

Ancient Magic in a New Key

Refining an Exotic Discipline in the History of Religions

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The following manifesto for the study of magic is the result of some twenty years of conversations with Henk Versnel about magic, why magic is interesting, how we should study magic, what we should do with the term ‘magic’, and how one might conceptualize a *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* in order to refine the field.¹ My starting point, of course, is Versnel’s sensible declaration of 1991: “Magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts.”² That is, the study of magic should not be beholden to philology – to how ancient people used terms like *mageia* – but must define the term, group magical things comparatively, analyze magical discourses, and delineate what is *not* magic, all according to the critical principles of the academy.

And yet this freedom – and responsibility – to define magic as a category of religion (and one that clearly covers more than just antiquity) clearly was not embraced as the study of magic began to take off in the 1980s. Instead, scholars fretted about the spiritual difference between magic and thaumaturgical healing, the boundaries between magic and monotheistic piety, and the pompous deceptions and dissipated mythologies that constituted magic. For most scholars in theological and classical studies the term could not be comprehended apart from its ancient roots as an amorphous, foreign-derived realm of superstition and manipulation. Thus the study of magic was largely a dive into the dark and mysterious areas of ancient cultures, whether one found them in the pages of Apuleius or the incantations of curse tablets. And a dedication to philology, to maintaining the ancient meaning of *mageia* as definitive for the study of magic, grounded this scholarship.

To answer these questions we must move to the historiography: why the blossoming of magic studies since the 1980s? In many ways we have to credit Morton Smith with both energizing and confusing this older approach to

1 The following essay largely reprints the main introductory essay to the *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, also in Brill’s *Religions of the Greco-Roman World*, on which Henk Versnel and I worked together between 2004 and about 2014. The observations and propositions in the essay in fact reflect the contents of the *Guide* as we conceptualized it.

2 Versnel 1991b, 177.

magic.³ For his *Jesus the Magician* so cleverly elided a category of ritual performance – ‘magic’ – with a common accusation in the Roman world, and so effectively deleted ‘miracle’ as a category of any real utility, that the book had scholars falling all over themselves to decry it as utterly irresponsible or acclaim it as revolutionary. “Son of God”? “Magos”? – all in the eye of the beholder.⁴

Following Smith’s initial salvo in 1978, the fields of New Testament and Classics enjoyed a surge in studies of ‘magic’ *as perceived or constructed* by classical authors like Luke-Acts or Apuleius. It was clear that these studies were motivated by a need to remove all second-order (etic) value to the term ‘magic’, to render the term entirely the rhetorical construction of ancient authors. What does ‘magic’ mean for the author of Luke-Acts and his presentation of thaumaturgical performance? What does ‘magic’ mean in the Apocryphal Acts, or Theodoret, or the Theodosian Code? Whether this literary turn came from an anxiety that Jesus might ever again be called a ‘magician’ by some prominent scholar or brazen undergraduate, or from a general suspicion of anthropology and comparative categories as useful influences on the study of ancient religions, scholarship on ancient magic entered what I might call its ‘resolutely emic’ period by the 1990s.⁵

Except these studies tended to be far from ‘emic’ in any real sense. If the ‘emic’ approach to ethnographic or historical data endeavours to translate the nuances of the indigenous worldview and its categories, then these literary studies, in their *ambitions* to say something about ‘magic’ in the ancient world, tended to depart the confines of the emic on a regular basis.⁶ By claiming to study ‘magic’ *as* ancient authors imagined the term or idea, these scholars would inevitably shift to talking about magic as a general category – as, say, a worldview, or a mode of deception, or rituals of a selfish nature, or a catch-all term for the PGM, curse-tablets, mystery cults, and fictional images of exotic priests.⁷ And behold: no more emic study – suddenly they were not only engaging in etic (second-order, outsider’s) generalization, gathering more and more terms and scenarios under a category magic, but worse, they were channeling the very etic notions of magic promulgated by theologians and the *Golden Bough*. Their excuse, inevitably, was that they were simply accepting the perspectives of Lucian or Apuleius.

3 Smith 1981.

4 See varying responses by Aune 1980, 1523–1539; Aune 2007, 274–278; Garrett 1989, 23–26; Twelftree 2007b.

5 E.g. Garrett 1989 and Dickie 2001.

6 On the widespread problem of collapsing emic and etic approaches to this topic, see Geertz 1975.

7 See my reviews of Garrett and Dickie: Frankfurter 1993; Frankfurter 2002b. Cf. Aune 2007, 240–244, 281–285.

The casual translation of *mageia* as 'magic' makes this kind of slippage or grandiosity inevitable. Whether one speaks of 'magic' in Apuleius or Heliodorus or the *Acts of John*, the English term carries its own heavy and problematic valences, from Houdini and Harry Potter to Frazer and Malinowski, and it is really impossible thus to do an emic analysis using an English word.⁸ We should take a leaf from Alice Donohue's brilliant study of *Xoana* – not 'Idolatry' or 'The Image', which would be far less precise and more grandiose titles.⁹ With *mageia* all the more it is essential to keep the term under analysis at arm's length, to maintain its discrete meaning and indigenous ambiguities and prejudices and not the ones associated with 'magic.' To talk about 'magic as the Early Christians understood it' involves exactly the deceptive elision of emic and etic that Morton Smith had so much fun with.

1 From 'Magic' to Vocabularies of Illegitimate or Ambiguous Ritual Action

Now, it would be inappropriate to downplay the value of *consistently* emic studies of *mageia* – or *khesheph* in early Judaism or *maleficium* in medieval studies. Many recent scholars have focused specifically on the evolving senses of *mageia* and other *indigenous* terminologies: what people thought in their own worlds as opposed to what 'magic' was. One might note the amount of times that Fritz Graf in his *Magic in the Ancient World* needed to clarify that *mageia* is not the same as 'magic.'¹⁰ Medievalists have been especially attentive to how a concept of *maleficium* forged in the world of heresiography came to be projected onto all kinds of suspect people and practices in Europe: that is, there was no 'witchcraft' *per se*. In fact, we have come to realize that many cultures have terms for some ambiguous or illegitimate sphere of ritual, often associated with some 'other' group or village or culture. Sometimes we imagine their rituals on a continuum with 'ours' – more powerful or ambivalent in effect – and sometimes as a perversion of ours (since *they* use idols or live roosters, or invoke unsavoury spirits, or speak atrocious languages).¹¹ But sometimes that 'Other' sphere of ritual power may exert some attraction – might suggest to us, in our village, a potential supplement to our more familiar traditions and specialists, useful (e.g.) for love- and binding spells, even while we depend on our 'mainstream' religious traditions to celebrate festivals and protect babies. And

8 See especially Remus 1999, 264–270.

9 Donohue 1988.

10 Graf 1997, 26, 30, 34, 39, 56, etc.

11 Cf. Frankfurter 2002a.

so also in reverse: Jesus of Nazareth, having successfully rid a demoniac and the whole region of a “legion” of demons (Mark 5) – a heroic and beneficial feat of exorcistic skill if there ever was one – consequently terrifies the populace by this very act, and they implore him to leave the area (5: 17). Virtuoso acts of ritual expertise carry an ambiguous power – what could he do if he was angry?

This sense of an ambiguous or illegitimate sphere of ritual will obviously change historically – with the introduction of new ideologies or groups – and geographically – from one village to another – even while the terminology itself might not change. *Mageia/Magia* clearly assumed different meanings and valences from ancient Greece to the Roman empire, and then in Latin Christian authors, Greek Christian authors, and Coptic authors. The *magoi* who visit baby Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (2:1–2) are clearly supposed to come from a different meaning system from that of Simon the “magic-performer” in the Book of Acts (8: 9–12). Likewise, in worlds of anxious competition, it makes a difference if an author uses *mageia*, *perierga*, *goēs*, *mantis*, *katadesmos*, or more specific designations of illegitimate ritual practice. They may not be interchangeable.

Now, while we should hold the study of *mageia*, *pharmakeia*, or other such terms to rigorously emic standards, adhering to indigenous sensibilities about their use, the observation I am making here about a cross-cultural notion of an illegitimate or ambivalent sphere of ritual is anthropological – etic – that is, generalized on the basis of comparison. I readily admit some circularity in adhering to indigenous vocabularies (emic) for a type of cultural concern I have designated on theoretical grounds (etic). A truly emic approach would eschew the comparison-based, thematic association of words like *mageia* and Hebrew *khesheph* and Latin *maleficium* and instead remain only in the particular historical-cultural world that perpetually tests and applies, enlarges and diminishes such nomenclature in context. But then we are merely *in* that world we were supposed to study, with nothing particular to focus on. So, circularity notwithstanding, it is defensible to describe a cross-cultural notion of an illegitimate or ambivalent sphere of ritual. While it circumscribes what counts as worthy of discussion as an improvement on ‘magic’, it does so in a coherent and nuanced way.

The notion of an illegitimate or ambivalent sphere of ritual embraces cultures’ conceptualization of alterity itself: where is danger to be located socially, materially? Where is power to be accessed socially, materially? How do they overlap? But how is this *folklore of alterity* to be designated – by what common terms?¹² ‘Magic’ is clearly misleading, for it usually implies an historical sphere of ritual expertise or technique, while in this case we are trying to describe a caricature or stereotype. I once proposed that the practitioners of the *imagined*

12 See Bailey 2006.

sphere be designated ‘wizards’, which conveniently suggests an imagined character.¹³ Others have used terms like ‘sorcerer’ – a dangerous figure who deliberately subverts through his ritual acts – or even ‘witch’; but both of these terms often slide into representing real social roles or ideal types rather than a stereotype or common nightmare projected onto others. In fact, some of the most interesting research in the field of magic in antiquity has addressed this stereotype or common nightmare of the witch, moving between literary, cultural, and historical perspectives but keeping the issue entirely separate from the definition of ritual practices for binding, healing, and protecting.¹⁴ At the same time, others have enthusiastically conflated these often misogynist caricatures with reconstructions of historical ritual expertise.¹⁵

So the study of wizards or witches, or *mageia* or *khesheph* or *hik* or *maleficium* is vital, even fundamental, to the larger study of ‘magic’ as long as it is done on its own *emic* terms, as the study of terminology for ambiguous or illegitimate ritual or of stereotypes and collective representations, *not* of real ritual experts, practices, or encounters. For example, it is interesting how wizards in literature, especially late antique hagiographical literature, were occasionally imagined as commanders of demons. But this is a very different question from whether and how *historical* ritual specialists in certain times and places might actually have invoked demonic forces in certain rituals.¹⁶ We should not assume any overlap in this regard (even if, in the end, we might discover some discursive influences). So also with images of ritual compulsion and selfish demands: wizards are *supposed* to force the *daimones* and chthonic gods into action, while priests implore and *pray*; wizards and witches offer their horrific sacrifices to fulfill selfish desires, not to protect the village from plague. These are the elements of the caricature; but to what degree are they actually generalizable to certain historical ritual experts? Probably not at all, but if we don’t keep these kinds of questions separate we end up replicating all the assertions of medieval heresiographers.

2 From ‘Magic’ to the Texts and Artifacts That Provoke the Label

Let us turn now to the corpora of texts and materials we often call ‘magic’ or consider primary evidence for magic: the Greek Magical Papyri, the Coptic spells, curse tablets and binding figurines, demon-protection bowls, amulets,

13 See Frankfurter 1997 and 2000.

14 See, e.g. Gordon 1987; Lesses 2001; Stratton 2007; Pollard 2008; Stratton 2014; Spaeth 2014.

15 See e.g. Dickie 2000; Dickie 2001, chapter 3 & passim; Eidinow 2007; Frankfurter 2014b.

16 Frankfurter 2007.

and so on. Here too is a subject – or range of subjects – that must be distinguished from the reconstruction of the meaning of *mageia* or *khesheph* in antiquity. New Testament scholars and classicists alike have set off to characterize ancient magic relying on a composite picture they glean from some modern collection of documents: Preisendanz's *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (2nd ed., 1973–1974), Borghouts's *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (1978), Meyer and Smith's *Ancient Christian Magic* (1994), and so on. But let us be precise: none of these corpora are *mageia*, nor are they 'documents of magic.' In fact, calling them 'magical papyri' prejudices their status as texts in society and confuses generations of students. How can 'magic' be defined as "the kinds of materials and literature well known in, but not limited to, the magical papyri", when 'the magical papyri' is itself a modern designation?¹⁷

Those so-called Greek Magical Papyri that Preisendanz (and then Daniel and Maltomini) assembled from disparate papyri largely comprise the Hellenized ritual compositions of Egyptian priests in the Roman period who nowhere identify themselves as *magoi* nor their writings as *mageia*.¹⁸ So it is a subjective presumption to refer to these materials as indicative of what *mageia* meant in the ancient world. So also the materials that Marvin Meyer collected in the 1994 volume *Ancient Christian Magic*: far from the compositions of some historically marginal wizards in late antique Egypt, we now realize they came from the pens of monks, adroit in reorienting liturgical materials.¹⁹ Aramaic 'demon-bowls' show no subversive, exotic, or anti-rabbinic source of procurement, while the latest research on curse tablets folds them into the larger social framework of negotiating risk, anxiety, and rivalry, invariably with the help of some local scribe.

All these corpora, then, are documents of specific historical subcultures: Egyptian priests in the Roman period, Syro-Mesopotamian domestic practices and Jewish rabbis, and the various encounters of social tension and writing practices in many parts of the Roman empire. But they are not documents of *mageia*. So, to return briefly to the field of New Testament studies, those books of "those who practiced *perierga*" that the author of Luke-Acts describes being burned in Ephesus (Ac 19:19) should *not* be exemplified by the corpus edited by Preisendanz for research convenience. The appearance of Seth or Anguipede imagery around the Greco-Roman world is not evidence for the widespread copying of Egyptian *grimoires* but the inner culture of gem-specialists and craftsmen.

17 Twelftree, 2007a, 60.

18 Ritner 1995; Frankfurter 2000, 166–183; Dieleman 2005; Fowden 1986.

19 Frankfurter 1998, 257–164; Van der Vliet 2011.

So let us consider for a moment what we are dismantling and what maintaining in the study of ancient magic. First, it is appropriate and important to look at the construction, use, and semantic range of the various Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Coptic, and other terms that authors and jurists used in antiquity to designate an ambiguous or illegitimate type of ritual work, *mageia* included. Although conceived thematically – etically – this work must be done with strict adherence to indigenous vocabulary, without glossing that vocabulary in terms of ‘magic.’ Second, it is appropriate and important to look at the construction, use, and semantic range of folklore characters – Erichtho, Pamphile, *striges*, as well as Alexander of Abonoteichos – used in literary and judicial texts to *epitomize* illegitimate ritual. Third, it is strategically possible, if carefully done, to use select English words like ‘witch’ or ‘wizard’ or ‘sorcerer’ to generalize about these folklore characters *as long as* there is no mistaking the folklore nature of the term: that witch or wizard is not a social role. That is, a selected word can be used with the criterion that it can only designate a literary or caricatured figure, not a real figure in society. And fourth, as fascinating and appealing as they are for ancient historians, the Greek and demotic Magical Papyri and other like corpora are not *prima facie* evidence for *mageia*, for ambiguous or illegitimate ritual in antiquity, but only for what their authors intended in these texts and compilations; and that is a subject on its own. By the same empirical principle, lead binding tablets and curse-figurines and apotropaic bowls are evidence of specific ritual types, not *magic*. Overall, what we are calling for – and what our *Guide* sought to encourage – is more precision in the study of ritual, ritual power, categories of ritual, and perceptions of ritual in antiquity.

3 ‘Magic’ as a Flexible and Heuristic Category

So what about ‘magic’? Can we, in the end, use this term in any meaningful way to describe some type of data? If the use of ‘magic’ to describe what the ancient Greeks or Christians meant by *mageia* results in the inevitable channelling of Frazerian worldviews, Durkheimian dichotomies, theological prejudices, and tenuous data, must we conclude that the term’s utility is exhausted? Must we abandon the term wholesale? In an important article Henk Versnel argued that we maintain an implicit sense of what counts as magic when we are selecting our data even when we try to excise the term from our vocabulary – that our unconscious definitions determine what we choose as worthy of discussion as ‘magic’: amulets and poppets, but not spoons and hats (or processional crucifixes and Mithraic stelae). Thus we may as well keep the term in play, at least to characterize how ancient peoples discriminated areas of

ritual action.²⁰ On the other hand, Jonathan Z. Smith, in his address to the Lawrence magic conference in 1992, declared that ‘magic’ as a second-order – descriptive – category involves an intrinsic *alterity*. It exoticizes whatever it covers and juxtaposes it to some other category of culture – whether religion, science, or reason.²¹ And Smith does have a point, not only for Keith Thomas’s brilliantly told but unfortunately conceptualized *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) but even in the most recent historical scholarship. Michael Swartz’s insightful study of late antique rituals to invoke the *Sar Ha-Torah* angel (in a kind of Jewish scholastic mysticism) classified these rituals as ‘magic’ as part of an argument to *distinguish* their authors from the rabbinic elite. In a more obvious case of magic’s intrinsic alterity, the archaeologist Ron Stroud classified various devotional practices and prayers in Roman Corinth as ‘magic’ to reflect their extra-temple provenance and to juxtapose them to ... the teachings of Paul.²²

This argument of Smith’s was powerful stuff when it was published, and it convinced many of us, who consequently raised the banner of the abandonment of ‘magic’ (even while attending conference sessions and publishing in books with ‘magic’ in their titles). The problem with Smith’s argument, however, is that *all* of our principal second-order categories carry some degree of Otherness or exoticism, from ‘religion’ (as Talal Asad notably pointed out) and ‘ritual’ (as historians of the Reformation remind us) to ‘sacrifice’, which mystifies and overloads the most prosaic animal-slaughter or homicide.²³ If we want all our descriptive categories to carry neutral pedigrees we won’t have anything left. The more realistic goal should be to ask ourselves what is gained or lost by describing data with one etic term or another: magic or ritual, religion or tradition, book or scripture, pilgrimage or travel, and so on. If ‘sacrifice’ seems to imply the violent death of an animal or person while for most ancient folks the term *thusia* meant cakes and the occasional pig-roast, then maybe the term gives the wrong sense to private and civic ritual. If ‘conversion’ implies a modern Protestant type of psychological transformation, then to use it for antiquity will probably distort shifts in religious adherence or allegiance. But if we use ‘ritual’ to gather together certain traditional patterns of gesture or speech, maybe it can help make sense of important data.

20 Versnel 1991b.

21 Smith 1995, 13–27.

22 Swartz 1996; Stroud 2014, 187–202.

23 Religion: Asad 1993; Burke 1987; Bell 1997, 253–267; Frankfurter 2001. Sacrifice: Frankfurter 2011.

So back to 'magic' – what can it describe, moving forward? To describe as magic some unspecified component of the culture in which the New Testament came about, of course, reinscribes precisely the errors and biases of which J.Z. Smith warned and in which Morton Smith revelled. It creates an image of a crude and superstitious heathen Other against which the apostles tried valiantly to define a pure gospel – a perfect retrojection of Protestant ideology.²⁴ On the other hand, borrowing social definitions of magic from Durkheim, Mauss, and Malinowski that depend on a juxtaposition to 'religion' doesn't carry us much further, since – as countless historians and anthropologists have shown us – the phenomenology of magical acts flows equally through so-called 'religious' rites: rabbis curse, priests write amulets, monks invoke demons, sheikhs offer binding spells, and so on. Overall, any time one seeks to articulate a 'non-magic', ideological bias follows, and then one is back in post-Reformation dichotomies.

One particularly nuanced attempt to distinguish a sphere of magic from a sphere of religion in the ancient world has been Versnel's. He devoted an important series of articles to the language of supplication and command in an effort to justify a distinction between a more mechanistic 'magic' and a more supplicatory 'religion' that involved gods. 'Magic' was supposed to work by the intrinsic power of commands and words; 'religion' covered appeals that, at least ostensibly, depended on the mediation and agency of gods. These were tendencies Versnel saw in the data of Greek curse tablets and votive inscriptions, and they were tendencies that, he argued, bore out how ancient Greek authors themselves envisioned two different categories of ritual speech and the cosmic dynamics each involved – long before Frazer made these dynamics (laws of sympathy etc. versus divine causality) fundamental to his own magic/religion distinction.²⁵

The argument is compelling, and yet it accepts perhaps too readily as a starting point the implications of written words for intentionality, belief, consistency, and the very function of spoken and written language. We must be extraordinarily careful not to get hung up on the language of ritual texts, whether in the original languages or how it sounds in translation. Where we think there is awe, humility, and a sense of ethics – or, conversely, amoral and mechanistic assumptions about selfish manipulation and command – there may simply be scribal idioms, local conventions, and a fundamental, overarching concern with efficacy on the part of a scribe. Even in oral performance 'prayer' can veer between supplication and illocutionary act, especially in the

24 Remus 1999, 260–263.

25 See especially Versnel 1991b; Versnel 1991a; Versnel 1981a; Versnel 2002.

realm of curse.²⁶ To extrapolate an intentionality and a theological perspective on the part of the ancient client or ritual specialist, whether for prayer or magical incantation, comes down in the end to one's own imagination (and, frankly, for the world of biblical and New Testament studies, the projection of normative values). Indeed, such extrapolation – here, from the wording of inscriptions, binding tablets, magical papyri, and the such – is really not so different from how Frazer imagined how primitive folk negotiated causality in the world. Evans-Pritchard labelled this kind of speculation the “If I were a horse” fallacy: imagining sentiments and thoughts you really have no access to.²⁷

I am thus apprehensive about Versnel's proposal here; but then what *can* we do with the word ‘magic’? If we agree that “magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts”, then it is certainly an empty category to do with what we will.²⁸ Does the category require an opposite – a ‘non-magic’ – at all? I would propose that ‘magic’ or ‘magical’ can serve as a *quality* of certain practices and materials that highlights for our scholarly scrutiny features of materiality, potency, or verbal or ritual performance we might not otherwise appreciate as part of a culture's religious world, or aspects of the social location of ritual practices we might not otherwise appreciate. ‘Magic’ – the category – becomes thus a heuristic tool rather than a second-order (etic) classification.

We might, for example, speak of the magical use of language to highlight the diverse functions that Austin and Searle outlined in speech-acts theory, or the multiple dimensions of ritual speech that Malinowski described in *Coral Gardens*.²⁹ Given that a so-called prayer can easily function as a curse, the application of the quality ‘magical’ here does not establish hard and fast distinctions, just tendencies that are inevitable in language and culture: that songs, spoken charms, speech acts, and certain uses of narrative actually work on the world.

A more obvious situation in which we find magical characteristics is writing, a technology that lends itself almost intrinsically to ritual expressions. The magical use of writing is akin to what Sam Gill has called the ‘performative’ use of text – in amulet and gesture – in contrast to the ‘informative’ – for

26 Cf. Frankfurter 2005.

27 Evans-Pritchard 1965, 25, 43, 47.

28 Versnel 1991b, 177. Cf. J.Z. Smith's pithy observation that “religion is solely the creation of the scholars' study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy”, see Smith 1982, xi.

29 Austin 1975; Searle 1975, 344–369; Malinowski 1978.

cognitive appreciation.³⁰ Given that in most nonliterate and semi-literate cultures texts have almost exclusively performative value, the extension to amulet, to drinking erased letters, to inscribing pseudo-hieroglyphs, represents no shift in religious domain whatsoever.

Magic in this material sense also pertains to, and highlights, the indigenization or localization of a Great Tradition. If Great Traditions like Christianity or Buddhism frame the administration and mythology of power, it is through a range of local practices, materials, and images that that power comes to be directed: the stone cross in the town as a source of sand for fecundity, the Bible as a device of divination, the altar-cloth or bell-rope as a healing substance. 'Magic' again does not signify an erroneous (or uncatechized) understanding but rather a *shift in political and spatial dimension* of materials, formulas, and ceremonial elements and the particular charisma borne in the local domain by the symbols of broad religious institutions.³¹

'Magic' can also highlight shifts in individuals' – ritual specialists' – social location. The Greco-Roman world was awash in stereotypes of ambiguous ritual expertise and in images of the exotic powers of foreigners – like those three Babylonian *magoi* who see Jesus's birth in the stars. At the same time, we must remember that there were real priestly traditions in these cultures as well as ritual experts both local and regional: diviners, mediums, seers. What happens when, say, the traditional lector priest of some Egyptian temple or the local diviner migrates from the local culture, in which his role and practices make traditional sense, to the cosmopolitan culture? An identity and sphere of authority that was understood in intimate social terms in the local culture, or native priestly styles in the temple culture, *shift* into an exotic frame of reference in the cosmopolitan culture – a magnet for awe, fear, ridicule, and the whole Orientalist charisma of the foreign Other. The great Chicago anthropologist Robert Redfield observed this shift almost a century ago in the Yucatan, as rural shamans assumed the character of wizards when they came to the cities.³² But, as I have argued, the native or priestly ritual expert often has a hand in this shift too, *appropriating* the stereotypes projected upon him for authority and financial gain.³³

So we might call 'magical' the exoticized appearance of a ritual expert outside his indigenous milieu.³⁴ Traditional, familiar remedies, charms, and

30 Gill 1985.

31 See Frankfurter 2014a.

32 Redfield 1941; Frankfurter 1997.

33 Frankfurter 1998, 224–233; Frankfurter 2000; Gordon 2002.

34 On itinerant religious entrepreneurs in general see Wendt 2016.

gestures come off as magical to the cosmopolitan outsider: “This I shall do”, says the speaker in an early Christian novel, “I shall proceed to Egypt, and there I shall cultivate the friendship of the hierophants or prophets, who preside at the shrines. Then I shall win over a *magus* by money, and entreat him, by what they call their necromantic art, to bring me a soul from the infernal regions”, in order to find out “whether the soul be immortal.”³⁵ For this Roman outsider, all the priests are just wizards at his disposal. Such shifts in performative, social, and political context often take place in new cultural or economic regimes: Hellenism, Roman or Sassanian rule, and so also, anthropologists have found, developments in the modern world. New regimes, these anthropologists have found, foster a kind of magic in the new material or sensory forms of the regime – say, for antiquity, statuary, jurisprudence, and coinage; and in the modern world, televisions, magazines, currency, and clothing styles – but also in the suspicions that new regimes breed (and seek to control) in cities and countryside. At the same time, new regimes and their commodities, governments, and idioms of power tend to hide their own magical forces while at the same time promoting discourses of illegitimate ritual forces – sorcery, witchcraft – as the antithesis of the ‘modern’ and the foil to central authority.³⁶

In a likewise sociological vein we might consider the way magic can point to particular situations of social tension or struggle in which both protection and aggression are called for (and sometimes public accusation and trial). For some scholars the term magic can stimulate inquiry into the way certain ritual acts and material assemblages are produced or commissioned out of social desperation or rivalry: the curse that augments legal proceedings or follows the breakdown in some village relationships; the erotic spell that a spurned wife uses to keep her husband and thus the honour and financial security he represents, or the kind of spell a man might use to project his frustrated desires onto the woman he desires: “Let [her] not be able to sleep for the entire night, but compel her until she comes to [my] feet, loving [me] with frenzied love, with affection and with sex ... do not allow her to eat, drink, sleep, or laugh but make her rush out of every place, ... abandon [her family], until she comes to me, ... loving me, wanting me (with a) divine, unceasing, and wild love.”³⁷ As Winkler suggested, these unquenchable feelings he seems to want *her* to suffer are, in fact, those that *he* suffers.³⁸

35 Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions* 1.5, in Donaldson and Roberts (edd.) 1867, 145.

36 See especially Pels 2003; Moore and Sanders 2001; Brown 1970.

37 *PGM* C1 = *Suppl. Mag.* 45. Cf. Gager (ed.), 1992, 101–106, #30.

38 Winkler 1990, 82–98. On other crisis contexts see Eidinow 2007 and Frankfurter 2014b.

Is there a productive way to describe such ritual materials, given that their use of language and symbols lies on a continuum with other efforts at potent writing or speech in the culture, and given that they clearly *supplement* quite elaborate face-to-face efforts to gain honour, security, or gratification? To denote them as the '*magical aspects of the resolution of crisis*' is not the end of the story but the beginning of an inquiry into the types of ritual materials used to negotiate social tensions and frustrations – or (in the famous case of the accusation against Apuleius) the way particular things can become marked as sorcery in the context of social tension. Is this really a question of private as opposed to public practices? Probably not, given the fact that most binding and curse spells had an inevitably public nature. Does social tension intrinsically demand a different, perhaps more ambivalent range of names, spirits, or stories to be efficacious – *daimones*, underworld powers, black cats? Are we really talking about ways of situating or performing *liminality*, according to cultural norms? How might a prevailing *culture of liminal symbolism* – all those hideous ingredients attributed to witches in Lucan and Apuleius – *feed back into* these kinds of rituals for negotiating social tension, in the way a contemporary adolescent who wants to curse a bullying classmate might know to include a pentagram, a skull or dead animal, and something to do with Satan? Here again we may use magic as a quality or character of a type of data – curses and erotic spells – a quality that demands dynamic redescription.

The new turn to materiality in the study of religion, picking up a theme developed in the field of archaeology, should steer us away from the intentions and ideologies that have governed the discussion of magic and towards the substances that mediate powers and agency in the world.³⁹ Materiality of Religion (as opposed to 'materials of religion' – a more traditional and limited archaeological approach)⁴⁰ highlights the concrete forms through which religious ideas, supernatural beings, and local traditions are felt and sensed in this world: from books to shrines, from ecclesiastical furniture to festival decorations, from figurines to costumes. This approach to religion stresses the *agency* of images and crafts, the *efficacy* of objects, the active *presence* in images, the *vitality* of repurposed things – say, baby shoes used as votive symbols – and the physical practicality of written amulets. It regards the body itself not as a passive thing to be transcended or healed but as a symbolic palette for communication with spirits and saints – through illness and inspiration, through dance and through pain. In steering us back to the things that constitute religious and social experience Materiality of Religion represents the ultimate repudiation

39 See also Bailey 2006, 17–19.

40 On the distinction see Frankfurter 2017.

of the Protestant legacy in Religious Studies, which had always held up the spiritual, intellectual, and transcendent as theologically superior to the idolatry of heathens, primitives, and Catholics.⁴¹ Putting the concrete, the object, the carnal, as well as ritual 'play' and bricolage at the centre of religion, the material approach represents an enormous step forward in the understanding of religion in culture and human life; and in many ways it is the next step also in the appreciation of 'magic' as more than some heathen counterpoint to apostolic Christianity. Magic, that is, becomes the element of agency and presence in objects sought out, combined, crafted, invested with mediation, deposited, worn, or placed publicly – the curse-tablet 'sent' to Hekate as much as the female figurine left in a saint's shrine, the apotropaic icon of St. Simeon or the cloak of a deceased prophet as much as the plaque with the 'suffering eye' outside one's door, and certainly the amulet containing scripture phrases as much as the bright red gem displaying the Anguipede symbol. In all such cases it is the agency in the material object that is felt to protect, communicate, heal, or curse.

Finally, the term magic can aid us in describing or redescribing certain verbal or material *aspects* of rituals that are otherwise defined as immaterial or transcendent in orientation: what we usually classify as mysticism or theurgy. Ancient mystical programs typically involved the recitation of sacred names, sounds, repetitive verses and images, and an *illocutionary* sense to declarations and descriptions. That is to say, the declaration establishes the situation. Permeating apocalyptic literature, Gnostic literature, and many other esoteric liturgical traditions, these linguistic features and functions should not be called 'magical' in and of themselves.⁴² We gain nothing by using the term magic simply for the language of mysticism. But 'magical' might refer helpfully to the particular uses to which certain types of language and gesture were put in mystical programs. And it might also refer to the *materials* that serve or are created through these rituals: the liquids and substances and sounds that serve the acquisition of visions, or mediate between the heavenly and human worlds. In this area of mysticism one might think of the *lunx* wheel that the theurgist would whirl to create supernatural sounds; or the names and symbols affixed on the body for heavenly ascent in apocalyptic and 'Gnostic' texts; or (on the other hand) the amulets and the ritual knowledge that one is said to gain *through* rituals of ascent to heaven (like the "white stone" with the secret name on it, promised by the prophet in the Book of Revelation, 2: 17).⁴³

41 See especially Asad 1993.

42 See Lesses 1998 and Janowitz 2002.

43 Swartz 1996, 179.

Sefer Ha-Razim is the paramount example of these verbal or material *results* of visionary ritual. It is not 'magical' because it recommends specific formulas and spells for practical purposes but rather because it derives material applications and ritual powers from apocalyptic ascent.⁴⁴

In all these ways the category magic might have some utility as long as we justify it for particular types of data – not as a loose or lazy generalization for whatever seems weird, manipulative, or selfish in orientation (and especially not as a foil to Jesus or Paul). As a heuristic term it can highlight – for further analysis – material aspects of ritual, local applications of official ritual, and shifting evaluations of traditional religious figures or rites. We can use it as a quality or aspect of ritual or a domain in which rituals might be directed. In these contexts the word carries a helpful qualitative sense – sometimes akin to 'numinousness' or 'charisma', 'agency' or 'presence', 'potency' or 'liminality', in all the ways these words have been loaded in the humanities; and sometimes characterizing shifts in status or the materiality of social crises. In these different ways, the self-conscious use of 'magic' and 'magical' can also encourage intellectual responsibility for the history of ideological misuses of these terms – misuses that tend to be replicated by scholars who imagine themselves pure by eliminating 'magic.' As the anthropologists Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw observed with the contested term syncretism, "embracing a term which has acquired – in some quarters – pejorative meanings can lead to a more challenging critique of the assumptions on which those meanings are based than can its mere avoidance."⁴⁵

Yet invariably, and appropriately, scholars will leave the category magic behind as, in the end, unnecessary to the description or classification of some phenomenon: the use of mysterious words and sounds to drive an incantation, for example. While helpful initially to highlight aspects of phenomena, the term 'magic' remains too vague to rely on as a genuine second-order category of description – for magic as described here essentially permeates human language, material lives, and social interactions. Ultimately the term should point us to something more fundamental in all the religions of antiquity (and beyond): that what we call religion inevitably revolves around the image and the amulet, the assemblage and the inscribed letters, the shrine and the body. Still, the term helped us to get there – to raise the questions.⁴⁶

44 Morgan 1983.

45 Shaw and Stewart 1994, 2.

46 See Satlow 2005, 293–295.