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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP MAGIC—RELIGION

H.S. VERSNEL

Summary

The well-known substantialist—'Frazerian'—definitions of magic as distinct from religion by its immediate and individual goals, the concomitant manipulative and coercive attitude, the instrumental and mechanical type of action etc., have been under attack for more than half a century. Anthropologists in particular have argued that no meaningful contrast between religion and magic can be gained from this approach and that our notion 'magic' is a modern-western biased construct which does not fit representations of other cultures. Consequently, in the view of some of them, the term 'magic' should be altogether avoided. Furthermore, with respect to the ancient and early modern world, in which the opposition religion-magic is supposed to have originated, it is argued that magic and religion function *exclusively* as value-judgments, terms indicating 'magic' being exploited to stigmatize illegitimate or undesired (religious) behaviour of socially or culturally deviant groups.

In the present article it is argued that—although admittedly this functionalist approach has yielded remarkable and lasting results—rejection of the term 'magic' will soon turn out to be unworkable and, in fact, is putting the cart before the horse. From an etic point of view—which in the view of the author is the only possible way to conduct scholarly discourse—it will be impossible to do cultural research without the aid of heuristic instruments such as—at least broad, polythetic or prototypical—definitions. And, if possible at all, it would be utterly unpractical to completely eliminate religion as one of the obvious models of contrast.

This position is substantiated with some practical instances from the Graeco-Roman world. It is shown that, at least in the context of (magical) curse-tablets and—related but clearly distinct—(religious) prayers for justice or vengeance, the ancient authors were clearly aware of the very same distinctions modern people normally associate with the notions of magic and religion.

Definitions and their critics

Magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts.¹ Scholars in earlier decades of this century were luckier: they knew both what magic was and how to find it. They simply opposed its characteristics to those of either science or religion, which they knew as well. It all began with Frazer's tripartite distinction between science, religion and magic,

the first being defined as knowledge which is actually or potentially verifiable by research, the second and third belonging to the category of dogmatic knowledge, the truth of which is asserted without regard to empirical verification. In his view, the basic difference between the latter two was that religion is intrinsically and essentially unverifiable, whereas magic is not, but will, if put to an empirical test, prove false. Magic, as "bastard science" or "pretended art", and science proper alike claim to offer operational knowledge which can be exploited to attain control over the environment and to achieve concrete goals directly, without mediation. Magic and religion have in common that they refer to supernatural forces and powers, a reality different from normal reality. It will be evident that there is a tension between the notion of non-mediation (that is: without needing a *personal* medium other than the magician or his client—of course not without instrumental aid) and that of the supernatural agent, a tension which was bound to surface in subsequent discussions.

In the framework of these Frazerian definitions of religion and magic—I will be silent on science, which is outside the scope of my issue²—a set of distinctions has been elaborated which have dominated the discussion years after their formalization in the much-quoted catalogue of 11 oppositions by the anthropologist Goode.³ Though the serious criticism that had already been expressed in the thirties has been repeated and elaborated with ever increasing emphasis in recent decades, the following distinctions—a selection of the most important items—are still generally applied, at any rate outside the field of anthropology.

1) *Intention*. Magic is employed to achieve concrete, mostly individual goals. Religion is not primarily purpose-motivated, or at most focusses on intangible long-term goals which concern collective issues of society.⁴

2) *Attitude*. Magic is essentially manipulative. Man is both the initiator and the executor of processes he controls with the aid of knowledge which he has, or which is put, at his disposal. Religion views man as dependent upon powers outside his sphere of influence. This entails an attitude of submission and supplication. The opposition is thus one between "instrumental, coercive manipulation" and "personal, supplicative negotiation."

3) *Action*. Magic is characterized by the attention paid to the technical side of the manipulation, precision of formula and *modus operandi*. Professional experience is often required since the knowledge is secret. But if all the instructions are observed, there is an expectation of direct results. In so far as religion, on the other hand, admits of intended effects (prayer for health, votives, private oracles), the results are never dependent upon a professional specialist, though his skill may be required as a mediating factor, nor on the suppliant, but solely and exclusively on the free favour of sovereign gods.

4) *Social/moral evaluation*. Since the goals of magic often run counter to the interests of other members of the society, magic easily acquires the connotation of an anti-social or at least a-social activity, thus leading to the Durkheimian dichotomy: magic is immoral, anti-social, deviant, whereas religion has positive social functions, is cohesive and solidarizing.

One might, of course, elaborate upon distinctions but these suffice for our purpose. In order to illustrate their influence I note that all, except the last, are implied in the definition given by no less an anthropologist than Sir Edmund Leach in 1964: "The term magic denotes a complex of belief and action on the basis and by means of which persons and groups may attempt to control their environment in such a way as to achieve their ends, the efficacy of such control being untested and in some cases untestable by the methods of empirical science. The core of the magical act is that it rests on empirically untested belief and that it is an effort at control. The first aspect distinguishes it from science, the second from religion."⁵

Practically no item in this scheme has escaped criticism. It has been demonstrated that typically "mechanical" (*ex opere operato*) magical devices lie at the heart of religious (*ex opere operantis*) ceremonies, most revealingly in the grand debate between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the 16th century.⁶ As far as antiquity is concerned, the typical rites of primitive Roman religion have induced its characterization as a "magical religion". *Vice versa*, some expressions of the magical papyri of late antiquity sometimes cannot be distinguished from religious confession. It has also

been shown that magic can have social goals (for instance collective spells and devices for a good harvest or against catastrophes) and religion a-social effects (hermits, sectarianism, destructive forms of crisis-cults). Again, that people do not always display more belief in the "automatic" effects of spell or amulet—not showing any surprise or even disappointment when they do not yield the intended result—than they have in prayer. And it has been argued that there is no essential or generally valid distinction between spell and prayer, since they sometimes exploit similar formulae in similar circumstances.⁷

Once we have arrived at this point it is only a step to the final conclusion, defended by some scholars, and first by R.R. Marett, that any distinction between religion and magic is an illusion based on a variety of fallacies, especially ethnocentric projection and historical distortion.⁸ The modern concept of magic, so these critics reason, is the product of an evolution which started in late antiquity in the context of Jewish-Christian conflict with remnants of pagan cult and which acquired its definitive Western connotations under the double influence of a comparable theological conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics in the 16th century and the subsequent evolution of Western scientific ideas. Magic and its above-listed symptoms are an essentially modern-Western, rationalistic and biased concept and as such quite unsuitable for application to the study of non-Western cultures where similar dichotomies cannot always be demonstrated, either terminologically or conceptually. Such criticism, moreover, derived considerable support from the discovery that in addition to all other similarities between magic and religion, they also could exercise identical functions on the level of social psychology e.g. as conductors of socially unmanageable emotions or frustrations.

Consequently, since Marett many anthropologists have expressed serious doubts as to the utility or relevance of the distinction and some have even advised that the terms 'magic' and 'religion' should be avoided altogether.⁹ It is noteworthy, however, that some of them, among whom the most influential, accepted this surrender only because, and as long as, the existing definitions did not work out or were being disputed. Cl. Kluckhohn (o.c. n. 9), for

example, does feel that the terms 'religion' and 'magic' may be meaningfully contrasted at the common-sense level, just as the terms "boy, youth, man, old man, which neither physiologists nor psychologists will wholly discard but which they will also not attempt to include among the elementary units and basic concepts upon which they rear their sciences."

The result is a confusing spectrum of divergent theories between the extremes of a Tylorian dichotomy between theistic religion and magic seen as mutually exclusive and incompatible concepts¹⁰ and the view that magic—if distinguishable at all from religion—is merely an aspect of it. In that case magic is not to be contrasted with religion itself but to be compared with or opposed to other components of religion, for instance prayer or sacrifice.¹¹ Significantly, between those who, enthusiastically or reluctantly, continue to adhere to some kind of a definitional distinction either between magic and religion, or between magic and other aspects of religion, some striking correspondences can be noted:

1) there is a marked tendency to single out manipulative-coercive versus emotional-supplicatory attitudes as the essential distinction between magic and (other components of) religion,¹²

2) the contrast is, since Ruth Benedict, generally viewed in terms of theoretical extremes functioning as conceptual tools to analyse a reality that, of course, will seldom or never answer to these ideal-typical "abstractions". Reality, instead, generally displays a "continuum" between the two extremes,¹³

3) *all* the theoreticians start from their own concept of magic, whether in order to defend or refute its correctness, relevance, applicability, general validity, ethnocentricity, (dis)similarity with religion etc. etc. without, however, always making explicit their own definition. Practically no one escapes moments of reduced concentration when they suddenly fall into using unsophisticated common sense concepts, though they sometimes betray their awareness of the lapse by putting the term magic between inverted commas or adding "so-called". One problem is that you cannot talk about magic without using the term magic. Using a term entails having a concept, even if to reject its applicability. Another problem is that magic is not always magic.

A field-test: the Graeco-Roman world

Let us illustrate the latter statements with a few examples from the discussion on magic in antiquity. In antiquity the term *magos/magus* had a double meaning: Persian priest (originally belonging to the tribe of the Magi) and enchanter, wizard, with predominantly negative overtones: charlatan, imposter.¹⁴ The former and original one is responsible for the fact that the negative connotations associated with the latter could not exercise an unrestrained tyranny. Partly because of the strange, exotic and shady rituals of the Persian fire-cult the term came to usurp connotations of existing Greek terms for sorcery etc. such as *goès*, sorcerer, magician, which nourished negative connotations as well.¹⁵ In the early imperial period, however, the negative aspects of *magus*, *magicus*, *magia* and other terms belonging to the complex of magic and sorcery underwent significant changes. In the official language the whole "magic complex" was associated or identified with—and just as eagerly persecuted as—indecent, un-Roman and suspected religious currents, for which the usual terms were *superstitio*, *prava religio*, *vel sim.* Quite often, for instance, we cannot distinguish whether Chaldei were persecuted on the charge of sorcery, or because they advocated religious convictions which were, for whatever reason, not appreciated by the Roman officials. In fact, the two could obviously be regarded as identical whenever this was useful either socially or politically, as has been demonstrated by P. Brown in his innovative, albeit somewhat overdrawn treatment of the accusations against sorcerers in late antiquity.¹⁶

Combining the sociological theories of Durkheim and Mauss with Merton's theories on social deviance, scholars like J.Z. Smith¹⁷ have, for this period of antiquity, adopted a strictly social definition of magic, not marked by a specific type of attitude or action or object, but exclusively as an instrument of social disqualification. A process of reclassification had made magic an assemblage of deviant and illegitimate beliefs and related practices. Magic was now—in some sectors of society—defined as "practices which were impious, heretic, demonic or fraudulent" and "whether or not a particular idea or attitude was said to be magical depended mainly on who said it, and the persuasiveness of the label depended mainly on the weight of authority behind it". These are

both quite apposite quotations from the observations of Hildred Geertz on Tudor and Stuart England where a similar redefinition took place. In the words of Phillips: "The category 'magic', then, has utility for the study of Roman religion, but only in the context of the person employing it".¹⁸

This sociological approach has been and proves still to be extremely fruitful for our interpretation of certain patterns of conduct in Roman times. It allows us to understand why "magical" practices such as for instance miraculous healings could be either lauded as testimonies of the power of the god in whose name they were performed, or meet with suspicion, persecution and condemnation if regarded as manifestations of *prava religio*, inspired by demonic powers.¹⁹ Consequently, one of the problems of miracle workers was to convince the world that they were not *magi* but took their inspiration from "legitimate" sources.²⁰ Apollonius of Tyana, the famous miracle worker of the first century A.D., found it necessary to explain that he could understand the language of birds or predict earth-quakes, *not* because he was a *magus* but simply because he lived on a diet that made his body hyper-sensitive to vibrations of the air. Jesus had to defend himself against the imputation that his power to do miracles derived from demonic forces. Pagans in the first three centuries A.D. accused Christians of magical practices (next to incest, cannibalism and atheism) and got it all repaid in the fourth and fifth century, when they were confronted with the very same accusations.²¹ In sum, accusations of magic could function as a social and political weapon to diabolize and eliminate the opponent.

Yet this social function of magic by no means precludes the existence of more concrete 'substantive' implications of the term. As I shall argue *infra*, apart from an aspect of social illegitimacy there were also more formal characteristics associated with magical practice. If one really wishes literary support for this truism there is the accusation against Apuleius to prove it.²² This is granted for instance by a faithful follower of J.Z. Smith in one of the best short accounts of this issue: D.E. Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity" (o.c. n. 16). In keeping with the functionalistic approach, he writes: "Magic is defined as that form of religious deviance whereby individual or social goals are sought by means alternate to those

normally sanctioned by the dominant religious institution''. And he regards magic as a species of the genus religion: "Magic appears to be as universal a feature of religion as deviant behaviour is of human societies''. In the meantime we observe that the expression "seeking individual or social goals" and the term "means" unequivocally refer to 'old-fashioned' definitions of magic that most more dogmatic disciples of the social interpretation would eat their tongues to avoid. He even rubs it in: "goals sought within the context of religious deviance are magical when attained through the management of supernatural powers in such a way that results are virtually guaranteed''.²³

Cutting knots

So we are again confronted with an embarrassing mixture of essentialist definitions and functional alternatives. And this in fact seems to be unavoidable. Both—and perhaps other approaches as well—will have to co-operate if we do not wish simply to abolish all communication on concepts of magic and religion. In order to create at least some sort of common platform on which scholars can stage their ideas in such a way that others may understand, if not appreciate, their ideas on central issues, I very succinctly and provisionally formulate a few reflections.

1) Scholars who deny or minimize the relevance of distinctions between magic and religion (or the relevance of the mere concept of 'magic') usually refer to non-Western cultures where similar distinctions do not seem to operate as clearly as they are supposed to do according to modern Western theories. In so doing they follow the "emic" ("inside", "first person", "empathic") approach many modern anthropologists more or less dogmatically adhere to.²⁴ However, Malinowski's "testament" *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967) has done much to shake the foundations of this belief. "The myth of the field-worker, perfectly self-tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience, and cosmopolitanism, was demolished by the man who had perhaps done most to create it."²⁵ Independently, however, many an anthropologist or sociologist had already ventilated doubts as to the possibility (if not the desirability) of such an "empathic"

approach. Goode reproaches his opponents for failing to understand what a concept is *for*: "If the natives do not 'see' a distinction we believe scientifically important, we do not discard it on that account", since "we are engaged in precisely that task, to create scientific theory and concepts with which to understand all social processes". Less doctrinaire but no less clear, Evans-Pritchard says that "terms are only labels which help us sort out facts of the same kind from facts which are different or in some respects different. If the labels do not prove helpful we can discard them. The facts will be the same without their labels". Finally, a sociologist who has become a professor of Ancient History, K. Hopkins writes: "Yet as moderns and as historians we have no alternative but to use our own concepts and categories to describe and explain other societies."²⁶ After this random list of quotations it will come as no surprise that I would subscribe to Snoek's categorical statement: "It should be clear then, that an emic scholarly approach is a *contradictio in terminis*. Scholarly discourse is always etic and should therefore be conducted in etic terms".²⁷

Consequently, it may be more rewarding to inquire whether non-Western cultures do or do not recognize a distinction between categories *we* introduce and, if they do not, ask why not (*and* why we do), than discard *apriori* our own conceptual tools, a psychological *tour de force* which many scholars believe to be an illusion in the first place.

2) But what if the categories are not only inapplicable to non-Western cultures but also very dubious as categories in themselves since the various items appear to blur and are certainly not all or not always equally distinctive? Then there are two options. One is categorically to avoid both the use of the term magic and any query which entails the application of this term even in books which have magic as their very subject. This means consistent use of more restricted terms as "amulets, defixio, prayer, sacrifice, malevolent practices", etc. (after as precise definitions as possible), without classifying them into a manageable taxonomy, whereas the use of terms like "spell, sorcery" already becomes dangerously risky. All this will, of course, soon appear to be utterly unpractical. The only realistic alternative is to devise at least a working definition of the concept you are going to employ. This definition might belong to

the type of classifications without sharp borders, more especially the so-called polythetic classes, as they were for the first time formulated by Wittgenstein.²⁸ He uses the example of the concept 'game', which he describes as a family to which all games belong, without, however, sharing all the family resemblances. They are linked by "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing". This insight has been applied to the use of the concept of religion—where, of course, similar definitional problems loom up. W.P. Alston,²⁹ for instance lists what he calls nine "religion-making characteristics" and he states that "When enough of these characteristics are present to a sufficient degree, we have religion". He also says that "the best way to explain the concept of religion is to elaborate in detail the relevant features of an ideally clear case of religion and then indicate the respects in which less clear cases can differ from this, without hoping to find any sharp line dividing religion from nonreligion" (*ibid.*).³⁰

Just like religions, 'magical' practices or expressions may share some though not all family resemblances. This means that we may accept a 'broad, polythetic or prototypical' definition of magic, based on a "common sense" collection of features, which may or may not, according to convention and experience, largely correspond to the items listed in the first part of this introduction: instrumental, manipulative, mechanical, non-personal, coercive, with short-term, concrete and often individual goals etc., and employ this as a provisional ideal-typical standard, coined by *our* cultural universe, and just see what happens. As Kluckhohn has well observed,³¹ "No definition can hope to incorporate (...) all aspects of each conception established in the various fields of learning and yet remain serviceable. (...) Construction of a definition must depend upon convenience (...) [which] demands doing as little violence as possible to whatever established core of meaning may exist in familiar usage in ordinary language and scholar terminology. It also requires simplicity so far as this is consistent with precision".

3) Any definition, given its provisional and experimental status, needs continuous readjustment. It may for instance prove preferable to substitute (or clarify) the "coercive" element by the very attractive category of "performative" action introduced by

Tambiah.³² Certain elements included in earlier definitions have been ousted, definitively it seems, such as the axiomatic supposition of the setting of magic in lower layers of society, or the presumed lesser degree of emotion involved. Others may follow. The definition should remain open, never be taken absolutely nor exclude *apriori* the insertion of other characteristics. Though purpose-oriented classifications may turn out to be of little value in one sort of rites, this should not necessarily lead to a general denunciation. Nor is the relevance of a classification according to the nature of a ritual action and the concomitant attitudes *per se* affected by the discovery of social or socio-psychological functions such as the canalization of aggression or anxiety or the control of social tension. Rather are there serious reasons to doubt the suitability of functional elements—however important as tools for understanding social processes—as instruments for a general classificatory system. This may appear from the fact that practically no scholar using the functionalistic approach manages to elaborate his social interpretation of magic without using the term ‘magic’ in one or the other of the more conventional substantive meanings, as we have seen in the examples above.

4) The question whether distinctions should be drawn between magic *and* religion or magic and other features *within* religion is then, besides being a matter of personal viewpoint and, indeed, of belief, of minor importance. What is important is to make a distinction between magic and non-magic, and it will be impossible—and, *if* possible, utterly impractical—to completely eliminate religion as one obvious model of contrast, if only for the fact that both religion and magic basically refer to ‘supernatural’ powers.³³ The question whether one of these contrasts is religion or the propitiatory and supplicative aspects within religion is of secondary importance. In order to prevent misunderstanding, one should make one’s standpoint explicit and, before doing so realize that one’s choice does have considerable consequences. When A.D. Nock, o.c. (n. 14) 312, notes on ancient Greece “there is not, then, *as with us* (my italics H.S.V.), a sphere of magic in contrast to the sphere of religion” one may accept or dispute this pronouncement, but should at least realize that it could only be made because of the supposition implied in the italicized part.

Once more the Graeco-Roman World

Ancient Greece was a non-Western culture. Ancient Greece was the first Western culture. Both statements can be defended. There is no reason whatsoever dogmatically to deny the applicability of modern notions of magic to particular sections of Greek ritual action. Moreover, those who contend that the modern idea of magic was originally coined by a Jewish-Christian setting in late-antiquity are themselves guilty of a serious reduction, since they forget that this type of "associative engineering" was anticipated by a comparable reclassification of the notion of magic by Roman officials against Christians (as related above) and, what is more, that similar manipulations, though less systematically applied, were as old as Greek democracy: it was so usual to identify (undesirable) prophets of a new religion with magicians and charlatans that Euripides could play with it in the *Bacchae* calling the prophet of the Dionysiac religion a *goês*, and a disreputable priestess Ninos was convicted in the fourth century BC for having introduced new rites *and* having practised magic.³⁴ Indeed, Greece had it all: the use of spells, magical curses, incantations and all sorts of material means, fabricated according to the recipes of professional specialists, in order to attain direct and immediate goals, with or without the enforced assistance of supernatural beings. Not only did Greek *have* it, it was also *aware* of it, reflected on it, frequently expressed disapproval of it, linked it with exotic creeds, and used it as an effective weapon in the competition with rivals in love, commerce, lawsuits or sports.

Greece also had something which no modern scholar would hesitate to call religion. We thus perceive distinctions that resemble those drawn in the first part of this paper. And we can also see the blurrings of these distinctions, sometimes incidentally at other times systematically, even consciously. Conscious blurring of distinctions, for instance, is one of the most characteristic and interesting phenomena in the Greek magical papyri of late antiquity. Again one has a choice between several options. One may totally ignore the phenomenon, because one denies on principle any distinction between magic and religion. But then one should quit speaking of "magical papyri" (and religious elements in them) in the first place. Or one can use the phenomena of late antiquity

in order to support a more general theory that these categories were blurred throughout antiquity. However, one can also maintain the “ideal” extremes and observe that the “path from magic to religion could be seen as continuous in the papyri” as A.E. Segal o.c. (n. 16) phrases it. Personally, I would prefer the later option. If one starts from the idea that magic *is* religion, one loses the chance of saying that “magic *was* religion”, as Segal concludes for this specific genre and period, and of explaining *why* such blurring was more radical and pervasive in this cultural context than at other times and places in the Ancient World. In my view this would be a serious draw-back.

And if we now, just for a moment, equipped with some random family resemblances of magic (*versus* religion) investigate the Greek and Roman evidence, do we indeed find what practically all recent investigators claim to find: namely that our division did not have the same relevance in antiquity, indeed, that it did not exist at all? Let us follow one of them, H. Remus in a solid and useful recent article: “Magic or Miracle? Some Second Century Instances”.³⁵ The author inquires on what grounds the negative labels *magos*, *magikos* etc. were applied. He analyses all those aspects that we commonly associate with the label magic as we have listed them above: manipulations, charms, gestures, application of secret texts, compulsory action through the use of secret names of gods or demons etc. etc. And of course he finds that using a powerful name may be labelled magic in one case and religion in the other depending on the position of the god concerned in the value system of the dominant group. The same is true for objects: an amulet of a pagan god will be listed among magic, whereas the use of a crucifix for miracle cures may be accepted as a deed of religious fervour. Indeed: “your magic is my miracle, and vice-versa”.³⁶ All the same the author has to concede “that there is some agreement that magic involves compulsion” and he produces quite a number of unequivocal statements in which the supplicatory attitude of prayer is radically opposed to the compulsory one of magical spells. Nonetheless it is also true that “the canons were not tight and the texts we have examined suggest that judgments were not made by impartial testing but on other grounds, to the detriment of ‘their’ rites and

wonders and the advantage of 'ours' ". So he concludes, as we expect by now: "In these examples it is evident that manipulations as such do not really demarcate miracle from magic, except for persons determined beforehand to make that demarcation. Such determination roots in social and cultural settings, which are more important in understanding such conflicts than are the manipulations which are found both in magic and in miracle".

Now, I do not for one moment dispute the correctness of his analysis. However, it should be realized that "your magic is my miracle" is no less true for modern-Western perception, where according to recent views the substantivistic distinction between magic and religion came to existence.³⁷ A bottle of a magical medicine sold by a mysterious foreigner at the fair is often opposed to the bottle from Lourdes, which is religiously sanctioned, though both are chemically the same and are used for the very same purposes. However, my point is that this social differentiation in assessment, true and important as it may be, as such by no means entails the necessity to reject the concept magic for use in comparative research. Such inferences could be considered only if charges of magic, ancient and modern, were *consistently devoid of any concrete details or argumentation*. However, these charges were generally buttressed with references to all sorts of suspicious practices, questionable gods and demons, secrecy and so on.

Apparently, the ancients no less than modern people knew *what specific* imputations would come in handy to underpin their charges. The questions of whether these charges had any basis in real practice and whether the materials might also function on the *right* side of the borderline between religion and magic, though interesting from a different perspective, are of no direct importance for the issue under discussion. What concerns me now is the perception of the deviant forms of religion or outside religion *and* the practices they were consistently associated with. And it is this ancient *representation* of the magical attitude which often closely corresponds with what we call magic. As we noticed earlier Apollonius of Tyana found it necessary to explain that he could understand the language of birds or predict earth-quakes, *not* because he was a *magus* but simply because he lived on a diet that made his body hypersensitive to vibrations of the air. Also, the authors or revisors of the

New Testament have done wonders to eliminate anything that might recall sorcery in Jesus' behaviour, the use of saliva for the healing of a deaf and dumb person apparently being an isolated slip of the pen.³⁸ Now, if Jesus or his biographers systematically avoided references to manipulations which might arouse suspicion of magic, they must have known *what* to avoid. In the life of Theodorus it is told that the blessing of this holy man, and no longer an amulet prepared by a wise woman, was what was now supposed to protect you from the effects of a green lizard that had fallen into your soup.³⁹ Of course, this is also an instance of "your magic is my miracle". But to exclude other approaches of interpretation would be seriously reductionist. For exactly the same distinction is made by the Hippocratic author of *Sacred Disease* (15th c. BC) who opposes the use of *katharmoi* and *epoidai* (purificatory medicines and spells), which he denounces because they are used to compel the gods, to *thuein*, *euchesthai* and *hiketeuein tous theous* (sacrifice, pray and supplicate the gods), which he approves of as examples of a pious attitude.⁴⁰ All this means that apart from the aspect of social judgment there were also more formal characteristics generally associated with magic action.⁴¹

To conclude. I was enticed into treading this slippery path by a research project in the field of ancient religion, *in casu* an analysis of the complete corpus of the so-called *defixiones* from Graeco-Roman antiquity.⁴² These mostly short curse-texts, usually inscribed in lead tablets, are intended to harm or bind a person whom the author, mostly for reasons of envy or competition, does not like. Starting from basic formulas such as: "I bind or fix or nail down John, that he may not move, breathe, speak" etc., the following common characteristics can be found: a god or demon from the Netherworld is invoked, who is ordered to execute the wish of the author of the tablet. Practically without exception the author is anonymous, and there is no legitimation of the harmful act. Often the tablet is transixed with a needle. Also a kind of voodoo-doll may be added.

During my research I found a number of texts that had always been included in the corpora of *defixiones*, but which nevertheless betrayed a different atmosphere and phrasing. Here we read for

instance: "John has stolen my coat (or: I suspect John of the theft). If I am right, oh mighty Lord, I implore you: come to my aid, punish him, that he may suffer (or in other texts: that he may return my property). Please hear my prayer, O Lord, for I, Peter, have been wronged". There are clear and rather consistent differences with the common type of *defixio*: the author makes himself known, he has every right to his action for he has been injured and therefore there is generally an argument or legitimation for the action; instead of pressure there is supplication, instead of demons or gods of the Netherworld we see great gods of the heavens, Zeus, the Sun, Theos Hupsistos.

I have baptized the latter, clearly deviant types of *defixiones* 'judicial prayers' or 'prayers for justice'. Of course, there are also mixtures of both types, but my point is that the differences between the ideal type of the *defixio* proper and that of the judicial prayer appear to correspond strikingly with the distinctions that former generations used to associate with the opposition between magic and religion. So, for the time being I shall continue to label my *defixiones* magical acts (in which I follow the common practice even adopted by those who reject the conventional definitions of magic) and my judicial prayers religious acts, and I feel supported by the fact that here at least the ancient authors display an unequivocal and explicit awareness of the differences. And I believe it may be useful to investigate whether we detect these distinctions based on practical characteristics in other sectors too. We can never do so without the heuristic tools provided by our 'broad' definitions. Whether this will turn out to be as useful for other cultures as it is for the Greek and Roman world I do not know. Perhaps the Greeks were prototypically modern-Western biased rationalists *avant la lettre*? But if we begin by rejecting terms, concepts and definitions right from the outset, *nobody* will ever know.

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¹ I am greatly indebted to Richard Gordon, who read an earlier draft of this paper, emended the English, offered a shower of generous critical observations and who, even after the many alterations prompted by his criticism, will certainly *not* approve of the result. As I have added substantial parts in a later stage nobody but the author can be held responsible for form and content of the final product.

² *Inter alia* for the reason that the existence of notions of religion and magic in antiquity is hardly debatable, while a concept of science is patently absent. See Phillips o.c. (below n. 16) 2700 ff. Modern discussion on the relationship magic-science: K. E. Rosengren, "Malinowski's Magic: The Riddle of the Empty Cell", *Current Anthropology* 17 (1976) 667-685 and some of the comments. Note that since J. Goody, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problems", *British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961) 142-157, many scholars tend to view the dichotomy profane-sacred (or: supernatural) as a Western ethnocentric construct.

³ W. J. Goode, "Magic and Religion. A Continuum", *Ethnos* 14 (1949) 172-182; *idem*, *Religion among the Primitives* (Glencoe 1951).

⁴ This, in fact, is a summary of Malinowski's famous theory as presented in: "Fishing in the Trobriand Islands", *Man* 53 (1918) 87-92, and elaborated in: *Magic, Science and Religion* (1925) and the article "Culture" in: *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 4 (1931) 634-42.

⁵ In: J. Gould and W. L. Kolb, *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe 1964) s.v. magic. Cf. *ibidem* "Magic is the use of 'dogmatic knowledge' for control, religion the worship or propitiation of beings known dogmatically." More extensively R. Benedict had said much the same in her sensible article "Magic" in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* X (1933) 39 ff. It should be noticed that Leach recanted in later works.

⁶ See: K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth 1973 = 1971). The exchange with Hildred Geertz, in: "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975-6) 71-108, well illustrates the confusions which result from the adoption of diametrically opposite—substantive/essentialist *versus* functional—definitions.

⁷ See especially J. van Baal, "Magic as a Religious Phenomenon", *Higher Education and Research in the Netherlands* 7 (1963) 10-21; W. E. A. van Beek, "The Religion of Everyday Life: An Ethnoscience Investigation into the Concepts of Religion and Magic", in: W. E. A. van Beek and J. H. Scherer, *Explorations in the Anthropology of Religion. Essays in Honour of J. van Baal* (The Hague 1975) 55-69. H. Philosooph, "Primitive Magic and Mana", *Man* 6 (1971) 182-203, argues that magical action is often employed in order to influence autonomous (divine) powers.

⁸ I refer for a survey of this discussion and the bibliography to M. and R. Wax, "The Notion of Magic", *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963) 495-518; more pointedly: Dorothy Hammond, "Magic: A Problem in Semantics", *American Anthropologist* 72 (1970) 1349-1356. Cf. Rosengren o.c. above n. 2, and the comments by referees. H. G. Kippenberg and B. Luchesi (edd.), *Magie, Die sozialwissenschaftliche Kontroverse über das Verstehen fremden Denkens* (Frankfurt 1978) provides a useful collection and a good introduction by Kippenberg.

⁹ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (Glencoe 1952) 138: "... to avoid as far as possible the use of the terms in question until there is some general agreement about them." C. Kluckhohn, in: A. L. Kroeber *et alii* (edd.), *Anthropology Today* (Chicago 1953) 518: "Anyone can make a definition that will separate magic from religion; but no one has yet found a definition that all other students accept"; D. F. Pocock, "Foreword" to Marcel Mauss [transl. R. Brain] *A General Theory of Magic* (London 1972) 2: "If categorical distinctions of the Western mind are found upon examination to impose distinctions upon (and so falsify) the intellectual universes of other cultures then they must be discarded or, as I have put it, dissolved. I believe 'magic' to be one such theory ..."

¹⁰ R. Horton, "A Definition of Religion and its Uses", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 90 (1960) 201-220: religion entails a belief in spiritual beings, magic is a "secular" phenomenon; M. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation", in: *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, A.S.A. Monographs 3 (1966) 85-126: magic like politics or art is a functional alternative to religion. Cf. also E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford 1965) 33. Most of this in the context of a revival of Tylor's 'substantivistic' approach of religion. See: R. Horton, "Neo-Tylorism: Sound Sense or Sinister Prejudice?", *Man* 3 (1968) 625-634; E. Ross, "Neo-Tylorism: A Reassessment", *Man* 6 (1971) 105-116.

¹¹ This is the conclusion of D. Hammond o.c. (above n.8) 1355, "Magic would serve as a denotation for one type of ritual behavior (viz. "mechanical religious practices") and thus belong to the set of terms in that category, such as prayer or sacrifice. With these propitiatory rites it is contrastive, not with religion", somewhat along the lines drawn by E. Norbeck, *Religion in Primitive Society* (New York 1961). Quite close to this: J. van Baal (o.c. above n. 7), who defines magic as: "all those acts and spells directed towards furthering a certain aim by employing another reality than the empirically determinable one, in which process this other reality is not independently active but is an instrument manipulated by the active person", and who sets magic within the category religion.

¹² For instance: R. Benedict, o.c. (above n. 5); R.H. Lowie, *History of Ethnological Theory* (New York 1937) 103; *idem*, *Primitive Religion* (New York 1948) 141; E. Norbeck, *Religion in Primitive Society* (New York 1961) and many others. See the survey by D. Hammond o.c. (above n. 8) and her conclusions (p. 1350): "These two characteristics—impersonal forces and manipulative techniques—remain as current critical diagnostic features." Note that the same characterization of magic is accepted by D. Hammond herself and J. van Baal (preceding note), who both denied the dichotomy magic—religion.

¹³ So *in nuce* already R.R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religion* (London 1914) 28, but much more cogently formulated by R. Benedict o.c. (above n. 5) 40; *eadem*, "Religion", in: F. Boas (ed.) *General Anthropology* (Boston 1938) 647; the term "continuum" was made popular by Goode o.c. above n. 3.

¹⁴ See on the development of the terms: A.D. Nock, "Paul and the Magus", in: *idem*, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World I* (Oxford 1972) 308-330; G. Deling, in: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament IV*, 360-363.

¹⁵ See: W. Burkert, "Goès", *RM* 102 (1962) 36-55.

¹⁶ P. Brown, "Sorcery. Demons and the Rise of Christianity: from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages", in: *idem*, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London 1972) 119-146. On these processes also: R. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge, Mass. 1975²) 95-127. Important reflections in: D.E. Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity", *ANRW II*. 23.2 (1980) 1507-1557; A.F. Segal, "Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition", in: R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (edd.), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions for G. Quispel* (Leiden 1981) 349-375, with honest criticism of some of P. Brown's theories. Most recently and most important: C.R. Phillips III, "The Sociology of Religious Knowledge in the Roman Empire to A.D. 284", *ANRW II*, 16.3 (1986), 2677-2773, espec. 2711-2732. Cf. also below nn. 19 and 20.

¹⁷ J.Z. Smith, "Good News is no News", in: *idem*, *Map is not Territory. Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden 1978) 190-207.

¹⁸ H. Geertz, o.c. (above n. 6) 75; Phillips o.c. (above n. 16) 2718. Cf. *ibid*.

2579: "Terms such as 'magic' or 'orthodoxy' (...) represent conceptual models of the group which employs them: they do not possess absolute, eternal authority", and: "the appearance of a term like 'magic' represents a value-judgment of the author employing it, whether the author be Apuleius, Origen, Sir James Frazer or Arthur Darby Nock".

¹⁹ Most recently on the strategies applied in sorting out approved from disapproved practices and in attributing them to 'true religion' and 'magic' respectively: J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs, and P.V. Flesher (edd.), *Religion, Science, and Magic in Concert and Conflict* (Oxford 1989), who rightly contend that by studying these processes we gain insight into the groups' self-definition. The principle had been recognized long ago; L. Bieler, *Theios Aner* (Darmstadt 1967 = Wien I-II, 1935-6) 84-87, who already refers to G.P. von Wetter, *'Der Sohn Gottes'. Eine Untersuchung über den Charakter und die Tendenzen des Johannes-Evangeliums* (Göttingen 1916) 73-82; R. Herzog, *Die Wunderheilungen von Epidauros* (*Philologus Suppl.* 22/3, 1931) 140; "Aberglaube ist immer der Glaube der Anderen"; cf. also: G. Theissen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten* (Gütersloh 1974), 230: "'Aberglaube' ist dann der in einer Gesellschaft abgelehnte Glaube, 'Glaube', so könnte man ironisch formulieren, der offiziell anerkannte Aberglaube. Wo die Grenze zu ziehen ist, bestimmen die massgeblichen Kreise" (as quoted by Remus 1983, o.c. [next note] 207 n. 2).

²⁰ Anitra B. Kolenkow, "A Problem of Power: How Miracle Doers counter Charges of Magic in the Hellenistic World", *Society of Biblical Literature. Seminar Papers* (Missoula 1976) 105-110. Cf. Segal o.c. (above n. 16) 356 f.; Phillips o.c. (above n. 16) 2716 n. 112; H. Remus, "'Magic or Miracle'? Some Second Century Instances", *The Second Century. A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1982) 127-56, reissued as ch. IV of his book: *Pagan-Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century* (Cambridge Mass. 1983).

²¹ See the article "Heidenverfolgung", in *RAC*; Phillips o.c. (above n. 16) 2713 n. 104; R. Turcan, "Les motivations de l'intolérance chrétienne et la fin du mithriacisme au IV^e siècle ap. J.-C.", *Actes VI Congr. FIEC* II, 209-226.

²² See the discussion by A. Abt, *Die Apologie des Apuleius von Madaura und die antike Zauberei* (Giessen 1908). Cf. also: N. Fick, "La magie dans les *Metamorphoses* d'Apulée", *REL* 63 (1985) 132-147.

²³ With the observation: "those who failed to achieve the particular benefits promised by religion not infrequently turned to magic for an alternate means and one generally regarded as socially deviant for achieving their goals", he differentiates between the substantive and the functional characteristics, but adopts both as relevant.

²⁴ For fundamental discussion see: P. Winch, *Die Idee der Sozialwissenschaft und ihr Verhältnis zur Philosophie* (Frankfurt 1974); A. MacIntyre, "A Mistake about Causality in Social Sciences", in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society* 2nd ser. (edited by P. Laslett and W. Runciman, Oxford 1967) 48-70; I.C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology* (London 1967²); J. Agassi and I.C. Jarvie, "Magic and Rationality", *British Journal of Sociology* 24 (1933) 236-45, some of which are collected in German translation in: Kippenberg and Luchesi o.c. (above n. 8).

²⁵ Cl. Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View'. On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding", in: K.H. Basso and H.A. Selby, *Meaning in Anthropology* (Albuquerque 1976) 221-237, esp. 222. See on the concepts of "emic" and "etic" the good discussion by M. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York 1968) 568-604.

²⁶ Goode in his reaction to the article of the Waxes, *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963) 507; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford 1937) 11; K. Hopkins, "Contraception in the Roman Empire", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8 (1965) 124-157. "Wie können denn fremde Glaubensanschauungen beschrieben werden, ohne daß der Beobachter seine eigenen Begriffe mit heranzieht?" (Kippenberg o.c. above n. 8, p. 43, and see his discussion).

²⁷ J.A.M. Snoek, *Initiations. A Methodological Approach to the Application of Classification and Definition Theory in the Study of Rituals* (Diss. Leiden 1987) 7.

²⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York 1958, translated from the German ed. 1953) I, 66-7.

²⁹ "Religion", *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol 7 (1967) 142. The principle of polythetic classification is exemplarily exploited by J.Z. Smith, "Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism", in: *idem*, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jones Town* (Chicago 1982) 1-18. Its import for anthropological studies has also been questioned, for instance by R. Needham, "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences", *Man* 10 (1975) 349-369.

³⁰ This is a prefiguration of what recently has been labelled the "prototype theory" of classification, as was shown by B. Saler in a paper read during the Congress of the *IAHR* at Rome, september 1990. I am indebted to this paper for some information on problems of the definition of religion.

³¹ C. Kluckhohn, "Values and Value-Orientations in the Theory of Action. An Exploration in Definition and Classification", in: T. Parsons and E.A. Shils (eds.) *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Cambridge Mass. 1959) 394/5. I am painfully aware of the injustice I have done to the infinitely intricate problems of the definition of definitions, as one can learn from J.A.M. Snoek, o.c. (above n. 27), who, on p. 9 f., largely advocates the strategies as formulated in my text.

³² S.J. Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words", *Man* 3 (1968) 175-208; *idem*, "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts. A Point of View", in: R. Horton and R. Finnegan (edd.), *Modes of Thought* (London 1973) 199-229. For a variant see: J. Skorupski, *Symbol and Theory. A Philosophical Study of Theories of Religion in Social Anthropology* (Cambridge-New York 1976). Cf. also E.M. Ahern, "The Problem of Efficacy: Strong and Weak Illocutionary Acts", *Man* (1979) 1-17. This approach was made productive i.a. by Rosengren, o.c. (above n. 2), and cf. J. Winkler and Chr. Faraone in: Chr. Faraone and D. Obbink (edd.), *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford 1990). However, as Richard Gordon warned me, D.S. Gardner, "Performativity in Ritual. The Mianmin Case", *Man* 15 (1983) 346-60, argues that the crucial features of initiation rituals, and therefore others concerned with magical or religious conceptions, cannot be understood (exclusively) as 'illocutionary' acts: "The similarities are superficial and derive from the putatively automatic effects of the rituals".

³³ Cf. Rosengren o.c. (above n. 2) 678: "It makes better sense to start with a distinction between ordinary reality (or realities) and extraordinary reality (or realities)".

³⁴ I have collected and discussed the evidence on identifications of magic and foreign cults in my *Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism (Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion I.* [Leiden 1990]) 102-123, and the case of the *Bacchae* pp. 156-205.

³⁵ o.c. (above n. 20).

³⁶ According to the often quoted expression by R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York 1966) 93.

³⁷ Consequently, a remark such as "The definitional boundaries of the term (magic) in the ancient world for a long time remained remarkable fluid" (Phillips o.c. [above n. 16] 2718), runs the risk of losing sight of similar vaguenesses in modern applications of the term.

³⁸ Jesus is often interpreted as essentially a Hellenistic type of magician, most emphatically by M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge Mass. 1933) 220-237; and *Jesus the Magician* (New York 1978). Once again magic is not always magic, depending as it does upon the authority of the person who is using the term: F. Preisigke, *Die Gotteskraft der frühchristlichen Zeit* (Leipzig 1922) saw in the healing of a woman by the touching of Jesus' clothing a pure example of magic, but W.L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids 1974), 192, says: "By an act of sovereign will God determined to honour the woman's faith *in spite of the fact* (my italics H.S.V.) that it was tinged with ideas that bordered on magic." In a similar apologetic vein: H.C. Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge 1986). The two sides of the medal in: E.V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origin on Jesus* (Chicago 1982). See on these issues especially: Aune o.c. (above n. 16); Phillips o.c. (above n. 16) 2757 ff..

³⁹ *V. Theod.* cc. 124 and 143, as quoted by P.R.L. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley-London 1982) 151.

⁴⁰ *Sacred Disease* 2, 12-13 and 4, 36 ff. Remus o.c. 145, tries to downplay them by taking them as expressions of "adherents of one culture pitted against those of another, with antithetical premises and values". But the opposition between 'magical' spells or charms, and pious supplicatory prayer is by no means restricted to this text. And even so, the Hippocratic author, just like the author of the *Vita Theodori*, knew what to censure.

⁴¹ A phrase by Segal o.c. (above n. 16) 367, may help to clarify what I mean: "Thus the charge of 'magic' helps distinguish between various groups of people from the perspective of the speaker but does not necessarily imply any essential difference in the actions of the participants. In a narrative about the event, the narrator will attempt to clarify his grounds for distinction". This passage (rightly) indicates two valid questions in the approach of magic: the functionalist one (who speaks about whom, to whom, in what ways, and why?) and the substantivist (exactly *what* is being said, in terms of adducing concrete evidence?).

⁴² The results have been published in "Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers", in: Chr. Faraone and D. Obbink (edd.), *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford 1991), 60-106.