

FROM MAΓEIA TO MAGIC
ENVISAGING A PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT
IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION¹

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Magic belongs, like 'religion' or 'ritual', among the basic concepts in the study of religions. Nevertheless, it is practically impossible to give an exhaustive survey of the different meanings associated with magic in anthropological and cultural studies, since there is no consensus at all in defining this term that has been used since antiquity: 'Magic is a word with as many definitions as there have been studies of it' summarizes John Middleton in M. Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*.²

The first aim of the present paper is to explain why it is so difficult to conceive of and define magic as a unitary phenomenon. For this purpose I will briefly discuss selected theories on magic that have greatly influenced the way we approach magic today. This retrospective on different positions will lead to some general considerations about the relationship between religion and magic.

Secondly, I will reflect on theoretical approaches to magic as heuristic instruments to read ancient sources starting with a short consideration of two different descriptions of 'magic' within the symbolic systems of ancient religions.

1. *Defining Magic in the Light of Selected Positions
in the History of Research*

a. *'Magic': Interactions Between Common, Etymological
and Scientific Usage*

Magic is not only a scientific category employed in religious, ethnographical, sociological, anthropological and psychological studies. It is also a very popular word within narrative and science fiction: Rowling's *Harry Potter* series or Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* are famous contemporary

1. I thank Ann Jeffers and Anna-Katharina Höpflinger who took the time to read and correct this manuscript.

2. J. Middleton, 'Theories of Magic', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 9 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 81-89 (82).

examples of literary and cinematographic productions where magic plays a central role. In daily language, 'magic' assumes a broad range of usages: it can mean wonderful, exciting, enchanting, or express 'the quality of something producing surprising results'.³ Furthermore, magic is not only a scientific, *etic* category in the study of religions but an *emic* self-definition in various new paganist groups.⁴

The notion of magic is no easier to approach from an etymological point of view. As a translation for μαγεία Liddell and Scott indicate (1) theology of the Magians, (2) magic; and for μάγος (1) Magian, one of a Median tribe, (2) one of the priests and wise men in Persia who interpreted dreams, (3) enchanter, wizard.⁵ Therefore the Greek terms relate 'magic' on the one hand to a particular Persian professional class, and on the other hand to various specialists of particular ritual activities.

Furthermore μαγεία can assume a polemic meaning, defining such rituals and praxis with a pejorative connotation. The Latin *magia* covers the same broad spectrum of meaning, however the pejorative usage is more frequent.⁶ These observations about the etymological components, although very concise, are sufficient to show the multi-layered connotations of this word since its advent in western traditions: specific meanings are combined with value-judgements, distinguishing 'serious' religious specialists, from the 'charlatans' described using the same word.

In the numerous attempts to define magic as a category within scientific discourse, the various meanings and possible associations at the level of etymological and common usage are not necessarily involved. Nevertheless, in approaching such a complex and evasive concept, it is important to be aware of the connotations given to such an elusive term as magic. This term, used for millennia in different cultures and languages and on different levels of communication, associated with various value-judgements ranging from religious and ritual practices considered legitimate or necessary to the absolutely repellent, can hardly be

3. R.E. Allen (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) p. 712.

4. Cf. as an example the Wiccan notion of magic, spelt 'magick' to distinguish it from other usages, J.R. Lewis: *Witchcraft Today: An Encyclopedia of Wiccan and Neopagan Traditions* (Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO; Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 1999) p. 183.

5. H.G. Liddell and R. Scott (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) pp. 992, 1070-71.

6. Following the etymological development of the word, we focus here on μαγεία and *magia*. In both Greek and Latin there are several other correlated notions such as γοητεία, φαρμακεία and *veneficium*, *maleficium*. For semantic implications and intersections of these concepts cf. F. Graf, *Gottesnähe und Schadenzauber. Die Magie in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (München: Beck, 1996), pp. 24-57, F. Graf and S.I. Johnston, 'Magie, Magier', in *DNP* 7 (1999), pp. 662-74 (662-64); M.W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 18-46; and the contribution of M. Becker in this publication, pp. 87-107.

completely detached in its scientific or *etic* usage from all these implications. The difficulties inherent in envisaging magic as a scientific category, are illustrated in the following stylized survey on selected central positions in the history of the study of religion.

b. Survey of Selected Theories on Magic

A broad discussion about the essence and the origin of magic arises towards the end of the nineteenth century. In this scientific context, magic is considered as a universal anthropological and/or sociological category; a wide range of meanings are expressed; the developments are controversial; the approaches to magic are very different. Some of these concepts of magic remain influential in contemporary reflection on magic within the study of religion.⁷ In this short survey it is not possible to deal with all the contributions about magic produced in more than a century. The focus will be restricted to a few selected, characteristic positions, aiming to reconstruct the main stages of the development in approaching magic on a scientific level.

At the end of his monumental work *The Golden Bough*⁸ James George Frazer (1854-1941) reviewed his concepts of evolution in the history of mankind with a suggestive image:

Without dipping so far into the future, we may illustrate the course which thought has hitherto run by likening it to a web woven of three different threads – the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science, if under science we may include those simple truths, drawn from observation of nature, of which men in all ages have possessed a store. Could we then survey the web of thought from the beginning, we should probably perceive it to be at first a chequer of black and white, a patchwork of true and false notions, hardly tinged as yet by the red thread of religion. But carry your eye farther along the fabric and you will remark that, while the black and white chequer still runs through it, there rests on the middle portion of

7. Cf. e.g. H.H. Penner, 'Rationality, Ritual, and Science', in J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs and P.V. McCracken Flesher (eds.), *Religion, Science, and Magic: in Concert and in Conflict* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 11-24; H.S. Versnel, 'Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion', *Numen* 38 (1991): 177-97; E. Thomassen, 'Is Magic a Subclass of Ritual?', in D.R. Jordan, H. Montgomery and E. Thomassen (eds.), *The World of Ancient Magic, Papers from the First International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4-8 May 1997* (Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4; Bergen: The Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999), pp. 55-66.

8. *The Golden Bough* was published several times in different editions: first in 1890 with the subheading 'A Study in Comparative Religion' in two volumes; then in 1900 with the new subheading 'A Study in Magic and Religion' in three volumes; then from 1911 to 1915 with the same subheading in 12 volumes and finally in 1922 in the shortened version quoted above. In 1936 the thirteenth and last volume of the long version of 1911-15 appeared.

the web, where religion has entered most deeply into its texture, a dark crimson stain, which shades off insensibly into a lighter tint as the white thread of science is woven more and more into the tissue.⁹

This quotation illustrates very well two aspects that are central in our context. Firstly we can directly notice the late romantic, dramatic style characterizing *The Golden Bough*; secondly the main chronologically conceived stages of Frazer's theory of evolution are shortly, but clearly presented: magic, religion and finally science. Magic represents the most primitive strategy of the human coping with life and the world: it is the first attempt of man to dominate his hostile environment. Magical rites are performed following similarity and/or contact between different things (sympathetic or contagious magic), but magic in general is based (in Frazer's words) on a false, pre-scientific, assumption, since it is founded on a logical mistake:

The fatal flaw of magic lies not in its general assumption of a sequence of events determined by law, but in its total misconception of the nature of the particular laws which govern that sequence.¹⁰

As the uselessness of magical practices is recognized, supernatural beings are integrated into the image of the world, which allows mankind a more effective way to interact with the world. At this moment the link between man, world and supernatural being can be defined as 'religion'.¹¹ Frazer's position received criticism almost immediately: particularly the concept of a homogenous, continual evolution of human history, starting with magic and leading to science, and also the definition of magic, religion and science as general, universal categories was not considered acceptable even at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Frazer had an enduring influence on the definition of magic as a contrast to religion and was also often used in popular literature.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) approached magic laterally: he in fact focuses on religion, defining it from a sociological, functionalistic point of view. Religion and magic are seen initially as similar, since both are complex systems of beliefs, rituals and myths. But they are radically different, or quite opposite, in their social collocation. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim defines religion as follows: 'Une religion est un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées, c'est-à-dire séparées, interdites, croyances et pratiques

9. J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1950 [1922]), p. 713.

10. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 49.

11. Concerning the passage from magic to religion cf. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 57–8.

qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelée Église, tous ceux qui y adhèrent.¹²

The radical difference between religion and magic lies in their different social function. While religion builds a collective, magic is addressed exclusively to the individual; religion builds a 'church', magic can only have customers.¹³

Bronislaw Malinowski's (1884–1942) writings reflect a new form of scientific approach to magic and religion based on research in the field. His considerations about magic are tightly related to his stays in Mailu (Neuginea) and in the Trobriant islands. Malinowski's definitions of magic and religion are no longer conceived as general categories but seen mainly in the context of the cultures he had directly observed and analysed in his field work. Although the influences of Frazer and Durkheim are evident, his contribution is original; within the scientific discussion about magic, Malinowski's position focuses on psychological aspects, on emotions. Magic is seen as a fundamental stabilizing aspect in 'primitive' culture. The following quotation from *Magic, Science and Religion* illustrates this new dimension in the scientific approach to magic as a ritual technique:

What is the cultural function of magic? We have seen that all the instincts and emotions, all practical activities, lead man into impasses where gaps in his knowledge and the limitations of his early power of observation and reason betray him at a crucial moment. A human

12. E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie* (Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine; Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 6th edn, 1979), p. 65.

13. See Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, pp. 58ff: 'La magie, elle aussi, est faite de croyances et de rites. Elle a, comme la religion, ses mythes et ses dogmes; ils sont seulement plus rudimentaires, sans doute parce que, poursuivant des fins techniques et utilitaires, elle ne perd pas son temps en pures spéculations. Elle a également ses cérémonies, ses sacrifices, ses lustrations, ses prières, ses chants et ses danses. Les êtres qu'invoque le magicien, les forces qu'il met en oeuvre ne sont pas seulement de même nature que les forces et les êtres auxquels s'adresse la religion; très souvent, ce sont identiquement les mêmes... Faudra-t-il donc dire que la magie ne peut être distinguée avec rigueur de la religion; que la magie est pleine de religion, comme la religion de magie et qu'il est, par suite, impossible de les séparer et de définir l'une sans l'autre? Mais ce qui rend cette thèse difficilement soutenable, c'est la répugnance marquée de la religion pour la magie et, en retour, l'hostilité de la seconde pour la première... Voici comment on peut tracer une ligne de démarcation entre ces deux domaines. Les croyances proprement religieuses sont toujours communes à une collectivité déterminée qui fait profession d'y adhérer et de pratiquer les rites qui en sont solidaires. Elles ne sont pas seulement admises, à titre individuel, par tous les membres de cette collectivité; mais elles sont la chose du groupe et elles en font l'unité... Il en est tout autrement de la magie... Il n'existe pas d'Église magique. Entre le magicien et les individus eux-mêmes, il n'y a pas de liens durables qui en fassent les membres d'un même corps moral, comparable à celui qui forment les fidèles d'un même dieu, les observateurs d'un même culte. Le magicien a une clientèle, non une Église...'

organism reacts to this in spontaneous outbursts, in which rudimentary modes of behaviour and rudimentary beliefs in their efficiency are engendered. Magic fixes upon these beliefs and rudimentary rites and standardizes them into permanent traditional forms. Thus magic supplies primitive man with a number of ready-made ritual acts and beliefs, with a definitive mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation. It enables man to carry out with confidence his important tasks, to maintain his poise and his mental integrity in fits of anger, in the throes of hate, of unrequited love, of despair and anxiety. The function of magic is to ritualize man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear. Magic expresses the greater value for man of confidence over doubt, of steadfastness over vacillation, of optimism over pessimism.¹⁴

In the work of Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902–83), the interrelation between field-work observation and theory on magic became very important:

All scientific theory is eclectic for a scientist takes the hypotheses of his predecessors and examines them by logical tests and checks them by observation. By these means he selects what he finds to be valid in each hypothesis and works them into a co-ordinated system. He adds his own observations and inferences and these in turn serve as hypothesis till they are verified by independent workers and are recognised as true by the consensus of specialised opinion. I have worked for several years on the subject of magic both by reading and by repeated observation of magical operations among savage peoples in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and have therefore had occasion to acquaint myself with most theories of magic and test them by direct observation.¹⁵

This synthesis of theoretical approaches and direct observation leads to a critical analysis of the previous theoretical position on magic.¹⁶ Evans-Pritchard approaches phenomena such as 'religion' or 'magic' as parts of a whole culture, arguing that it is possible to understand them only within a determinate culture, which the anthropologist is living in and dealing with. The link between *etic* and *emic* categories is stressed; magic can be only described in a clear context, as a partial aspect of a whole system of thought:

14. B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1954), p. 90.

15. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, 'The Intellectualist (English) Interpretation of Magic', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, IV, 3 (1973): 123–42 (123).

16. See V. Merten, *Eine gezielte Beschreibung. Edward E. Evans-Pritchards Beitrag zur Theorie der Magie* (Zürich: Fadenspiel, 1994).

To try to understand magic as an idea in itself, what is the essence of it, as it were, is a hopeless task. It becomes more intelligible when it is viewed not only in relation to empirical activities but also in relation to other beliefs, as part of a system of thought; for it is certainly often the case that it is primarily not so much a means of controlling nature as of preventing witchcraft and other mystical forces operating against human endeavour by interfering with the empirical measures taken to attain an end.¹⁷

The focus is no longer on the question about the origins of magic and its development in human history and/or society; magic is considered instead as part of the complex web of belief and practice systems.

This schematic survey of selected positions in the history of research into magic aimed firstly to emphasize the diversity of approaches and points of view represented by the several authors. Secondly it is important to point out the fact that the discussion about the definition of magic is always strongly related to the definition of religion.¹⁸ Thirdly it is also essential to consider the direct scientific context, where a determinate definition of magic is situated.

The selected positions do not reproduce the complete discussion on magic. Nevertheless the survey illustrates some basic tendencies in the different strategies of argumentation of the selected authors. Summarizing the relevant aspects for our purpose, it is important to distinguish between functionalistic definitions of magic from substantialistic definitions. A further fundamental difference lies between 'intellectualistic' theories of magic and definitions based on empirical research and, finally, between theories of magic focusing on a general, historical, or psychological-individual phenomenon. In other words: the plurality of definitions of magic arises not only due to different premises, different kinds of historical or ethnographical sources but also by the different aims and points of interest focused on by a determinate definition of 'magic'. The broad range of definitions of magic proposed in the last century or more of research in the study of religions, anthropology and sociology, legitimate a general scepticism toward the possibility of describing completely different kinds of practices with a general, abstract definition produced in a tradition where magic has been mainly considered as a secondary, non-relevant issue, often associated with negative connotations.¹⁹

17. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 111.

18. For a more complete introductory comparative reading on the classical positions on religion and magic, see G. Cunningham, *Religion and Magic: Approaches and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

19. The history of the discovery of the Greek magical papyri offers a good illustration of the ambivalent status of magic as an issue in scientific research. See K. Preisendanz, 'Zur

As a possible way to escape this congested situation, it has been proposed to renounce a general definition of magic and to concentrate instead on concrete practices or sources in their peculiarity.²⁰ This option is surely possible if the comparative aspect does not play a role. Others suggest the use of definitions as heuristic tools, as instruments of orientation. This option seems also practicable and can be useful for a comparative perspective. The latter option must nevertheless be associated with further methodological reflection on the relationship between the chosen theoretical approach (used as a heuristic tool), the selected sources that are to be analysed, and the historical, religious, social and cultural frame, where the sources have been produced.²¹ A heuristic usage of a definition of magic leads to the question about the performance of a theoretical approach for the analysis of concrete religious materials: in the case of this essay, ancient iconographic and textual sources in the broadest context of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures.

2. Performance of Implied Definitions of Magic in a Few Selected Ancient Texts

To illustrate this rather abstract introduction to the general problem of defining magic in the study of religions, we will now consider some examples of ancient texts dealing with magic: a few spells from the collection of the *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM) and a passage in Apuleius' *Apology*. Both, the selected charms and Apuleius' *Apology*, contain the term 'magic'. This will allow us to read these sources side by side, although they belong to very different linguistic, religious, social and cultural contexts. Since it is not possible to give here a complete analysis of the quoted texts, we direct our attention toward a few elements: specifically the meaning of magic in the sources and the situation, where they were possibly employed.

Überlieferungsgeschichte der spätantiken Magie', in *Aus der Welt des Buches, Festgabe zum 70. Geburtstag von G. Leyh* (Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen Beiheft, 75; Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1950), pp. 223–40; H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press; 1992), pp. xli–liii. Cf. also D.E. Aune, 'Magic in Early Christianity', in *ANRW* II.23 (1980), pp. 1507–57 (1507–10).

20. Cf. as an example for this position H.G. Kippenberg, 'Einleitung: Zur Kontroverse über das Verstehen fremden Denkens', in H.G. Kippenberg and B. Luchesi (eds.), *Magie: Die sozialwissenschaftliche Kontroverse über das Verstehen fremden Denkens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2nd edn, 1995), pp. 9–51.

21. Cf. also M. Becker, 'Die "Magie"-Problematik in der Antike. Genügt eine sozialwissenschaftliche Erfassung?', *ZRGG* 54 (2002): 1–22.

a. PGM I.232–247 and 262–347²²

The magic spells we consider here are heterogeneous both in their contents and in their formal structure. PGM I.232–247 contains a spell for memory:²³

Take hieratic papyrus and write the prescribed names with Hermaic myrrh ink. And once you have written them as they are prescribed, wash them off into spring water from 7 springs and drink the water on an empty stomach for 7 days while the moon is in the east. But drink a sufficient amount.

This is the writing on the strip of papyrus. 'καμβρη χαμβρη' σιξιωφι 'Αρπον Χνουφι βριντατηνωφριβρισκυλμααρουαζαρβαμεσεν κριφι νιπτουμι χμουμαωφ Ακτιωφι αρτωσι βιβιου βιβιου σφη σφη νουσι νουσι σιεγω σιεγω νουχα νουχα λινουχα λινουχα χυχβα χυχβα καξιω χυχβα δητοφωθ ιι αα οο υυ ηη εε ωω.'

After doing these things wash the writing off and drink as is prescribed.

This is also the composition of the ink: myrrh troglitis, 4 drams; 3 karian figs, 7 pits of Nikolaus dates, 7 dried pinecones, 7 piths of the single-stemmed wormwood, 7 wings of the Hermaic ibis, spring water. When you have burned the ingredients, prepare them and write.

The text encompasses four distinct parts: (a) The function of the spell is declared by the first word, *μνημονική*; (b) detailed instructions over the performance of the specialist follow, then (c) there is a long list of *voces magicae* that have to be written on the piece of papyrus, and (d) in conclusion, a recipe to prepare the special myrrh ink of Hermes. These parts are correlated to a different usage of written and spoken language. The instructions resume a series of actions the specialist has to carry out exactly as written to reach a satisfying result. The list of *voces magicae* illustrate a different dimension of language: the meaning of the words seems not to be as important as are the phonetic structure of the names and syllables and their sequence.²⁴ The power of the word sustains the

22. The English translations are from Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, for the Greek text cf. K. Preisendanz (ed.), *Papyri Graecae Magicae – Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (Sammlung Wissenschaftlicher Kommentare; Stuttgart: Teubner, 2nd edn, 1973).

23. Cf. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, p. 2.

24. On the usage, structure and possible hidden significance of the *voces magicae* cf. W.M. Brashear, 'The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography (1928–1994)', *ANRW* II.18.5 (1995), pp. 3380–3684 (3429–3438, 3576ff). Brashear (3429) reports a polemical description of the *voces magicae* and their effect in a letter St Jerome writes to the widow Theodora: 'and altogether refused to embrace Armagil, Barbelon, Abraxas, Balsamum, and the absurd Leusibora. Such are the portentous names which, to excite the minds of unlearned men and weak women, they pretend to draw from

being.²⁹ In 277–97 the text lists the several actions necessary to constrain the *daimon* to obey the magician. In 294–96 there are *voces magicae* making palindromic word-constellations to be written on a piece of linen involved in the ritual described above. The rest of the text is dedicated to the spoken part of the practice: the hymn to Apollo with some incomplete metric elements³⁰ and again *voces magicae* that this time must be pronounced (297–328). The spoken text assumes two different connotations: the praise shows the divine power by combining Apollo with the names of other powerful figures.³¹ The *voces magicae* seem again to operate by their particular sounds, which are incomprehensible to outsiders. Before indicating how to dismiss the spirit, lines 328–31 explain in detail what kind of knowledge the performer of the ritual may obtain by the presence of a divine figure. The passage deals with the essence of the μαγικὴ ἐμπειρία, that encompasses several techniques like prophecy, divination with epic verses, several practices with dreams, harming with diseases, and some more not expressly named techniques. Magic is described here as a practical knowledge³² dealing with different techniques whereby the communication between the specialist and the gods plays a fundamental role. In this text the spirit is supposed to be able to give to the magician information about the whole magic art.

The structure of the spell gives further information about the communication between the god and the magician: since the performer of the charm is protected by the sprig of laurel from the presence of the *daimon* and must not fear him, he possesses great authority over the god. The magical technique enables the specialist to call the god, to bring him revelation of divine knowledge, and to send him back when he wants. The

29. The use of mysterious signs stresses the power of the spell. Cf. Brashear, 'The Greek Magical Papyri', p. 3440: 'For an illiterate, ignorant clientele any sign or symbol, be it alphabetic, cryptographic or simply a product of the magician's fantasy, has strong magical potential'.

30. Cf. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 10, note 56, and Brashear, 'The Greek Magical Papyri', p. 3420.

31. Cf. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pp. xlv–xlvi: 'The historian of religion will be especially interested in the kind of syncretism represented in the Greek magical papyri. This syncretism is more than a mixture of diverse elements from Egyptian, Greek, Babylonian, and Jewish religion, with a few sprinkles of Christianity. Despite the diversity of texts, there is in the whole corpus a tendency toward assimilation and uniformity'. Cf. also H.D. Betz, 'Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri', in H.D. Betz, *Hellenismus und Urchristentum. Gesammelte Aufsätze I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), pp. 209–29 (218).

32. Liddell, Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 544, translate ἐμπειρία as 'experience' and 'practice, without knowledge of principles, esp. in medicine, empiricism'. Cf. also F. Graf, 'How to Cope with a Difficult Life: A View of Ancient Magic', in P. Schäfer and H.G. Kippenberg (eds.), *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (SHR, 75; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 93–114 (113–14).

relation between human being and god is reversed, during the ritual the magician has power over the *daimon*.

The two examples selected from the collection of spells in *PGM I* address the magician, the specialist, not his possible addressees. For instance, in *PGM I.262–347* it is clear that only the performer can be involved: the encounter with the god serves to consolidate his position as an expert in magical techniques.

We know little about the context in which this literature is embedded. The texts in *PGM* date between the second century BCE and the fifth CE; they are situated in Graeco-Roman Egypt. *PGM I* is dated in late antiquity, at the end of the fourth or in the fifth century CE. Since we know little about the usage and context where the *PGM* were produced,³³ the information given by the sources themselves is particularly precious. The charms do not contain considerations about the mechanisms that sustain the efficacy of the magical practice nor offer a critical analysis of the phenomena implied by the charms. These texts are documents formerly used by religious experts for their work; they belong to collections where this kind of knowledge was collected and transmitted. The spells represent an *emic* insight on magic seen as a practical discipline.

b. Apuleius' Apology 26³⁴

In his *Apology*, Apuleius, a philosopher living in Oea, in the Roman province of Africa, presents himself in a trial, in a situation where he has to demonstrate his innocence against the accusation that he compelled his wife Pudentilla to marry him with magic. The text, written in the middle of the second century CE, is conceived as a defence speech and is written in a refined rhetorical style.³⁵ In *Apology 26*, Apuleius gives a brief definition of magic that is very important for our context. Apuleius argues here on

33. See Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, p. 1, and Brashear, 'The Greek Magical Papyri', p. 3492. This chronological situation is referred to in the production of *PGM* as a book, that seems to be more like a compilation, collection or anthology than an 'original' handbook for magicians: 'All this makes it obvious that the III-VI-VII a. A.D. texts on papyrus and parchment in our collections today cannot be the original works of the scribes who penned them, but are rather compilations from a multitude of various sources – PGM I 46's claim to be compiled from "thousands of sources" being colloquially exaggerated!' (Brashear, 'The Greek Magical Papyri', p. 3415).

34. For a critical edition cf. V. Hunink, *Apuleius of Madauros: Pro Se De Magia (Apologia)*, vol. I: *Introduction, Text, Bibliography, Indexes* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1997).

35. For the purposes of the present paper, *Apology 26* is considered as a literary source. It is not possible here to discuss the problem of the historicity of the trial. For an initial orientation cf. P. Schenk, 'Einleitung', in *Apuleius: De Magia* (eingeleitet, übersetzt und mit interpretierenden Essays versehen von J. Hammerstaedt, P. Habermehl, F. Lamberti, A.M. Ritter and P. Schenk; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), pp. 23–57 (39–45), Hunink, *Apuleius of Madauros*, p. 11–12, and the paper of U. Riemer, 'Fascinating but forbidden? Magic in Rome', in this volume, pp. 160–72.

two distinct levels; magic is presented from two different points of view. On the one side, magic is described as a divine, ancient art, belonging to a most respectable historical, religious and social context with references to Persian magicians and a quotation of Plato (26.1–4):

Auditisne magiam, qui eam temere accusatis, artem esse dis immortalibus acceptam, colendi eos ac venerandi pergnaram, piam scilicet et divini scientem, iam inde a Zoroastre et Oromaze auctoribus suis nobilem, caelitum antistitam, quipped qui inter prima regalia docetur nec ulli temere inter Persas concessum est magum esse, haud magis quam regnare? Idem Plato in alia sermocinatione de Zalmoxi quodam Thraci generis, sed eiusdem artis uiro ita scriptum reliquit: τὰς ἐπιφθὰς εἶναι τοὺς λόγους τοὺς καλοὺς.

On the other side, resuming the accusation against him, he reproduces the common opinion that a magician is a specialist disposed of great power over the gods (26.6–7):

Sin uero more vulgari eum isti propriae magum existimant, qui communione loquendi cum deis immortalibus ad omnia quae velit incredibili[a] quadam vi cantaminum polleat, oppido mirror, cur accusare non timuerint quem posse tantum fatentur. Neque enim tam occulta et diuina potentia caueri potest itidem ut cetera.

In contrast to the examples in *PGM*, Apuleius describes magic not as an insider, but intentionally as an outsider, from the perspective of a philosopher. Although his interest (within this literary context) is to demonstrate his innocence, he considers magic almost with a scientific, rational intention. The historical–philosophical background of magic emphasized by Apuleius in *Apology* 26.1–4 projects a positive light on this phenomenon. Furthermore, the definition stresses the importance of the communication between the magician and the gods: through the spells the magician gains a great power over the immortal beings and is able to obtain whatever he wants. In this polemical, rhetorical context, Apuleius describes the magical power as absolute, uncontrollable by outsiders. It works through the incredible power of words ('communione loquendi cum deis immortalibus', 'incredibili vi cantaminum').³⁶

c. Magic in Antiquity Between Practice and Conceptualization

A brief comparison of the sources mentioned in this paper, the *PGM* and Apuleius' *Apology*, highlights immediately the differences in the language

36. See V. Hunink, *Apuleius of Madauros: Pro Se De Magia (Apologia)*, vol. II: *Commentary* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1997), p. 90; F. Graf, 'Theories of Magic in Antiquity', in P. Mirecki and M. Meyer (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (RGRW, 141; Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 93–103.

employed, the implied level of literary quality, and the perspective on magic. *PGM* represents the inner view of the magician practising his work and dealing with recipes and detailed prescriptions that should lead to positive results. The *Apology* represents a philosophical approach to a common, recurrent practice that avoids a clear judgement. Apuleius is not arguing that magic does not exist, he argues only that he did not have recourse to such a technique.

Although these documents represent only a very narrow range of ancient sources on magic they testify to a multi-layered discourse on magic: magic is a self-definition of a widespread practice, magic is also an issue in a philosophical reflection on human relations and on possible links between the human and divine worlds. Moreover, although both the spells in *PGM* I and the defence speech of Apuleius, presuppose a wide range of terms around this sort of practice, for the general designation of the phenomena, from *emic* and *etic* perspectives, μαγεία and *magia* are used. Finally it is interesting to remark that both texts do not deal with the relationship between the practice of magic and the religious system that they implicitly refer to. Magic is considered in both cases as a possibility to reach special goals by influencing directly the gods or simply by recourse to some divine elements. The religious symbol system as a whole builds the undisputed frame where the practice is embedded.

3. Relating Sources with Theories: A (Provisory) Conclusion

This introduction to the problematic concept of magic within the study of religions started with a concise survey of selected, classical positions. A complex mix of substantial, functional, empirical, sociological, psychological and cultural arguments characterize the discussion of magic; magic can be considered in radical opposition to religion or identified with it. There are approaches focusing on the origin of magic or on the social and/or individual performance of magical practices. As we have seen, the range of possibilities is considerable indeed; in some cases the plurality of theories of magic has directly led to the dissolution of the concept.

On the other hand, reading ancient sources on magic stresses some interesting aspects of the concept of magic, at least in its *emic* usage within a particular culture. Contrasting the strikingly different texts of the *PGM* spells and Apuleius' *Apology*, we recognize different usages of the concept of μαγεία and *magia* within the inner-cultural discourse. While in the *PGM* texts magic is the self-definition of a practical activity encompassing different techniques of action and of language, the rhetorical and forensic context of the *Apology* reveals a rational, rather theoretical approach to a phenomenon belonging to the ordinary experience of the author. Although we did not presuppose a particular definition of magic when

approaching the ancient texts, we observe that the sources themselves propose a general term.

Can we relate to these considerations? Where is a possible link between modern theories on magic with their ambivalent complexity on the one hand and the ancient sources with their (more or less) abstract concepts on the other? Is there an interest in searching for such a link between the theoretical approaches and the historical religious dimension of magic? In a provisory, tentative answer to these questions, the following aspects must be pointed out.

The theories on magic from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day and the ancient texts on magic are primarily historically related, since they can all be seen as products within the Mediterranean-European history of religions. Some of the classics quoted above grounded their definition of magic on ancient sources, particularly from the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman world.³⁷ Magic – the etymological aspect stresses this even more – is a typical European, perhaps even eurocentric category. Consequently, a critical analysis of ancient sources and a critical reception of modern theories on magic can both be seen as necessary phases in the same interpretative process sustained by an accurate hermeneutical reflection.

In modern study, theories of magic are always related to theories of religion. In the sources considered, on the contrary, the relation between magic (in an *emic* perspective) and the religious reference system is not explicitly explained, it is simply presupposed. In the *PGM* spells the recurring deities can be reinterpreted as an implicit link, while Apuleius, arguing that magic must be related to the 'community of speech with the immortal gods', situated magic automatically within the religious symbol system. The strong, but not explicitly explained connection between magic and religion on the level of the historical documents requires in my opinion also a theoretical approach from the *etic* perspective.

Envisaging all these aspects, it seems reasonable to make use of a heuristic definition of magic and religion that is strong enough to bring methodological clarity but open enough to respect the particularity of the sources we are dealing with. Religion could be provisionally described as a symbol system producing images of the world that guarantee an orientation on the social and the individual level, transforming uncontrollable dimensions of human life into at least partially controllable ones; therefore the religious symbol system must be considered as a general system of communication.³⁸ Magic, as a particular aspect of the religious symbol system, directs the communication process to the total control of

37. See Frazer, *The Golden Bough*.

38. See C. Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87–125; N. Luhmann, 'Die

uncontrollable aspects. Approaching magic as a system of communication, it is interesting to look for particular articulations of its message. As a working hypothesis, the focus could be guided by typical constellations of the magical message that are articulated on several levels and overlap with different forms of communication at the same time. The oral language in the forms of prose, poetics, *voces magicae*, and the written word in the forms of descriptions, lists, magical symbols, again *voces magicae* (but in an optical effect forming palindromes or particular shapes) constitutes an important repertoire. Images and visual representations seem also to play a central role; the aspect of materiality in general is particularly stressed (ingredients for recipes, artefacts, amulets). Furthermore, with regard to the aspect of the performance, several actions and action successions with different modalities to realize them is also fundamental. All these levels contribute to the magical communication a particular density. Finally, a functionalistic approach orientated on theories of communication could allow an integration between rational, critical reflections on magic within the same symbol system. In fact, the magical communication includes several actors: the gods, the specialists performing and transmitting the knowledge, the users and clients, as well as the spectators and sceptics.

gesellschaftliche Funktion der Religion', in N. Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 3rd edn, 1992), F. Stolz, *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3rd edn, 2001), pp. 101–45.

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A KIND OF MAGIC

Understanding Magic in the New Testament
and its Religious Environment

EDITED BY MICHAEL LABAHN AND
BERT JAN LIETAERT PEERBOLTE





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PREFACE

The phenomenon of magic in antiquity has received much attention over the past century. General introductions have been written, collections of case studies have been presented, and numerous publications present the material remains of the practice of magic in antiquity.¹ The study of magic in antiquity has thus resulted in a greater availability of material relevant to biblical scholars. Still, it is precisely here that work remains to be done. How should, for instance, the impact of Morton Smith's *Jesus the Magician* be assessed thirty years after he published his work? And how should the borderlines be drawn between stories of magic and miracles in early Judaism and Christianity? What do Jewish elements in pagan magical papyri tell us of the religious interaction between Jews and the surrounding world? Did Christians take part in the practice of magic? Is 'magic' a valid category in attempts to understand the traditions of early Christianity?

This volume offers a collection of essays, earlier versions of which have been presented in the Early Christianity between Judaism and Hellenism seminar of the European Association of Biblical Studies during its Annual Meeting in Groningen, July 2004. It is the aim of this seminar to study Early Christianity and its literature within its social, religious, and historical contexts.² As a result, case studies are given here on magic in early Judaism, in pagan antiquity, and in early Christianity itself.

Part One of this collection of essays focuses on general remarks and hermeneutical aspects. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati faces in her article the problem of magic in the study of religion by giving a critical introduction to recent contributions and by analysing ancient sources. She is offering new perspectives for further studies including the recommendation of including theories of communication. Emmanuel Nwaoru gives a contemporary African perspective on the study of magic in the Bible.

1. Bibliographical references to the literature on magic are given in most of the individual articles in this volume.

2. Earlier results from this same seminar that were published in the present series are: J. Zangenbergh and M. Labahn (eds.), *Christians as a Religious Minority in a Multicultural City. Modes of Interaction and Identity Formation in Early Imperial Rome* (JSNTSup, 243 = ESCO; London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004); M. Labahn and B.J. Lietaert Peerbolte (eds.), *Wonders Never Cease: The Purpose of Narrating Miracle Stories in the New Testament and its Religious Environment* (LNTS, 288 = ESCO; London, New York: T&T Clark, 2006).