 1904 in England. In order to make this analysis the critical proposals by Ernesto de Martino regarding crisis of presence and religious reintegration; by Silvia Mancini

KEYWORDS
Thelema; Magic;
Esotericism;
Body; Ritual
performance.

on altered states of consciousness, and by Stanley Tambiah and Victor Turner on performative analysis of ritual will be utilized.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to reflect on the possibility of analyzing the ritual practices that emerge in this cultural context of the late 19th century and that extend to the present day as performances that point to a resignification of the group categories of being-in-the-world through of values worked through mythical-ritual symbolism (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012) and altered states of consciousness (Mancini 2018), promoting agency over the world through the transformation of the self – the body – and the world . I will use the Gnostic Mass and its contemporary reconfigurations, which are the result of my ethnographic observations since 2018, as the theme of this argument. It is one of the main rites, and one of the only ones that have a public version, of Thelema, a magical-religious system founded and developed by Aleister Crowley from 1904 in England. I chose this case study due to the deficiency of academic production, especially Brazilian, on Esoterism and one of its historical stages – Occultism, perhaps because of an academic prejudice on the subject. This article intends to be an impulse for new studies in the area in the light of Anthropology.

First, I will discuss the historical context of the emergence of Esotericism. Then I will make some notes on Thelema. Then, I will present my theoretical-methodological options for the analysis of these ritual practices. Finally, I will describe my ethnographic observations on the aforementioned rituals and articulate them with what was discussed in the previous section, resulting in an analysis that privileges the idea of crisis of presence (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012) as provocative of a ritual performance that promotes a being-in-the-world according to values such as sexual freedom.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SCIENCE, MAGIC AND RELIGION BETWEEN THE 15TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

The twentieth century in the West witnessed the emergence of different religious currents. The apparent (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012) disenchantment of the world elaborated by Weber (1920/2016) was put in check as magico-religious currents did not stop flourishing despite the rise of science as a sieve legitimizing objective reality, putting in the background – that of alterity – other rationalities that allow different forms of world conception¹.

1. There was, in fact, a rationalization of spheres of action from the 17th century onwards in Europe, which allowed the capitalist system to take root. However, this is not why the world was totally “disenchanted”: magic and religion never ceased to be present in social life, they were just delegitimized and relegated to the sphere of the private or the space of radical alterity.

If we go back in time, in the 15th century, during the Renaissance, the production of alterity – of the conceptions of human and non-human, of barbarism and civilization – due to overseas expansion, formulated with more “property” the categories of science, magic and religion, marking its “difference”: “we are religion, faith, and the repository of science; the other is magic”. This production of the other, non-human, barbaric, has also affected the way the West relates to science, magic and religion. However, in the 15th and 16th centuries, magic, religion and science walked together: scientific production had as one of its main occupations to prove the existence of God and the Holy Christian Trinity. The appropriation of magic by the literate layer of the population at the time also served these purposes, see the great treatises on magic of the time – otherwise, magic was considered heresy and that is where the question of hunting folk magic or dissidents from magic comes in. “Intellectual”/esoteric because they threatened the Church’s legitimate monopoly of magic, for example (Thomas 1971). Even the recovery of ancient magical currents, such as the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Chaldeans, were only socially accepted if they fit into the spectrum of proof of Christian discursive practices (Hanegraaff 2012, Yates 1964/1995). Hermeticism² was a great exponent of these concerns.

In the sixteenth century, however, the Protestant Reformation brought about a change in this relationship through the attempt to exclude all magical content present in Christianity, such as the Eucharist, the cult of relics, prayers (Hanegraaff 2012). The concept of religion that was emerging is radically opposed to that of magic, which is often conceived as a diabolical, evil practice – hence the emergence of the concepts of white magic and black magic. Religion becomes a matter of faith, of the pact established with God (Pompa 2008); magic, in bad faith. The rationalization of spheres of action proposed by Weber (1920/2016) begins to take shape in this period. Capitalism itself develops through categories of a religious order, that is, from Protestantism, such as the question of the exclusivity of vocation and divine grace. However, magical practices³, despite their

2. Philosophical-religious tradition from Greece, but credited to a supposed Egyptian magician, Hermes Trismegistus. This tradition is recovered from the 15th century onwards with the discovery of Hermetic texts and served as a promoter of an intellectual strand of Western magic, but it was always focused on Christianity, hence the formation of religious Hermeticism in the 16th century.

3. I understand by magic and religion systems of discursive and ritual practices, variable in their social legitimation, which operate transformations in the subjects-bodies who practice them and in the world, in addition to keeping the being-in-the-world out of crisis (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012). I believe that the difference between them is more in axiological than epistemological terms. Both magic and religion are historical constructs that refer to a form of elaboration of alterity, dating from the overseas expansion from the 15th century onwards. That is, such concepts are Eurocentric insofar as they establish a notion of religion for that set of practices whose similarity with Christianity is stronger (Pompa 2008). Otherwise, it’s magic. Magic, therefore, is the practice of the “other”, it is knowledge rejected by the West (Hanegraaff 2012). I prefer to start from provisional concepts, in the absence of a term that better translates such social manifestations.

increasing delegitimization, are not excluded from the social realm. In England, in the Elizabethan period, for example, there was an explosion of magical systems, such as that of John Dee (1527-1608) for conversation with angels, which resulted in the formulation of the Enochian system of magic⁴. Magic is withdrawn from the entire institutional field of western social life, having, therefore, to inhabit the margins through Initiatic Orders, for example, or healing practices, which reinforced the stereotype of these as a pact with the Devil, as heresy.

In the 18th century, the situation worsened with the coronation of mechanistic science as the pillar of Western Reason, which would determine civilization. Magic is derided as mere superstition and more specifically Esotericism⁵ is relegated to an “intellectual junk category” (Hanegraaff 2012). The Initiatic Orders gained strength in this period, such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, in addition to the emergence of the category of ceremonial magic, which turned to ritual, with the figure of Éliphas Lévi (1810-1875)⁶. In the 19th century, Romanticism as a broad movement of expression of a worldview engendered questions about the extreme rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment (Guinsburg (org.) 2019, Hanegraaff 2012, Löwy and Sayre 1992/2015). In this way, the individual and the dimension of the psychological, of emotion, of the relationship between the Self and the world are brought into vogue. The idea of *natürphilosophie* – “living nature” – defended mainly by the German side of the movement, added to the importance of the religious dimension as a promoter of a union with the Whole, causes a particular articulation between magic, science and religion. The science of the time, with the theories of animal magnetism, investigations into hypnosis, about spirits, assumed a lively and organic nature, in which man needs to be reintegrated. However, these theories, seen through the prism of a mechanistic, Cartesian science, are interpreted as mere superstitions, magic. In turn, the emergence of new magical currents from the second half of the 19th century – Theosophical Society, Brotherhood of Luxor, Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Polish mysticism, among others (Faivre 1994, Hanegraaff 2012, Webb 1974) – establishes a new relationship with science: it begins to provide and legitimize the discursive practices of these emerging religiosities, that is, a way is sought to “rationalize” magic so that it asserts itself in the social environments of the educated middle class western in which it spreads later. The practice is magic, but the method is scientific⁷. A

4. A system of magic dating from the 16th century that aimed to converse with angels from the angelic language, Enochian.

5. According to Hanegraaff (2012), Esotericism constitutes a set of magical-religious practices and discourses initiated in the 16th century in Europe that were rejected by the West.

6. Pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant, Éliphas Lévi was a French writer and occultist, very influential for the esoteric currents of the 19th century, which recover ceremonial magic. He wrote some books on magic, the best known being *Dogma and Ritual of High Magic*.

7. This is a famous phrase by Crowley that became the motto of the Initiatic Order he founded in 1907, the *Astrum Argentum* (A.A.).

relationship of distance is also formed towards the idea of religion since this would represent oppression and dogmatism. Magical practice asserts itself as a political option against such attitudes and in favor of liberties of a different order.

The panorama of the situation, in the 20th century, is a consequence of the historical relationship between magic, science and religion. In this period, relationships are made explicit that go beyond magic itself – epistemological, political, social and cultural issues. In the following sections, we will see a specific case, arising from this complex relationship between magic, science and religion, which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century: Thelema.

THELEMA

Thelema⁸, or Current 93, designates a philosophical-magical-religious system received⁹ by Aleister Crowley⁹ (1875-1947) during a trip to Cairo with his first wife, Rose Edith Kelly (1874-1932), and later developed by the magician and by others who followed him, such as Jack Parsons (1914-1952), Kenneth Grant (1924-2011). The Book of the Law, which is sacred to the Thelemites, forms the foundational pillar of this system, as it was dictated to Crowley for three days on the aforementioned journey by an extra-human entity called Aiwass, messenger of the Egyptian god Horus¹⁰. This text is important as it establishes a conduct towards a specific life and introduces us to some deities of the Thelemic pantheon. From an anthropological point of view, these deities appear as resignifications of other magical-religious traditions, especially the Egyptian one¹¹. There is

8. Thelema is the Greek word for “Will”.

9. Poet and one of the greatest names in Occultism of the 20th century, Crowley was born in 1875, in an extremely religious Protestant family, which generated a conflicting relationship with Christianity, which is reflected in his magical path. It begins, in 1898, in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, having a notorious development and encountering oriental practices, but it is expelled in 1902, entering a period of magical skepticism, which lasts until 1904, with the receipt of the Book of Law. In 1907, he founded the Astrum Argentum, an initiatory order that served the practice of magick and the Law of Thelema and, in 1910, he entered the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), an order of pseudo-Masonic origin that was converted to the Law of Thelema in 1919. In 1920, he founded the Abbey of Thelema in Cefalù, Sicily, Italy, a fact that caused much controversy and caused him to be expelled from the country in 1923. Crowley assumes the leadership of the OTO in 1925 and continues to publish books and instructions for his followers as a prophet of the Aeon of Horus. He died in 1947.

10. The Book of the Law, or Liber AL vel Legis, was transmitted by Aiwass for three days. It contains three chapters and is written in the form of aphorisms. Each chapter represents one of the deities of the Thelemic trinity, constituted, respectively, by Nuit, Hadit and Ra-Hoor-Khuit. Confirmation that Aiwass was a messenger of Horus comes at the Cairo Museum when Rose points to a Stele that contained Horus, as well as Nuit, Hadit and the Egyptian priest Ankh-af-na-Khonsu. Crowley believes himself to be the reincarnation of this priest and the prophet of the Aeon of Horus, the latter instituted with the receipt of the Book of the Law, this Stele – called by the Thelemites the Stele of Revelation and being present on most altars – the summary of Crowleyan Thelemic cosmology.

11. There is no monotheistic conception of “God” in this religiosity and this idea can be thought of either in terms of a transcendent entity, which is the sexual instinct, or as aspects of the magician’s unconscious that need to be worked through mythical-ritual symbolism.

the Thelemic “trinity”¹²: Nuit, which represents the unmanifest; Hadit, individuality; and Heru-Ra-Ha, a dual entity comprising Horus and Set; which, united, divinize man, since they represent an active-passive polarity. In addition to these deities, Thelema also encompasses deities such as Isis, Nephthys, Osiris, Kali, as well as some extraterrestrial entities, depending on the approach. It is important to highlight the increasing emphasis on “female” goddesses, particularly Babalon.

Babalon, according to Manon Hedenborg White (2020), is a modern goddess, that is, she embodies in her ritual and discursive practices political, social, cultural issues of our times, such as the problem of gender, sexuality, freedom, and the (de)construction of subjectivities and bodies. It is very likely that Crowley took inspiration from the Whore of Babylon, contained in the biblical apocalypse next to the Beast. His family background in a Protestant Church suggests so, insofar as the reading of biblical texts is encouraged. Babalon is represented as a wanton (whoredom), lascivious, self-possessed woman, with martial attributes or under the trope of the femme fatale, who wears opulent clothes and jewelry, as well as who inspired her, the Whore of Babylon. Babalon is one of the main entities worshiped in Thelema and all these characteristics that would be a priori negative become epithets of his sacredness, an attitude towards life that favors freedom and materiality. Babalon also has a messianic character in some of its representations. The goddess, in addition to representing the feminine principle of the Universe within a gender polarity that understands Chaos as its complement, symbolizes the ecstatic union with the All, the destruction of the Ego, the breaking of borders with the Other, a state of copulation or constant transformation with the Universe (*ibid.*). The whoredom of the goddess is nothing more than the celebration of a subjectivity, a body and a sexuality that are in continuous change from the contact with the Other, whether human or extra-human.

Thelema represents a new age for humanity, that of Aquarius or Aeon of Horus, with Crowley as its prophet. This new stage has as a summary of its posture towards the world the following postulate – Law of Thelema: “Do what thou wilt, it shall be the whole of the Law” (AL I, 1904/2017, §40¹³). Another important postulate is: “Every woman and every man is a star” (AL I, 1904/2017, §3). It is necessary to say that such postulates are not an invitation to pure social irresponsibility, but an emic conduct necessary for the discovery of the True Will, another fundamental discursive practice for the Thelemites. This delimits a set of dispositions present in

12. Emic term for this set of deities.

13. The Book of the Law is commonly referred to as AL, as it is an abbreviation of Liber Al Vel Legis, AL meaning God. The book consists of three chapters, each being “narrated” by one of the deities of the Thelemic Trinity – Nuit, Hadit and Ra-hoor-khuit (Set and Horus). In this way, the chapter number is placed in the reference so that the deity who transmitted these words is identified. Finally, the referenced number does not refer to the page, but to the aphorism in which such quotation is contained.

all individuals, whose articulation is particular to each one (Djurdjevic 2008). The Thelemite's objective is to base his life conduct on the discovery and realization of his True Will, which can also be understood by the concept of self, widely used by Western Esotericism (Heelas 1993). Gordan Djurdjevic (2008) points to the importance of understanding the self as a doing, a verb rather than a noun, indicating the need to understand the primacy of individual agency in this religiosity and the practices and discourses as forms of action that constitute a subject and his body, which are not given.

Thelema can be characterized by a system of sexual magic¹⁴, that is, a set of discursive practices and rituals that use sexual fluids – semen, vaginal fluids and menstrual blood – for the transformation of bodies, creation of worlds and diverse forms of relationality, since, according to the Thelemic conception, these elements are holders of great magical power – power of transformation. The mythical-ritual horizon that allows the Thelemite to exercise his Will is called magick, being “the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will” (Crowley 2017, 7). It consists not only in sexual intercourse practices, whether heterosexual, homosexual or autoerotic, but also in situations of visualization, ritual performances, meditations, Yoga, among others, so that the magician's sexual forces are also strengthened. Sex and the body are central categories and values for the Thelemites, who resignify them in each ritual practice through mythical-ritual symbolism (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012), embodying in the body values about sexuality, freedom, gender etc. (Parisi 2021). I also emphasize the importance of altered states of consciousness for this *ethopoietic*¹⁵ ritual exercise, which involves contact with extra-human bodies or even contact with oneself, whether or not using psychoactive substances. The Scarlet Woman and the Solar Beast are the main avatars, personas, or magical offices in Thelemic practices, and they often assume complementary roles because they represent a gender polarity. The idea of transgression contained in this system, both for its practices and for its cosmological representatives, is central to the understanding

14. Hugh Urban (2006), when defining modern sexual magic, that is, from the 19th century onwards, states: “Sex Magic is based on the belief that the most powerful moment of human existence is the orgasm. Sex Magic is the art of utilizing sexual orgasm to create a reality and/or expand consciousness” (Tye *apud* Urban 2006, 3). Urban indicates what he calls “four dimensions of modern sexual magic”: a-) the literature on the subject focuses on the individual and individual will as the greatest creative force in the universe; b-) emergence of new forms of *scientia sexualis*, placing sex as a key to understanding the mysteries of human existence; c-) sexual magic as a “scientific secret”, that is, the use of scientific means to reveal nature and the individual effectively; d-) practitioners of sex magic sought radical forms of freedom and extreme sexual, religious and political liberation. It is a body of ritual and discursive practices that, in my view, use the body – from its symbolic conceptions to sexual fluids and sexual organs – and sexuality to produce transformations in the subjects who practice them and in the worlds that surround them, placing sex as a vector of such changes.

15. Foucaultian term that denotes discursive and symbolic devices allied to the conscious and voluntary praxis of the construction of the individual.

of the construction of “marginalized” subjectivities and bodies, as it opens space for new types of performativity, in addition to explaining the idea of continuous transformation. of oneself through ritual transgression and magical practices themselves, contradicting the idea of an a priori subjectivity.

Finally, the socioeconomic profile of the Thelemite that I could see fits the highly educated middle classes. Most visitors are male (cisnormative) and the representation of transsexual and non-binary populations is very low. Many women are not attracted to Thelema due to its androcentric and sexist¹⁶ character, which has given rise to many dissent focused on a female or queer issue, in the case of accusations of extreme cisnormativity (White 2020). Thelema is still based on an elitist knowledge base, despite the efforts of some groups to rethink this process, due to the transmission of knowledge traditionally being done through initiatory orders, the most traditional being the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) and the Astrum Argentum (AA). With the advent of the internet, the Thelemic community seems to show a tendency to create stronger ties through online study groups, discussion groups and material dissemination, production of lives and public lectures, although many Thelemites follow a more initiatory path lonely due to AA. The OTO initiation format it is a fraternal order, which enables more frequent social interaction among the members.

In my ethnographic journey, when I came across the Thelemic Gnostic Mass – which will be the core of this investigation –, I was struck by the importance of altered states of consciousness for this ritual performance, since they force the individual to act, to take control of oneself, and that this is accompanied by an axiological change in some social categories, such as sexuality and subjectivity; from a state of liminality, in which the individual is in the “between” from one social status to another; and a sense of *communitas*, in which there is a suspension of structured society. In the light of Ernesto de Martino (1948/2004; 1956/2012), I see this axiological shift as a symptom of a crisis of presence, alienation of being-in-the-world, which is being resolved through mythical-ritual symbolism (*ibid.*). Before making my ethnographic considerations, I would

16. What has been presented so far may seem contradictory, but the contradiction is part of the constitution of Thelema as a magico-religious system (Djurdjevic 2008). Babalon, despite her characterization as a woman with strong sexual freedom and a life posture not common to women from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, was idealized by Crowley as *Femme fatale*, a very common trope in European society at the time in question (White 2020). We can infer from this information that Babalon is a masculine construction around an idea of femininity, which is problematic because, once again, agency is taken away from women. Crowley was accused multiple times by his Scarlet Women, that is, the women who performed the role of female officiant in Thelemic sex magic rituals, of misogyny and androcentrism. Crowley did not allow female initiation, treating women as mere magical tools for men initiated into Thelema. Scarlet Women were branded by him, in addition to a hypersexualization of women in rituals, such as the nudity of the Priestess in the Gnostic Mass.

like to discuss in more depth the theoretical-methodological apparatus chosen for this reflection.

TOWARDS A PERFORMATIVE APPROACH TO RITUAL: A REFLECTION ON MAGIC AND ITS SOCIAL EFFECTIVENESS

I would like to work with an author who can help me methodologically: Stanley Tambiah (1985/2018). The performative approach to ritual proposed by the author is of great help to understand the rite in terms of the association between language and action, since the Gnostic Mass is precisely constituted from this association.

For the author, the articulation between these two terms occurs on two levels:

a-) internal structure, which concerns the technique of transferring an attribute to the recipient through the use of metaphorical and metonymic language¹⁷ -, the way incantations are constructed, the choice of substances used in the ritual, among others, and how they are associated with a particular form of action;

b-) the external structure, marked by the context of the situation, that is, in the relationships that the ritual has with the social activities and practices in which it influences.

For Tambiah, ritual is a culturally constructed symbolic communication system. The ritual presents a sequence of patterned words and acts. Therefore, the ritual is understood in the light of the categories of formality, stereotyping, condensation and redundancy. It is a mode of social action. Every ritual action is performative because it is a conventional act; it is an intense experience of the event, made possible by the multiple means of staged performance; and indicates values linked to the actors and inferred by them during the performance.

In other words, if ritual events are performative acts (in a much stronger sense than ordinary speech acts, which also do something with words), then the connections between unitary acts and ritual utterances, logic of the rules of obligatory sequences of ritual acts per se, cannot be fully understood without understanding that they are the garment of social actions; and these social actions cannot, in turn, be understood if not in relation to the authors' cosmological assumptions and interactional social norms. Again, the form and content of the ritual are necessarily fused and the problem here is to devise a conceptual system that sees the message itself as 'both internally patterned and part of a

17. Tambiah borrows the terms "metaphorical" and "metonymic" to associate the issue of language with social action within the rite. An attribute is transferred to the recipient through figurative language or through the part for the whole.

larger patterned universe – the culture or some part of it’. ‘
(Bateson 1972, 132). (*ibid.*, 158)

However, the rite as a performance has a dual character, because, while it is an event whose main internal characteristics are stereotyping and repetition, it also serves contextual situations, such as claims of social status and interests of the participants:

On the one hand, it can be said that, in general, a public ritual reproduces in its repeated enactments certain apparently stereotyped and invariant sequences, such as sung formulas, rules of etiquette followed, and so on. On the other hand, every field anthropologist knows that not a single performance of a rite, however rigidly prescribed, is exactly the same as the performance, for it is affected by processes peculiar to the specialist’s oral mode of recitation and by certain variable aspects. , such as the characteristics and social circumstances of actors that (with the exception of purely contingent and unforeseen events) affect issues such as scale of attendance, public interest, economic expenditures, and so on. It is therefore necessary to keep in mind that festivals, cosmic rituals and rites of passage, regardless of whether they have been prescribed, are always linked to the status claims and interests of the participants and therefore always open to contextual meanings. Variable components make flexible the basic core of most rituals. (*ibid.*, 135-136)

A complement to Tambiah’s perspective is that of Victor Turner (1969/2013). Performance, for Turner, “reenacts traditional models of representation and gives rise to a creativity that destabilizes these same models” (Borges 2019). It has a preliminary character:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are in the middle and between the positions assigned and ordained by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. Its ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols, in those various societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (Turner 1969/2013, 98)

Liminal entities interrupt the everyday flow, allowing social actors to rethink the social structure because it moves them away from normative social roles. Another aspect of performance is *communitas*:

It is as if there were, in this case, two main “models” of human correlation, juxtaposed and alternating. The first is that of society taken as a structured, differentiated and often hierarchical system of political-legal-economic positions, with many types of evaluation, separating men according to the notions of “more” or “less”. The second, which emerges evidently in the liminal period, is that of society considered as an unstructured or rudimentary structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, a community, or

even communion, of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the elders. rituals.” (Turner 1969/2013, 99)

Thus, the passage from low to high is made through a limbo of lack of social status. Turner also states that social life is constituted by conflict and crisis situations, which reflect the incompleteness of the social world, showing its procedural character. Performance as a rite is shown as one of the ways to understand the tensions of the social structure and its anti-structural elements. The author’s concept of “social drama” summarizes this stance: they are events marked by conflict – exaggeration – between social institutions, in which their internal characteristics are displayed. Conflict is the expression of social actors, which allows the verification of the elasticity of cosmologies in the face of practical life.

The following authors, despite not working specifically with the issue of performance, discuss important aspects for my argument: the relationship between body and ritual. I bring them here because they complement my perspective on performance, which I believe is related, in this case, to the notion of presence crisis.

Ernesto de Martino (1948/2004), Italian philosopher and ethnologist, poses the problem of what he conceptualizes as a “magical world”: the collective instability of presence, that is, of the ability to objectify the real and of the individual to understand himself as subject in History¹⁸. For this anthropologist, the fundamental human ethos is based on moral potency, which is the dialectical power in which man classifies experience and things through value judgments. The cultural presence, the idea of “being there”, is given by this “categorizing energy” that is inserted in history and, therefore, in society. Society is equivalent to History for the author, both meaning the mode of collective organization that aims at the technical mastery of nature, which is remade *ad infinitum* due to the dialectical process characteristic of the historical dimension – presence versus religious experience, discussed in terms of mythical symbolism – ritual. Presence is what guarantees the subject in the dimension of culture; if this is at risk of instability, the individual “loses the world”, that is, the classificatory energy according to values that place him as an actant.

This is because, for the author, the existential drama of the magical world is expressed in a polarity: the crisis of presence and its rescue. Such drama occurs in critical periods of existence, when a lot of presence is demanded, demanding a repair that balances the situation. The main objective is to control the crisis of presence from its rescue in order to avoid the complete dissolution of the Self, loss of individuation¹⁹, which

18. De Martino’s notion of History is not universalist, but concerns the regimes of historicity of each society.

19. Individuation, for the author, is not an *a priori*, but a “cultural achievement”.

is the ultimate risk of the crisis. The “being-in-the-world” in this case is a condemned reality – which needs to be constructed through mythical-ritual symbolism – as it is permanently exposed to the risk of loss of presence, of being alienated.

It is important to say that this dialectical relationship between crisis of presence and religious reintegration is mediated by the notion of “institutionalized de-historification” (De Martino 1956/2012), which works as an instrument to protect an act in History, the question being performance, so to speak, involved here²⁰. It is, in short, to make history with the protection of meta-history. When the individual experiences de-historification, the crisis of presence indicating a rupture in the dialectical process – that is, the loss of differentiation between object and subject –, this causes him to be expelled from society and, thus, from History itself, causing deep anguish, this caused by the loss of classifying capacity based on values; the individual is no longer there. This alienation of presence calls for reintegration into human history, which is made from the religious experience, the “sacred”, through magical techniques, carried out through rituals:

Religious reintegration, however, is historical also in another sense because it takes very different forms even on the level of reintegration itself. In general, the hieropoetic process is to be interpreted as the choice of exemplary critical moments and as a technique—or system of techniques—for facing the risk of alienation and re-disclosing those formal powers which crisis threatens to paralyze. It is as if a part—in some given societies an enormous part—of the technical power of man were diverted from its use for the domination of natural forces by means of the economic organization of society and the manipulation of certain material or mental instruments, to find its application in the task of restoring an horizon to presence, and of preventing—in critical moments—the same fundamental power from which culture and human history come forth from being naturalized. The fundamental trait of religious reintegration is this technique of institutional dehistorification. (De Martino 1956/2012, 443)

The ritual, which has de-historification as a technique, offers a discourse that allows the resurgence of this individual in the historical situation

20. Although De Martino does not deal specifically with performance, we have glimpses of an anthropology of performance when we come across the concept of institutionalized de-historification because it is this protective mechanism of presence that purposely provokes the crisis of presence and generates a performance – a communication system, symbolic culturally constructed in which there is standardization of acts and words (Tambiah 1985/2018). When researching Tarantism, a form of musical and chromatic exorcism in Apulia, Italy, de Martino comes across a sequence of words and standardized gestures after the supposed bite of the tarantula and the attempt of the musicians to find the ideal music and color of that tarantula that the “fussy” embodies. The tarantula bite would be the seasonal cause of the presence crisis, linked in this context to the harvest, induced every year by the symbolic bite of the tarantula and its consequent embodiment, causing de-historification. The control of the crisis of presence takes place exactly through the ritual performance, through the mythical-ritual symbolism.

through the process of repetition (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012). He repeats a given situation from the exacerbation of the initial crisis that led to the loss of presence in order to control it so that the individual regains the “categorizing energy” that allows him to be reintegrated historically and socially. There is no return to the norm, but a reinvention of culture (Wagner *apud* De Martino 1956/2012) – culture is “invented” so that the motivations of all social groupings conform within these “invented” values in order to that the dialectical process of reproduction of social and symbolic relations is maintained.

Thus, the rite for De Martino becomes a performance that modifies History, the repetition opening space for the doing, for the difference, because the repetition is never the same, giving dynamism to the mythical-ritual symbolism, which is at the same time time fiction and concreteness, reformulating the categories according to values and promoting action in History, that is, the active transformation of oneself and the world.

A scholar of Ernesto de Martino, Silvia Mancini (2018) states that psychocorporal practices that imply altered states of consciousness occupy a central role in marginalized and transversal²¹ magico-religious traditions due to a particular way of understanding, conceiving and manipulating reality, in that the problem of symbolic efficacy²² emerges. The author suggests that we look at this issue through certain concepts: a-) that of technique, in which the mythical-ritual *modus operandi* is analyzed as an effective technical device, and uses should gain prominence to the detriment of meanings; b-) that of orthopractice, in which the cultural or ritual function is aimed at the active and transforming intervention of the world and the subject; c-) and ethopoietic practices (Foucault 2001 *apud* Mancini 2018), which consist of discursive and symbolic devices allied to the conscious and voluntary praxis of the construction of the individual, that is, man manufactures himself through techniques that cross his body. The altered states of consciousness occur through the divided, dissociated and plural Self, forming the “other” through psychotechniques. Altered states of consciousness are crucial in correcting disorders²³ that affect the body and spirit of individuals. They are important, according to Mancini, because the effectiveness of magic is based on fictional devices, which are in another regime of reality, promoting ruptures in the waking state, stimulating the imagination and the unfolding of the Self, this being the real vector. of effectiveness. Fictional devices promote an “active doing”, that is, they force their agents to act to regain control over themselves

21. Mancini refers here to the magico-religious traditions that were put in the background by the West due to the use of magic and altered states of consciousness in their ritual practices.

22. Concept developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (2012) that concerns this property of symbolic manipulation that organizes the chaos of the world.

23. Disorder here refers to any type of bodily manifestation that deviates from the established social norm.

and the world. “The magical efficacy, founded on the dissociation of the Self, resides in a kind of technical learning of knowing how to transform and repair oneself” (Mancini 2018, 59, my translation²⁴).

In view of the theoretical-methodological discussion made above, my argument, which justifies the presence of this article in the present dossier, is: the Thelemic Gnostic Mass, which we will see below, is a ritual performance, that is, a culturally defined symbolic communication that has standardized words and actions, but exacerbates certain social conflicts, such as the issue of sexuality. It has a liminal character, since, through the dissolution of normative social roles, there is a limbo of absence of social status. This limbo and the exacerbation of social conflicts, together with the presence of ecstatic states, suggests another analytical method, that of the crisis of presence, through the mythical-ritual technique of institutionalized de-historification, which promotes a being-in-the-world of another. through the resignification of culturally constructed values. Hence the relationship between body, ritual and performance that I propose here.

THE THELEMIC GNOSTIC MASS AND ITS RECONFIGURATIONS: AN ANALYTICAL EXERCISE

My ethnographic experience is dated from 2018 to the present²⁵. I have investigated the relationship between performance, body and ritual in Thelema, and the Gnostic Mass seemed to me “eligible” for the study, since it constitutes one of the only collective and public rites of this esoteric current, both in national and international contexts. I emphasize that my journey had to be made largely via the digital environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented me from carrying out face-to-face fieldwork. Thus, I relied on several of my research interlocutors who helped me to understand which meanings and categories are mobilized in this rite, in addition to its effectiveness for the Thelemites. I watched the rite a few times in versions made available on YouTube between July 2020 and September 2021, in addition to having participated remotely in a Mass adapted to the digital scenario held by Ecclesia Babalon in March 2021, a Thelemic institution with representation in Brazil. Before proceeding with the description of the ritual, some preliminary explanations are necessary.

The Gnostic Mass is a rite that was conceived by Crowley during his stay in Russia in 1913, inspired by the Russian Orthodox Eucharistic ritual. It is the main rite of the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), an initiatory order that admits Crowley in 1912 and is converted to the Law of Thelema in 1919.

24. “La eficacia mágica, fundada sobre la disociación del yo, reside, en fin, en una especie de aprendizaje técnico del ‘saber transformarse y repararse.’” (Mancini 2018, 59)

25. This period refers to the beginning of my scientific initiation and my master’s research.

However, Liber XV – text of the Mass – was only published in 1918. Despite rumors that the Mass had been practiced a few times during the 1920s at the Abbey of Thelema²⁶ in Cefalù, Sicily, Italy, the first public celebration of this rite took place in 1933 at the Agape Lodge, one of the OTO representations in California, United States. The Gnostic Mass is performed in its private and public versions – the latter allowing the presence of the uninitiated in the rite – in the Lodges, Camps and Oasis of the OTO, but the ritual itself is performed by the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (EGC), the ecclesiastical arm of the OTO. OTO

In general terms, the Thelemic Gnostic Mass celebrates the mystical union between the feminine and masculine principle of the Universe for the generation of a magical child. On the metanarrative horizon, Babalon and Chaos are such principles, respectively, and Horus – with his hidden duality, Set – is the magical child. This symbolic-mythical horizon is anthropomorphized in the ritual through the characters of the drama, in addition to being metonymized²⁷ through the ritual objects that are put on the scene, which are epithets of each character.

The characters and their attributes are: a-) deacon, who has the Book of the Law; b-) the priestess, who has the chalice, the paten, the sword and the cookies of light; c-) the priest, who has the spear; d-) children, who carry water, perfume, incense and salt; d-) and the Congregation, composed of members initiated or not in the O.T.O. or E.G.C., but who play an active role in the rite. There is a specific dress and posture for each ritual role. The interaction between the objects arranged by the characters of the Mass constitutes the core of the ritual, which has a strong sexual connotation because it is a rite whose “mystery” revolves around sexual magic – the erotic interaction, especially between chalice and spear, representing the vulva. and the phallus.

The Mass is divided into several moments, being characterized by the mixture between the reading of excerpts from the Book of the Law by the Deacon, pre-established dialogues between priest and priestess, sound manifestations – music, sounds emitted by the mouth – and ritual actions themselves, such as such as the correct preparation of the Temple, a specific walk for each character because this has implications for the effectiveness of the rite, a specific form of interaction of ritual

26. The Abbey of Thelema was a magical experience performed in a house in Cefalù, Sicily, by Crowley and his followers, emphasizing Leah Hirsig, the Scarlet Woman of the magician at the time. The practices carried out in this place had as their main characteristic the ritual transgression through sexual magic, coprophagy, among others. The objective was the discovery of the True Will of the adepts and advancement on the initiatory path. The Italians were so shocked by the events at the Abbey that Mussolini expelled Crowley from Italy in 1923.

27. Metonymy: figure of speech that refers to the whole by the parts. In the Gnostic Mass, the gods represented in the drama are referred to by the objects that the officiants wield and their clothing, hence their identification/embodiment with a certain entity.

instruments, among others. The apex of the ritual takes place with the moment of the Eucharist²⁸, which would symbolize the consummation of the mystical marriage between the forces of the Universe – Babalon and Chaos – through the vocalization of the magic word “HRILIU”, which connotes the moment of joint orgasm between priest and priestess. Unlike the Christian Eucharist, what is consumed in this case is a cookie of light – a cookie made from spices with a mixture of boiled semen and menstrual blood – along with a glass of wine, both consecrated during the ritual performance.

The Gnostic Mass, in this sense, is a system of symbolic communication (Tambiah 1985/2018) in which there is a sequence of standardized words and acts that do something. The Mass produces its effectiveness among Thelemites from this particular articulation of elements that generate the performance, which, despite transmitting a “message” through its magic formula, is never the same; the performance repeats the difference (Deleuze 2018²⁹) for contextual reasons and for the very issue of not being able to restore the conditions in which that rite was performed. It is also a social drama, that is, an event that exacerbates a given social conflict through the dissolution of normative social roles and the formation of a *communitas*. But how is this seen in the ritual? The Gnostic Mass problematizes, above all, the issue of sexuality for Western society, which generates conflicts due to discursive practices of silencing bodies and the imposition of a model of sexuality established by the bourgeoisie in the 19th century (Foucault 1976/2015, Weeks 1981/2012) through the extreme sexualization of the ritual and an idea of transgression – such as, for example, “desecrating” the altar by placing the Priestess sitting on it naked, or ingesting semen and menstrual fluids as belonging to the “sacred”. The celebration of the materiality of the body is also exacerbated in the ritual context, highlighting the practices of ritual erasure of the body (Le Breton 1990/2002) in Western society and a questioning about the dichotomy between body and mind, since everything it is body in thelemic practices – the affections (Favret-Saada 2005) are corporeal as the experience of the world, the being-there, is mediated by the body. In the Gnostic Mass, the body is the door to the transformation of oneself and the world, in addition to the possibility of establishing a relationship

28. Emic terminology.

29. In *Difference and Repetition* (2018), Deleuze states that becoming implies an encounter in which everything is repeated in another way. Therefore, the relationship operates through difference, not through similarity or identity. Becoming transports difference through the repetitive space thus constituted. But what is difference and repetition? Deleuze (*ibid.*), when criticizing representational thinking, postulates that in it difference was treated as opposition to what is identical, excluding difference as such. For the author, difference must be understood by itself, as a concept: as an affirmation of the unequal, as a process, transformation. Things are not; they are constantly changing – the issue here is action and not essence. The difference occurs during repetition, that is, each encounter generates a resignification of itself. The difference is enhanced by the repetition of the meetings, as something new happens in the intervals between the cycles.

with Thelemic entities. In the ritual, clothing and instruments are used as a way of adorning the body to embody this entity, taking its characteristics and powers. It is something similar to the perspective-taking promoted by Amerindian shamans (Viveiros de Castro 2015). It is a partial abduction of the agency of the officiants to return agency to them through bodily experience, for this, among other things, builds up the Thelemite person. The rite still tells the story of the Priest's initiation into a man initiated in Thelema from the idea of liminality and the formation of a *communitas*. The social roles both produced by the macro society and by the Initiatic Order are suspended in view of the ritual and a community is provisionally "structured", containing the rite officiants and the Congregation. Anyone initiated into the *Ordo Templi Orientis* (O.T.O.) can be officiant in any ritual role. But let us return to the Priest. The Gnostic Mass establishes the symbolic passage of the Priest from an "ordinary" man to a complete initiate in Thelema, that is, one who has completed all the initiation rites of the Order. He remains in a liminal neither-this-nor-that condition for much of the ritual, a problem that is only resolved with his passage through the ordeal of the Abyss, in which he becomes "Nemo" or "No Man", constituting his change of status if this pass is successful. The Priest is guided by the only authority of the ritual: the Priestess, understood as initiatrix, that is, who initiates people into Thelemites, the one who promotes the meeting of the person with their True Will. It is she who promotes the change of the Priest's social status, which, within the normative social roles of western society from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, would normally be carried out by another man, showing us a questioning of the western social structure regarding gender roles.

If we add to the perspective of Tambiah (1985/2018) and Turner (1969/2013) the theoretical-methodological set of Ernesto de Martino (1948/2004; 1956/2012) and Silvia Mancini (2018), we will see that the Gnostic Mass, through its mythical-ritual symbolism, purposely "suspends" History from the institutionalized de-historification technique to resolve issues pertinent to that social group acting in History – which brings an echo of Turner's considerations (1969/2013) on ritual performance. In addition to a mystical wedding, the Mass stages the initiatory journey of the priest, who ascends the Kabbalistic Tree of Life³⁰ – where the O.T.O. – with the help of the priestess, the movements in the temple being motivated by the positions in this initiation system and by an awakening of a new awareness of oneself and the world, symbolized by the ascension of the

30. System of correlations on which Esoterism bases its practical-discursive apparatus, originating from the Christian Cabala proposed by Pico della Mirandola, in 1496. Also known as Sephiroth. It consists of ten emanations from Ain Soph (unmanifest and unintelligible principle) in the Christian Kabbalah that each carry a principle of existence, connected to each other by thirty-two paths, divided between three pillars that balance each other and containing a pseudosphere, Daath, which allows the connection between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death or Knowledge, the Qliphoth. It is understood as a microcosm of the Universe (Yates 1964/1995).

Serpent of Fire, Kundalini, hence the importance of the altered state of consciousness in this ritual performance. The awakening of Kundalini³¹ is only possible through ritual techniques of consciousness alteration, such as meditation, Yoga and the use of psychotropic substances. In this case, sex – including the extreme sexualization of the ritual – induces a change in the waking consciousness state in the characters and members of the Congregation, making them see “beyond”: to dissociate means to transform. With the trance state, the people involved in the rite are taken by a torpor and, in addition, the posture of the ritual characters – tone of voice, eloquence in movements, among others – varies throughout the rite, reaching a climax in communion, when “HRILIU” is shouted. This expression is truly magical: it produces transformation because it is the word with the greatest magical force in the ritual (Tambiah 1985/2018). Words, which have magical power according to Tambiah (*ibid.*), together with ritual actions, constitute the effectiveness of the rite, as they build a culturally defined system that exacerbates social tensions. HRILIU, who represents the symbolic orgasm of the Priest and Priestess, stresses the social issue of sexuality to the maximum, since free sexuality is preached, which contradicts the western social structure of that time.

The valorization of the body as a space of magical effectiveness and the possibility of transforming oneself and the world is transposed to the central themes of this Eucharist, namely, sexuality and the question of gender, which are also linked to the social problems of the beginning of the century. XX in Europe – hence its performative character, that is, an event that exacerbates social tensions through the suspension of social roles and the association between language and social action. Sex as the engine of life and as an inducer of changes in the body – a body that structures sexuality and ways of being-in-the-world in other ways and that can also creatively construct and update realities that are not given. – enables new ways of acting on the world, since the mythical-ritual device (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012) is responsible for questioning these categories that cause “crisis” in these individuals, and, on the other hand, it opens up the opportunity to re-signify them through values attributed to them by the adepts themselves. Contact with Babalon and Chaos forces adherents to change their attitude towards life so that they can live in the wider society with other values. An example of this is the way in which a new perspective on sexuality is treated in the ritual: it is only possible from the connection of the Adept with his True Will through magical-religious practices that destabilize the current social structure, such as ritual transgression. . Ritual is a way of recovering individuals as acting beings in history. In other words, the rite produces new forms of agency

31. According to Eastern discursive practices, Kundalini is a force represented by a serpent of fire lodged at the base of the human spine that, when awakened due to specific bodily practices, promotes a spiritual awakening and consciousness in the individual.

as it rescues the sick presence and controls the crisis. This rescue is only possible if some social categories that the rite mobilizes are resignified. I cite again the examples of sexuality and the materiality of the body.

Another issue raised by Tambiah (1985/2018) is very clear about ritual performance not only being limited to the rite itself, but also to claims of social status and a wider network of sociability. The transgressive character of the Gnostic Mass, by highlighting the materiality of the body, the importance of sexuality as a factor in social life, magic as part of the West, among others, also places the status of the Thelemites themselves in society on the margins of the system because it is contrary to the ideals proposed by the bourgeois family from the 19th century onwards (Foucault 1976/2015, Weeks 1981/2012). When Tambiah (1985/2018) and Turner (1969/2013) say that ritual performance reveals conflicting worldviews, this is exactly what I am talking about when I approach Thelema: the conflict between Western social practices, which relegates magic to absolute alterity and maintains itself in a Cartesian perspective of existence, which privileges the mind and relegates the body to the mere functioning of organs, and the thelemic ritual and discursive practices, which rethink such postures. Thus, the effectiveness of the Gnostic Mass depends on this network of sociability that is created on the margins of what is socially accepted, which affirms a being-in-the-world other, other forms of construction of reality, and which has as imperative the continuous transformation of the categories, of relationships, of bodies, of worlds.

However, in the last few decades, a very extensive discussion among Thelemites and also among non-Thelemites took place about some Crowleyan conceptions that spread in their rites. For example, an overly phallogocentric conception of the world, which privileges men in their magical journey and relegates women to the role of mere helpers. Another issue raised is the lack of space for other gender identities not founded on cisnormativity, such as transsexuals and non-binary people. In the case of the Gnostic Mass, such criticisms were very consistent with a certain bad reputation that Thelema gained among such circles of people, including through accusations of harassment and sexual abuse and power in initiatic orders, above all, and the profile of the initiates, mostly highly educated white men, in addition to the ineffectiveness of Thelemic institutions in dealing with such accusations and in embracing difference and producing structural changes. Because of all this, several reconfigurations of the Gnostic Mass have appeared in recent times, pointing to the question of the effectiveness of this rite (De Martino 1948/2004, 1956/2012, Mancini 2018, Stengers 2008, Tambiah 1985/2018), which needs to be rethought in

light of new times. I will stick to two ethnographic examples: the Balada Nervosa and the Liber Sophia³².

I was invited to Balada Nervosa, which took place in October 2020, by L., an initiate at O.T.O. who is my research interlocutor. This ritual consisted of a technoucharist³³ – that is, a Eucharist based on the Gnostic Mass that uses digital and coding means, giving rise to a virtual event called Criptofunk. To have access to the technoucharist, it was necessary to decipher a code, which redirected me to a virtual room with background music and a chat. In this room, I didn't know who my rite "colleagues" were, since there was no camera. When the rite begins, there is a mix between ritualistic language and songs by female artists whose lyrics have an empowering or sexualized character, poems recited by black women, odes to female deities, including the most "lascivious", a series of songs in funk styles, trap, rap, denouncing police violence in communities, indigenous genocide, social inequality, in addition to a series of images of codes and programming. The apex of the ritual takes place with the production of sigils – a pictorial representation linked to the practitioner's desire in relation to a certain magical practice – or the "seed" – correlated to the magical child – in which a free drawing program is opened so that the participants to design what they wanted and what they wanted for the internet of the future. Meanwhile, a video was played in the background, about a feminist, free, anti-racist, public, counter-hegemonic, knowledge-sharing internet. The ritual ended abruptly with the end of the broadcast.

It is interesting to think of this ritual performance as a system of codes that show a vision of the world of the people who were gathered in this event. In this sense, it is a political stance towards the world, inequalities, genocide. A defense of women's space and a performance that highlights the need for relationality between socially marginalized layers in order to reach a more libertarian society. The various elements of the performance, which often resulted in a delirious cacophony, end up becoming a whole that (dis)orders the categories called into question by the ritual. Ritual action forces agency over the world, creates the possibility of new worlds, inserting the digital medium into the rite as a character and as a space for ritual effectiveness and agency in the world. The rite in its performance becomes power to produce other relationships and ways of relating through the language that becomes an act: "what is said is also what is done" (Peirano 2006, 3). This appears in the ritual, for example, when the powerful speech defending the rights of women and marginalized

32. On the question of rethinking cisnormativity, I just say that there are experimental masses being held and queer masses, but I will not delve into the subject, as I lack ethnographic material for this.

33. This is a term created by L. himself to define his magical practice.

populations by the West together with a speech about digital security is transformed into a secrecy, a magical act.

The last ritual I wish to address in this reflection is the one contained in *Liber Sophia* (2019), performed for the first time in December 2019 in Atlanta, United States, at the Thelemic Temple of Our Lady of the Abyss by Sophia Melitodes, High Priestess of the Temple³⁴. It is a feminine-centered review of the Gnostic Mass. As a prelude to the text of the rite, it is stated:

Thelema is not a naked woman on the altar. It is the sublime ecstasy of the ever-whirring divine duality. It is our approach to this ever-whirring. Our experience of it, our relationship with it, as an individual which is in itself an ever-whirring multiplicity, for the individual is nothing more than a community of stars and cells. The woman on the altar served a purpose; it can still serve one. But it cannot be the end of our work, nor the centre. And this is why *Thelema* has stagnated since its conception; because it recognised the need for the worship of the goddess, and then found itself unable to enact it; because it feared Her coming. (*ibid.*, 5)

The central problem posed by the Mass is that of the universality of the phallus without a counterpart of the same value and as the only possible path to gnosis. Subjectivity is offered only to men, relegating women to the role of degenerate. Hence, the *Liber Sophia*, therefore, promotes a magical practice of celebrating the Mysteries from a female perspective, proclaiming the arrival of Babalon.

As for the rite itself, it is a celebration of the Apocalypse. There is a conviction that this is not a Mass because it does not proclaim female passivity and does not have the same ritual instruments and characters. It is a celebration of the Apocalypse. The preparations of the Temple are indicated, highlighting a cavity at the bottom covered by a veil, representing a uterus. The ritual characters are Sophia, Melissa, the Neophyte and the Master of Ceremonies, each with specific attire and functions. The ritual has several parts in which Sophia, Melissa and the Neophyte interact with each other and with the Congregation. It is interesting to see how male entities, except for Chaos, are excluded from this operation in favor of female and androgynous figures (Baphomet, for example), reinforcing a relationality between women, evident in the relationship between Sophia and Melissa as sisters – a relationship symmetrical. When crossing the paths of initiation, this rite performs a symbolic pregnancy of Melissa, represented by the Sephiroth and the positions taken in the Temple, but the paternity is not identified. All women and forms of femininity that were considered deviant are celebrated in the name of Babalon. The Eucharist is performed through an invocation to Babalon, which reinforces the connection between

34. This information is contained in the *Liber Sophia* itself.

debauchery (whoredom), femininity and immortality. Melissa drinks the wine, sweetened with honey and thickened with a crumbled light cake containing menstrual blood, from a flower bed. Hymns are spoken and the Congregation communes from the time they go to the altar to drink this wine and receive the symbol of the Rosicrucian on the chest of each of the members of the Congregation with Holy Oil for Sophia. At the end of the celebration, Sophia blesses the Congregation in the name of Babalon and all the ritual characters remain in their “crowned” positions as the Congregation leaves the Temple.

In this last ritual performance, it becomes clear how what is questioned is not the Eucharist itself – in the sense of the magical efficacy of the ritual’s core – but the symbolic-practical construction of the elements that make up the ritual, mirroring, in a certain sense, the social life. This performance privileges, instead of the sequence of acts and words, promulgating a cisnormative and heterosexual relationality as a way of achieving a magical objective, that is, active transformation of oneself and the world, the relationship between women through the exacerbation of an experience that technically would be feminine³⁵, pregnancy, a posture that removes the masculine gender from the center. The lack of importance given to the paternity of the performed pregnancy already indicates another position for the initiatory and even social advance as a whole – the focus on the margins. As a mythical-symbolic horizon for embracing diversity and continuous self-transformation, Babalon is of great significance as a cult center in this performance because it calls into question the need to change oneself and society through other values.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

If performance is a social act (Peirano 2006, Tambiah 1985/2018), this Mass is so insofar as it constitutes a performance that deals with the contradictions of the Western world and exacerbates them in a social drama (Turner 1969/2013). Its transgressive language concerns the social rigidity in which we are inserted. The mystical marriage of the principles that govern the Universe and the initiatory path of the priest say more about the fact that things are not a priori and are always in transformation than about a sexual-alchemical formula.

While the acts of repetition of the performance crystallize social values (De Martino 1948/2004; 1956/2012) because they reinsert the individual as an actant being in History via mythical-ritual symbolism, deriving its effectiveness from there, one cannot forget that such effectiveness is also

35. I write in these terms because pregnancy has historically been linked in the West to bodies marked as female, excluding the possibility of pregnancy in non-binary and transsexual bodies.


subject to political-social issues, as we could see with the reconfigurations of the Gnostic Mass. Both demonstrate that the “problem” was not in the properly ritualistic structure of the rite that is, in the Eucharist as a magical performance that maintains the Thelemic being-in-the-world, but in the elements mobilized during the rite: cis and heteronormativity, lack of inclusion of marginalized populations, issue of abuse suffered by women. All this while mobilizing issues of gender, sexuality and the body (Parisi 2021), structural issues of western society, but which generate many conflicts.

Therefore, the performativity of the Gnostic Mass cannot be understood without the articulation between what is said and what is done, to paraphrase Mariza Peirano (2006), in addition to contextual aspects of power, politics, social, racial, among others. The rite creates relationships within and beyond it and (re)formulates ways of being in the world, producing agency (Rabelo 2008). The anthropologist must be aware of the transformations that alter the ritual performance, as this is extremely important for understanding its effectiveness and what this ritual mobilizes and experiences in an intense way. The performance is, ultimately, the dramatic update whose peculiar structure is related to the production of an intensified meaning (Tambiah 1985/2018). There are those who see the ritual as a transgression; some see it as freedom, but its effectiveness depends on how much we can relate to it.

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