

Is magic a subclass of ritual?

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IN THIS AGE of deconstruction, 'magic' is one of those traditional terms which it has become fashionable to dismantle and discard as being no longer useful for scholarship—a word expressing the prejudices of the one who uses it rather than conveying an understanding of what it purports to designate. These days there is hardly a new publication dealing with magic which does not avow that the term itself is deeply problematical. Thus, for instance, the recent book *Ancient Christian Magic* by Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith (1994)—an admirable publication in many respects—carries the subtitle *Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*. And in their introduction to the volume the two editors admit that 'the subtitle is more precise and crucially important' (1). Indeed, going on they maintain that 'the more closely these texts are actually read, the harder it is to maintain any distinction between piety and sorcery' (2). In a similar vein, Hans-Dieter Betz, in his introduction to *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, asserts that in antiquity,

The religious beliefs and practices of most people were identical with some form of magic, and the neat distinctions we make today between approved and disapproved forms of religion—calling the former 'religion' and 'church' and the latter 'magic' and 'cult'—did not exist in antiquity except among a few intellectuals. (*GMPT*: xli)

It would seem, then, that a general agreement has emerged that the phenomenon of 'magic' cannot truthfully or usefully be distinguished from 'ritual,' or from 'religion' in general. It may be questioned, however, how useful such a position is for purposes of theoretical analysis. After all, the word 'magic' continues to be used, even by those who deny its validity in principle, and the prospect of doing without it in our descriptive work as historians of religion does not really seem inviting.¹ There still is, it appears, something we want to call 'magic,' although we no longer think we have a clear idea of what it is. For this reason it seems that after

1. As H.S. Versnel (1991:181) succinctly puts it: 'One problem is that you cannot talk about magic without using the term magic.' For the extensive literature concerning the nature of magic I refer to Versnel's article, which contains excellent bibliographical references.

As you will already have suspected, this is going to be a theoretical paper—actually rather a speculative one—more than an historical and empirical study. My chief concern will not be with the various manifestations of ancient magic as such, but with the problems of classification and taxonomy currently posed by the term ‘magic’ in my own discipline, the history of religion.

Reflecting, for that purpose, on the history of the discipline, it can no doubt be said that magic has been treated as the stepchild, or, if you like, the black sheep, in the family of the discipline’s theoretical concepts. One of the first things our founding fathers did was to separate magic from religion. According to the most influential classification scheme, which goes back to E.B. Tylor and, above all, to Sir James Frazer, magic differs from religion with respect to the *action type* of the magical act. Magic, it is thought, is the performance of instrumental acts. The intention of the magical act is to cause an effect, and is based on the belief in the existence of invariable mechanisms which automatically link the effect to the cause. Religion, on the other hand, addresses the powers which govern us as autonomous personalities, and religious acts are therefore not instrumental, but *communicative* in their essence. Consequently, while magic intends to coerce the powers operating in the world, religion proposes to negotiate with the powers as deities.

The second classical approach to the phenomenon of magic was to explain it primarily in social categories. The chief proponents of this approach, Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, also assumed that there is a difference in principle between religion and magic. The difference is not, however, basically one of action type, but has to do with social context and function. In Durkheim’s famous phrase, the magician has a clientele, not a church.² For him, religion is the communal cult and beliefs of a group, the expression of collective identity. Magic, on the other hand, is an individual practice—a private, often secret matter; it is thus posited off centre in relation to what serves to confirm group identity, and is even a potential threat to it.³

In both of these classical theories magic is defined out of religion—in the first theory because it rests on notions of automatic efficacy, which are deemed to be alien to genuine religion, in the second because it lacks the social functionality of

2 Durkheim 1994:62. For Mauss’ description of the difference between magic and religion cf. in particular Mauss 1997:13–16.

3 Thus Mauss stresses ‘l’irrélégiosité du rite magique; il est et on veut qu’il soit anti-religieux’ (1997:15). It is true that in Mauss’ analysis, magic too, just as religion, is an articulation of social forces. By consequence, however, he ended up with ‘une difficulté grave’ and ‘un dilemme’ with regard to his initial distinction between religion and magic: How can magic be anti-religious and anti-social, and at the same time a collectively underpinned activity involving a notion of the sacred, and thus itself a social and religious phenomenon? (cf. *ib.* 139–140).

of religion. Now I am not going to say that this is all wrong. On the contrary, I would hold that these two perspectives on magic together encompass widespread intuitions regarding the nature of 'magic.' An attempt to combine them might prove quite interesting.

Let us look at the sociological viewpoint first—that magic consists in practices outside the religious cult thought to be central to a society. There is much to be said for this view. The roles of magician, witch or sorcerer are found in a wide variety of societies, and are generally attributed to marginal persons, who are feared, despised and frequently persecuted (*cf. e.g.* Mauss 1997:19–24). This was largely true in antiquity as well. Magic was something associated above all with out-groups. The word *mageia* itself is of Iranian origin, and other barbarian peoples too, such as the Jews, the Chaldaeans or the Egyptians, were believed to be great practitioners of magic, a reputation they shared with the notorious Thessalians, despised by all decent and civilized Greeks. Much ethnographic material can be adduced which parallels this view of magic in the Graeco-Roman world. Magic is associated above all with 'the others'—other peoples, immigrants, and, very frequently, with aboriginal populations living as remnant minorities among a powerful majority of more recent colonizers. The Scandinavian example is of course the Saami, who used to be feared by the local Scandinavian and Finnish populations, and still are, for their powers as sorcerers.

The category of the marginal applies in this context both to the 'others' in the sense of the foreign and exotic, and to deviant behaviour and people who are 'different' within—and thus on the margins of—a community. Naturally, we need to distinguish between how people see themselves and how they are classified by others. Obviously many more people have been accused of witchcraft and sorcery in the history of mankind than there have been actual practitioners of these arts. A famous case from the ancient world, known to all, is that of Apuleius, who was accused of having employed love magic to capture the heart of the wealthy widow Pudentilla. In this case it is clear that the accusations against Apuleius, though motivated by the pecuniary interests of Pudentilla's relatives, was made more efficient, as Fritz Graf has pointed out (1996:64), by the suspicion already lying upon Apuleius by the fact that he was a social upstart, a stranger and a so-called 'philosopher'—all qualities which bestowed upon Apuleius the odium of marginality.

On the other hand, the evidence from literature, curse tablets and the magical papyri leaves no doubt that there actually existed in all periods of antiquity individuals who saw themselves as practising what society at large called *mageia*, *goeteia*, etc. The category of magic is not merely the expression of an ideological prejudice against 'the other'; it was also a profession and a practice understood by its practitioners as being something different from the official cult of the gods.

Thus Marcel Mauss' contention that the role of sorcerer is basically something which is ascribed to a person by public opinion⁴ is only partly true. There has of course to be a pre-existing slot in the collective consciousness into which the magic practitioner's self-image will fit, but it is nonetheless the case that being a *magos* or a *goes* is also an acquired status, one which often requires long periods of apprenticeship and initiation.

Thus we have to beware of not throwing out the baby with the washwater. On the one hand we have 'magic' as a denunciatory term used to describe what is weird, what does not conform to the shared social norms of a community, specifically in its dealings with the suprahuman, and which therefore is perceived as a potential threat to the community. This perception of magic is a reality, in the sense of a social fact. It is noteworthy that in antiquity the initiation rites of various mysteries were also associated with the practice of magic in this way (especially if such rites were performed by women).⁵ Already Heraclitus, if we are to believe Clement of Alexandria (*Prot.* 22 = DK 22 B 14), threw the *magoi* into the same bag as the *bakchoi*, the *maenads* and the *mystai*. What magic and the mysteries have in common, of course, is the private, secret, uncontrolled and therefore potentially anti-social, nature of their practice.

On the other hand, however, the fact that the category of 'magic' was a social construction, does not mean that it did not exist as a specific activity pursued by people who knew that that was what they were practising. The *goês* and the *magos* did actually exist. We now need to look into the question of the action type of the magical practice.

Is it true that magical action is instrumental whereas religious action is communicative? This too is a question which cannot be answered, as far as I can see, simply by yes or no. The distinction between instrumental and communicative action seems like a neat one. We might invoke, for instance, the authority of the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who has argued for categorizing instrumental and communicative action as two irreducible basic forms of human action (e.g. 1981:1 384ff.). However, in the area of religion, and especially in the analysis of ritual, things are not as clear-cut as we might like them to be. Instrumental action is at bottom a physical thing, involving the use of the body. Communicative action, on the other hand, is the transmission of information and presupposes a personal interlocutor able to decode the message. The transmitted information is itself essentially incorporeal; the physical only plays a part as the

4 'C'est donc l'opinion qui crée le magicien et les influences qu'il dégage,' Mauss 1997:32; cf. also 19–33 *passim*; this is accepted by Graf 1996:58. Mauss' views are, to be sure, more nuanced than this (cf. 33–37); however, the logical status of the negative vs. the positive characteristics of the magician with regard to the definition of magic remains unclear throughout Mauss' essay.

5 Cf. Graf 1996:25–29, 57, 89–107, 197.

medium through which the information is conveyed. This dichotomy breaks down, however, when we consider ritual acts, because it belongs to the nature of ritual to involve the body. Ritual, it is conventionally said, consists in symbolic acts. But too often the accent has been on the symbolical aspect, ritual as language and communication, and too rarely has its act-quality as such been taken into account as an indispensable feature of ritual.

The traditional distinction of magic and ritual on the basis of a dichotomy between instrumental and communicative acts fails, I think, to take the problem of ritual seriously. Rereading older works in the history of religions—most of them written by liberal Protestants—one cannot help noticing that in addition to the excision of magic from the domain of religion, frequently also another sentiment can be found: that of a contempt of 'ritualism' and of the notion of *opere operato*. Typically, the phenomena referred to by these terms are compared to magic and contrasted with 'cult,' which is considered the more authentic ritual expression of religion. Thus the attempt in this period of scholarship to exorcize—if the word may be allowed here—magic from religion was rather unsuccessful in so far as it required a further distinction within religion itself, where what was exorcized seems to have reappeared in new guise.

This situation suggests that the distinction between religion and magic might derive from a failure to take proper account of the nature of ritual. It reveals too, perhaps, a prejudice about the nature of religion which gives religious belief a privileged status as opposed to religious action, reflecting, on an even more deep-seated level, a privileging of mind, or spirit, over body and matter.

If, then, we are to review the relationship of magic and religion, we need to do so in the context of considerations on the problem of ritual. Elements of the problem which then present themselves are the relationship of the symbolic and the physical aspects of ritual, the relationship of words and action and the criteria we use for classifying various types of ritual. To pick up the last thread first, it is usual to distinguish two main classes of religious rituals: rituals of maintenance and rituals of transformation.⁶ The first class of rituals are fixed according to a calendar, and are most typically collective; they serve to maintain a situation, in terms of their social function they serve to maintain the coherence of a group of people. Transformation rituals, on the other hand, are concerned with the individual person, and effect a change in the status and identity of that individual. The various kinds of rites of passage naturally belong to this category. To these two broad categories a third may be added, crisis rituals, which are performed by individuals or

6 Cf. e.g. Zuesse 1987:414ff. (Zuesse uses the terminology 'confirmatory rituals' and 'transformatory rituals'); also, Honko 1979.

collectivities as an improvised response to situations of perceived threat (*cf.* Honko 1979).

Where does magic fit into this picture? Can magic ritual be subsumed under one of these classes, or is it to be considered a class of its own alongside the others? It might seem that magical rituals have a certain affinity with crisis rituals. Many of the situations in which magic is used may in fact be interpreted as individual crisis situations: sickness, love, crime, lawsuits, business competition, sport games. However, we would probably be wrong to stress the element of psychological urgency in all such cases. Graf points out in his recent book that the magic rituals more often than not were performed by professionals (1996:132f.). And the great mass of curse tablets by which people tried to influence the outcome of horse-races during the later empire, has made A.A. Barb wonder 'whether the engraving and burying of these charms may not have been almost as popular as the filling in and posting of football-pools is today' (1964:120). Though an element of crisis can be sensed in many cases, it does not seem plausible to make this a general criterion of magic.

So is magic, then, perhaps a separate, fourth class of religious ritual? But what criteria should we apply in that case to define its common genus with the other three classes as well as its own *differentia specifica*? We need in any case some kind of general notion about ritual. Now, an aspect of ritual which has attracted attention in recent years is its performative quality.⁷ Rituals are performances. As such, they are doing things. It is essential to note, however, that rituals are doing things not only with words, but by means of bodily gestures and manipulations of matter as well. Unless this physical characteristic of rituals is given due attention, the inspiration offered by speech acts theory risks being deceptive. Ritual acts normally include both words and action. This is a feature which is shared by magical rituals and those rituals which are commonly called religious. An interesting thing about a performance perspective on ritual, however, is not only that the ritual words may be analysed as a form of action, but also that the non-verbal part of the ritual is highly laden with symbolism. Ritual is not only doing things with words, but just as much saying things with acts.

This dialectic of signifying and doing in ritual is quite fascinating. In everyday life too, of course, both are present and, indeed, inevitable. We cannot communicate without at the same time performing an act, and our acts normally signify something. In a ritual situation, however, both of these aspects are enhanced: we speak with heightened physical presence, and our acts are replete with meanings. Ritual in a sense operates on the principle of reversal, a bit like the use of italics in

7 This was inspired by the well-known books by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). The most influential applications of the theory are probably Tambiah 1968 and 1973.

printing.⁸ Speaking emphatically turns speech all the more into an act, while acting with intense deliberation increases the significative content of the act. There is a double reversal, then, it would seem, which essentially consists in upsetting the normal relationship between saying and doing by undertaking to turn the one into the other. A magical transmutation indeed!

The function of performing bodily gestures and specific acts together with the pronunciation of words is, it would seem, to enhance the action character of the utterance. It is not enough to promise mutual fidelity with words in a wedding ceremony, the act of promise is given additional emphasis through the solemn exchange of rings. In a similar way, if in antiquity you wanted to curse someone really seriously, you wrote 'I bind NN, etc.' on a tablet, pierced it through with holes and hid it in some secret or inaccessible place, in order to endow the fleeting spoken words with permanent efficacy. This seems to be the way the combination of words and acts works in all rituals. The Christian baptismal words 'I baptise you ...' are accompanied by the imposition of hands, water immersion and anointment, whereby the baptizand is 'sealed'—not only is the act-nature of the initiation emphasized and intensified by physical means, but the act leaves a permanent imprint as well.

The performative quality of the ritual words themselves are enhanced by ways of attracting attention to their physical, phonic and acoustic, dimensions, not only by forms of diction and modulations of voice, but also by the use of non-normal languages. Languages such as Hebrew, Egyptian and Latin have played this role in various historical contexts. The speaking of the sounds is what matters, more than their meanings. Normal comprehensibility even seems to detract from the efficacy of the utterance. However, this form of performative use of language seems to be most efficient when it is used in combination with speech which actually conveys a message. Whereas much of what is being said is more readily comprehensible, going into sublimely unintelligible speech marks the climaxes in a liturgy. Thus we have a dialectic between signifying and doing on the level itself of the words used in a ritual. A similar dialectic can be said to be present on the level of the acts performed, but there the diametrically opposite seems to apply: the highlights of the sequence of gestures are not the ones which most resemble normal activities, but the ones which are especially rich in symbolism, e.g. the sacramental parts of the mass.

All of this suggests that an essential purpose of ritual is in fact the fusion of saying and doing, of signifying and effecting. From an analytical point of view we can study the dialectics of these two components, and come to the conclusion that their fusion is never actually successful, they invariably fall apart in the very attempt

8 The simile is borrowed from Smith 1987:108.

to merge them. This must be so, because the signified content of a sign is by definition incorporeal and repeatable, whereas an act, considered just as an act, is an empirical event taking place under conditions of time and space. This dichotomy of the intelligible and the sensible, which as a general theme of course has a long history in western philosophy, is made into a particularly acute problem in ritual. By attempting to effect things with signs but at the same time turning acts into symbols, rituals both affirm and at the same time deny this dichotomy.

I shall resist the temptation to continue pondering over this paradox, and try to stick to my theme. Is there a difference in principle between a religious class of rituals and magical ones? Well, in terms of this general characteristic of the attempted fusion of signs and acts there seems to be no difference in principle. What we have said about rituals in general seems to apply to magical rituals as well. In particular, we see that the instrumental-communicative dichotomy does not offer a clear criterion for differentiation, since it does not sufficiently account for the fact that *all* rituals are emphatic ways of doing things with the aim of causing an effect, at the same time as they insistently communicate meanings. Thus we do not seem to be able to make progress along this line of deliberations.

The other traditional approach seems more promising. The rituals which we intuitively label magical seem to be characterized by their quality of being unofficial and private. However, this is, I believe, a rather superficial way of looking at the matter. One reason is that there actually do exist private forms of ritual devotion which we normally do not want to classify as magic, such as prayer, or mystical exercises. Therefore we need to go one step further and ask how the collective and the private as such are constituted within ritual generally and magic in particular.

The main types of religious ritual which were mentioned earlier can all of them be seen as ways of negotiating a relationship between individuals and a community. Rituals of maintenance serve to reaffirm periodically a social contract between the members of a community. Transformation rituals serve to integrate individuals into a group by conferring upon them a socially recognized and desirable status and identity. Crisis rituals reestablish a *nomos* in situations of *anomie*, and most often have the form of mutual reassurance shared by the members of a group. Compared to the social qualities of these rituals, magical rituals appear not only to be private and unsocial, but actually anti-social. Perhaps we can work with this latter notion. Could it be that the magical ritual is an inversion of what these other kinds of rituals are doing—not merely different from them with respect to social ramifications, but their necessary dialectical negative side, the dark side of ritual, the explicit expression of a tension existing even within ritual's positive side?

Further, the dialectics of act and symbol, performance and communication, physicality and intelligibility, can be related to those of the individual and the collective. The emphatic performance of acts in ritual has the effect of asserting the

individual performer, who in this way is endowed with a surplus of power. On the other hand, however, the symbolic qualities of the performed acts serve to de-individualize the performer. The power invested in him by the ritual does not belong to himself as an individual, but rather to the role he is performing. The duality of physicality and symbolism in the ritual has a socially integrating effect, mediating the individual and the collective, since it focuses attention on the individual by means which highlight his personal bodily and sensual presence, at the same time as he is submitting to a common code of significations.

This integrating mechanism which ritual is, has the effect of not only making the individual significant, by making him perform acts which focus attention on his unique body, but also of making this significance into something which is collectively shared and approved. Thus the power accorded to the ritual performer is diffused in, and controlled by, what is the common concern of the collectivity. The collective performance of the ritual is therefore often essential, as can be seen most clearly in those ritual modes which we call ceremonies. And in any case, the ritual performer must conform with a standard role.

Ritual therefore has to do with striking a balance between the granting of power to the performing body of the individual, and the control of this power for the common good. If we adopt this perspective on ritual it should also be possible to describe situations where this balance is skewed. Magic seems to be such a situation. The magical ritual act is, typically, an act where the power of the ritual performer is not allowed to be absorbed by the collective, but is assumed by, or arrogated by, the individual himself only. This anti-social, or potentially anti-social, attitude seems to be expressed in various ways by the characteristic forms of the magical ritual.

On the one hand, the performative and physical dimension of ritual, which endows the performer with power, is maintained in magic, and very frequently emphasized even more intensely than in normal rituals. The element of performative self-assertion is very strong in the magical ritual.

On the other hand, this self-assertion is not controlled by the forms of a collectively sanctioned symbolism. The circumstance that the ritual is typically performed in solitude, and not in a collective situation, is only one aspect of this. Equally significant is the fact that magical ritual deliberately negates the conventional and recognized symbolic content of normal rituals. One form of this is the employment of obscure formulae, magical words. This occurs, as we have remarked, in normal ritual too. The crucial difference is, I think, that in normal rituals the use of such formulae is restricted to ritual actors possessing clearly defined roles accorded to them by common consent. Thus the excess of assertive power wielded by the person enunciating such formulae is all the more strongly controlled by a community, by virtue of the fact that he is performing them not as

an individual person, but as the actor in a special liturgical role granted to him by the group on whose behalf he acts. The use of such formulae by unlicensed people is another matter, and becomes magic, not primarily because of the enunciation act itself, but because of who performs it.

It must be noted, too, that the formulae employed by the magician are however as a rule not simply identical with the ones used in normal liturgies, but includes secret words known only to the few. The *difference* from the normal is essential. Magical ritual does not intend to communicate, in the way that normal rituals communicate by means of a code of significations shared by a community. With respect to the verbal features of the magical ritual this is shown, then, both by the extensive use of *voces magicae* and by the fact that the formulae used are distinct from the ones sanctioned in communal rituals.

We can go further than this, however, and observe that not only does the magical ritual disobey the demands of intersubjective transparency posed by the existence of a fixed symbolic code in ritual, but it very often revolts against these demands too. This is expressed in the phenomenon of inversion: the magical acts are deliberate inversions of the ones performed in normal rituals—the sacrifice of a black animal instead of a white one, at midnight instead of during daylight, holding objects upside down, walking backwards, etc. In this way, the magician actively refuses to submit to a common code, and the power generated in the ritual is not shared by a community. Instead, the ritual power is retained by and concentrated in the magician himself.

This ego-centric concentration of power in the magician, and his refusal to be intersubjectively communicative, is the foundation for the forms of discourse employed—spells, curses, commanding invocations. This also accounts for the character of the physical acts performed: they are not as much instrumental acts, properly speaking (which would make magic indistinguishable from primitive science, or technology); rather, they are imperative commands expressed in acts—not just doing things, but saying things with acts in the imperative mode.

Moreover, the unsocial appropriation of ritual power by a single person in the magical ritual also makes it possible to employ the power for deliberately anti-social purposes, to harm other people or to manipulate them. Such destructive use of the magical ritual is not in itself the basis of the practice of magic, but the individualistic form of ritualization which constitutes the magical ritual as such opens up the possibility of using it for such blacker purposes.

Finally, to wind up a couple of loose ends: We made the observation that there also exist other forms of individual rituals which are not generally considered to be magic. It is noteworthy that the most generally approved form of individual ritual is prayer. Why is prayer acceptable, and not considered to be magic? Presumably it is because the element of performative self-assertion is very weak in prayer.

The discourse of prayer is explicitly submissive in character, and uses either very plain language or formulae with a high degree of official sanction. As soon as the degree of performativity increases, for instance, when prayer turns into invocation, we need a communal setting for the ritual to be acceptable. There is a decisive distinction in attitude between saying 'I invoke ...,' and 'we invoke ...'.

Another point concerns the official use of magic, which exists in many societies. Here, the observation can be extended which was made before about the use of powerful unintelligible formulae in liturgies. The use of magic in such situations is characterized by being restricted to very special people such as kings and priests. It is acceptable precisely because these people act on behalf of a community. They act in *roles* which at the same time make them represent a collectivity and set them apart from the ordinary community members. They thus represent the diametrical opposite of the magician who assumes the power of magic for his own person.

To conclude: Magic is the appropriation of ritual power for personal ends, offsetting the balance between the individual and the collective which forms the sanctioned norm of ritual practice in societies. Magic depends on normal ritual and relates dialectically to it, by combining features which are the same as the ones performed in normal rituals—hymns, prayers, invocations, sacrifices, etc.—with features which are deliberately different from it. A kind of intertextuality thus operates between magic and the official religious ritual forms. This suggests that the most fruitful approach is neither to make an absolute distinction between religious ritual and magical practices, nor to pretend there is no difference. Historically, religious rites and magic have always existed side by side—there is never the one without the other. Theoretically, too, the mutual relationship and interdependence of the two should be more basically interesting than religion and magic studied separately.

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