

THE OCCULT WORLD

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John Whiteside Parsons

Nicholas Campion

Senior Lecturer, School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David,

John Whiteside Parsons, better known simply as Jack Parsons, is one of the most interesting characters in the history of the occult in the early to mid-twentieth century, by virtue of his vital role in the American space programme. Parsons was born in Pasadena in October 1914 and became a noted chemical engineer and explosives expert. His scientific activities have been well-documented, as has his involvement in magick and the occult (Carter, 2004; Pendle, 2005). Inspired partly by science-fiction, he became part of a group of rocket enthusiasts who were determined to make space travel a reality and named themselves the ‘suicide squad’, in view of the danger of their work, and who were attached to the California Institute of Technology. Their work laid the foundation for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, founded in 1944 (JPL History), and so for the NASA space programme. Parsons eventually blew himself up in 1952, a martyr to his dream of travelling to the Moon.

Parsons joined Aleister Crowley’s Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) in 1941, together with his wife, the artist Marjorie Cameron (Kansa, 2011) and became master of the Agapé Lodge, based in a mansion in Pasadena which acted as a commune for Parsons and his close associates. He fell out with Crowley in 1946 and also had a brief friendship – and falling out - with L.Ron Hubbard (Miller, 1988, pp. 146-68), the founder of Scientology.

Although Carter and Pendle have documented the facts of Parsons’ life as both an occultist and magician, and as a pioneer of the American space programme, neither deal with the details of Parsons’ ideas concerning the role and nature of the occult. These can be inferred from Crowley’s teachings, which served as Parsons’ primary source in magick, as well as from Parsons’ own writings, chiefly a collection of essays written in the 1940s, and published posthumously in 1989. In Grant’s words (2010, p. 169), Parsons’ mission as an occultist can be summed up as ‘the discovery of his True Will’. His definitions and discussion of magic are clearly rooted in the European tradition, referring explicitly to

the doctrine of sympathies (1989, p. 46) and correspondences which, appropriately for Parsons' dreams of space travel, were described by Crowley (1979, p. 53) as essential for a proper understanding of the planets. 'Magick', Parsons wrote, 'is a system of philosophy and a way of life which, a common denominator of all cultures, [and] is universal to mankind' (1989, p. 45). As a scientist, Parsons was clear that the scientific and magickal world views are compatible. 'It is therefore essential', he wrote, 'that the magician have a comprehensive knowledge of the various planes whose interaction results in comprehensive reality' (1989, p. 47). In Parsons' world-view, knowledge of rocket fuel was therefore as important to the practice of magick as were the rules and rites set out by the OTO. He continued, 'In its absolute basis magick is a passion and a discipline which relates the mystery of love, and through which man is capable of attaining to any ultimate knowledge and love of himself, his fellow man and the universe in all its aspects' (1989, p. 46). Grant (2010, p. 170) commented on Parson's revolutionary tendencies, and radical and counter-cultural statements concerning the need for love as the basis human life, as well as the necessity for new forms of social organisation, pervade his work. For example, he wrote that an education in magick should be a training in 'total consciousness', the object being 'the unfoldment of society in all the ways of love; (1989, p. 47). The consequence, he hoped, would be 'a more conscious, better integrated, and more interesting and significant social order'.

The legacy of such rhetoric in the counter-culturalism of the 1960s, two decades later, is clear. Parson's vision of a new society was encompassed by his Crowleyesque (Crowley 2011, pp. 15-18) millenarianism, and what he believed to be the current historic transition from the 'Age of Osiris'. This, Parsons thought, had begun around 4000 BCE, and had resulted in what he saw as the debased, patriarchal, oppressive, violent, self-loathing, militaristic, dogmatic and sexually-warped culture of Judeo-Christianity. Parsons described the condition of humanity at the end of the Age of Osiris in despairing terms: 'Feeling himself unloved and unknowing of the way to live, Western man moves in a sterile wasteland of the mind, lacking the knowledge, understanding and will to save himself by an act of love' (1989, p. 49). All this, he hoped, was to change with the arrival of the imminent 'Age of Horus'. A new and better world was to come about through psychological revolution, that is, through the self-aware recognition, and full expression, by each individual of their dual male/female nature. However, he was not optimistic. Recognising the dire condition of 1940s American culture, Parsons concluded that ~~'to this terrible impasse no real individual or social solution has been found, nor will be found until the magical~~

~~equilibrium is rediscovered and reformulated by the culture heroes who will found a new religion of love, and thus initiate the new age to maturity' (XXXXX).~~ Like Crowley, this prophetic historiography places Parsons within the wider context of theosophical and New Age millenarianism (Campion 2012), as espoused particularly by H.P. Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner and Alice Bailey, accompanied by a denunciation of modern materialism, and a belief in a spiritual equivalent of a Bolshevik revolutionary vanguard, whose task was to promote the arrival of the new world order. In Parsons' occult politics, the revolutionary vanguard was the OTO, its activism being magickal ritual and psychological self-awareness, rather than violent revolution.

The evidence from Parsons' own writings suggests that Crowley's cosmology was central to this own, including his desire to travel into space. Crowley's writings open many questions in relation to Parsons' own ideology. For example, Parsons was born on 2 October 1914: did he note Crowley's statement that those born with Uranus in Aries, as he was, possess 'a character intrepid, dauntless, fiery and indomitable' (Crowley, 1979, p. 124) or, in his rituals, did he note that emerald is the colour of Libra (Crowley, 1986, p. 104), the zodiac sign containing the sun at his birth? Was he inspired by Crowley's (2011, p. 25) statement that 'every man and woman is a star', and did Crowley's (1981, p. 69) injunction, 'Plunge from the height, O God, and interlock with Man!', encourage his determination to travel to the stars? Crowley had claimed (2011, p. 15) that a star, in its metaphysical sense, is an aggregate of experience, in effect a 'God'; in what sense did such statements alter what Parsons' saw when he looked at the night sky? Such questions are yet to be explored, as are the significance of other aspects of life in the OTO. It is known, for example, that the OTO rituals which Parsons both participated in and presided over, were explicitly astrological. One, the 'Ritual of the Lesser Hexagram', required the participant to face the East (the rising sun) and utter words such as 'Virgo, Isis, Mighty Mother. Scorpio, Apophis, Destroyer' (DuQuette, 2003, p. 110), words that Parsons (1989, p. 60) interpreted as code for the coming of the 'New Aeon' of Horus. When Crowley (1991, p. 117) complained that, 'men take the Son of Science, and burn him for a Heretic' Parsons, for whom magick and science were part of the same, single cosmos, would have understood that the 'Scientist' in Crowley's terms, was the visionary who understood the true laws, of life, death and love, which, which underpinned the world within which ordinary scientists – including rocket scientists – operated.

Parsons was not a leading occultist, but assumes prominence in the history of twentieth-century occultism as a consequence of his wider

historical importance. He both confounds simple arguments that scientific education is the antithesis of superstition, occult practice or religious affiliation, and contributes to the study of the wide spread of ideas concerning the importance of human exploration of space (Bell and Parker, 2009) which was later to drive the Apollo Moon programme.

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