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Do What Thou Wilt A Life Of Aleister Crowley

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795580928885486

Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley

The phrase "Do what thou wilt" is perhaps the most famous – and most misunderstood – axiom in modern esoteric history. It is the central tenet of Thelema, the spiritual and philosophical system founded by the enigmatic English mystic, poet, and occultist Aleister Crowley. To many, Crowley remains the "Great Beast 666," a scandalous figure of drug-fueled rituals and moral depravity. But a closer look at his life reveals a complex, driven individual who sought to liberate humanity from the chains of dogma and conventional morality. "Do what thou wilt" was not a license for hedonism, as his critics claimed, but a profound call to discover and follow one's true will. Exploring the life of Aleister Crowley means tracing his journey from a repressed Victorian upbringing to a global icon of counterculture and spiritual rebellion. This article delves into the man behind the myth, examining his works, his controversies, and the enduring legacy of Thelema.

The Early Years: Rebellion and Intellectual Awakening

Born Edward Alexander Crowley on October 12, 1875, in Leamington Spa, England, he was the only son of a wealthy brewer and a devoutly religious mother. His parents were members of the exclusive Plymouth Brethren, a strict Christian sect that preached hellfire and eternal damnation. This repressive environment had a profound effect on the young Crowley. He later wrote that his mother called him "the Beast," a reference to the Book of Revelation, a label he would later embrace with zealous pride. His father's death when Aleister was eleven left him under the control of his puritanical uncles, further fueling his rebellion against authority and conventional faith.

Crowley excelled academically, attending Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied literature, philosophy, and chess. He published his first poetry at his own expense and began to explore mountaineering. But his intellectual curiosity soon turned to the occult. Disillusioned with Christianity, he joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society dedicated to ceremonial magic, alchemy, and the study of Kabbalah. It was here that he adopted the magical name "Perdurabo" (I shall endure to the end) and met key figures like William Butler Yeats and Allan Bennett. His time in the Golden Dawn was marked by both intense learning and bitter infighting, ending in a schism that would push Crowley onto his own solitary path.

The Revelation of the Book of the Law

The turning point in Crowley's life came in 1904, during a visit to Cairo with his wife Rose. Through a series of trance states, Crowley claimed to have received a dictation from a spiritual entity named Aiwass, a messenger of the ancient Egyptian god Horus. The result was **The Book of the Law**, a short but dense text that forms the foundation of Thelema. Its first lines declare: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law,

love under will." This "Cairo Working" shattered Crowley's previous magical framework and set him on a new course. He initially struggled with the book's meaning and nearly abandoned it, but over the next several years he came to see it as the central revelation of a new age—the Aeon of Horus.

The phrase "Do what thou wilt" was often misrepresented by the press and his detractors as a simple call to anarchy. Crowley himself insisted that it meant far more. To understand the "True Will" one must engage in rigorous self-discipline, introspection, and often uncomfortable spiritual work. It was not about following whims but about discovering the unique purpose of one's soul. As he wrote, "Every man and every woman is a star." Each star has its own orbit; to "do thy will" is to travel that orbit with precision and harmony, not to crash into other stars.

Thelemic Magick and the Practice of the Will

Crowley spent the rest of his life systematizing and promoting Thelema. He developed a comprehensive system of "Magick" (spelled with a 'k' to distinguish it from stage illusions) as a method for achieving this union with one's true will. His magnum opus, **Magick in Theory and Practice**, remains a cornerstone of modern occult literature. In it, he defined magick as "the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will." This included everything from ritual conjuration to the construction of talismans, meditation, and the use of drugs, sex, and other experiences to alter consciousness.

He established the Abbey of Thelema in Cefalù, Sicily, in 1920, a commune dedicated to living the law of Thelema. It was here that he wrote some of his most important works, including **The Book of Lies** and **The Confessions of Aleister Crowley**. The Abbey also became a source of scandal due to reports of orgiastic rituals, animal sacrifice, and drug use. One of the most notorious incidents involved the death of Raoul Loveday, a disciple who died from apparent poisoning (likely from a contaminated ritual meal) while staying at the Abbey. The ensuing press coverage painted Crowley as a monster, leading to his expulsion from Italy by Mussolini's regime.

The Infamous Reputation: Crowley as "The Wickedest Man in the World"

There is no denying that Aleister Crowley courted controversy. He deliberately used the title "the Beast 666," wore a horned headdress, and openly mocked Christianity and Victorian sexual mores. He experimented with drugs like heroin, cocaine, and mescaline, documented his own bisexuality, and performed "sex magick" rituals that shocked the sensibilities of his era. The popular press, especially the British tabloids, gleefully depicted him as a satanic cult leader. Stories of black masses, human sacrifice, and insanity followed him everywhere.

Yet many of these stories were exaggerated or outright fabricated. Crowley was his own worst enemy when it came to public relations; he loved to needle the establishment and rarely corrected misconceptions. His financial situation was often dire; he published his own books at a loss and frequently sponged off followers. He was a brilliant writer but a notoriously unreliable friend. The **Book of the Law** itself forbids making a spectacle of the Law: "Be good to them, but do not let them know that you love them." Crowley often failed to live up to his own teachings.

His opium addiction in the 1930s took a serious toll on his health and writing. He spent his final years in relative poverty in Hastings, England, still writing and corresponding with a small circle of devotees. He died on December 1, 1947, reportedly from a chronic respiratory infection, though his final words are said to have been "I am perplexed." His funeral was attended by a dozen people; the tabloids printed gleeful obituaries.

The Lasting Influence of Aleister Crowley

Despite his infamy, or perhaps because of it, Aleister Crowley's influence has only grown since his death. His writings have been foundational for many modern spiritual movements, including Wicca, chaos magic, and the

Western esoteric revival. The phrase "Do what thou wilt" was adopted, and often diluted, by the 1960s counterculture. Figures like the Beatles, Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, and Timothy Leary all cited Crowley's works. Rock music and heavy metal culture drew heavily on his imagery and slogans.

Academically, Crowley has been studied as a significant figure in the history of Western esotericism, psychology, and literature. His works on tarot, astrology, and ceremonial magic are still used by practitioners worldwide. The O.T.O. (Ordo Templi Orientis), the Thelemic fraternal organization he headed, continues to have active lodges across the globe. Many modern occultists see him not as a demonic figure but as a flawed but visionary pioneer who broke down the walls of religious repression.

Misinterpretations and the True Meaning of Thelema

The most persistent misunderstanding about "Do what thou wilt" is that it advocates total freedom without responsibility. Crowley was explicit that true will is not the same as desire. "The law of the strong is the law of the weak," he wrote. "Do what thou wilt" does not mean you can do whatever you feel like; it means you must discover what you are meant to do. For Crowley, the greatest sin was not breaking a moral code but failing to fulfill one's own destiny. Thelema is an intensely individualistic path, but it demands great personal rigor.

Another common error is to equate Crowley's system with Satanism. While Crowley used inverted Christian symbols and referred to "the Devil" as a synonym for the creative force, he did not worship Satan as an entity. His "Book of the Law" rejects both God and Devil as dualistic fictions, proclaiming instead a unified conception of the divine as the All. He saw himself as the prophet of a new age, not a servant of an old one.

Conclusion: The Legacy of a Prophet

Aleister Crowley's life was a storm of creativity, scandal, and genuine spiritual insight. "Do what thou wilt" remains a powerful and provocative call to authenticity, a challenge to the herd mentality that Crowley so despised. Whether one views him as a madman, a charlatan, or a true prophet, his impact on modern spirituality, art, and culture is undeniable. His works continue to be read and debated, and the principles of Thelema inspire those seeking a radical path of self-realization. Crowley once wrote, "I have found the Secret of Life. I have found the Secret of Death. I have found the Secret of Love. I have found the Secret of Will." For those who take the time to understand his life, his philosophy offers a difficult but transformative journey—one where the only law is the will of the individual star, moving freely in its orbit of meaning.

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