CHAPTER 1

The Study of Contemporary Magic

What is Magic?

Many attempts have been made to define magic and distinguish it from religion.1 Although old, James Frazer’s understanding of magic as attempts to control supernatural forces and one’s environment (and thus a form of ‘primitive, but misdirected, science’), distinguished from the submission to the same forces in religion,2 has shown itself to be very enduring. Emile Durkheim demonstrates similar views, positing that while magic and religion both operate with the same general premises, such as belief systems, rites, myths, and dogmas, the former does not unite its practitioners in churches whereas the latter does.3 For Mircea Eliade religion deals in kratophanies (manifestations of power), hierophanies (manifestations of the sacred), and theophanies (manifestations of the divine). Kratophanies are the most elementary of the three, manifestations which have yet to be proven to be sacred.4 While no absolute distinction between magic and religion is made, the former is closely related to kratophanies due to revolving around notions of power. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge regard both religion and magic as offering compensation for experiences of deprivation, with magic offering more specific compensation to the more general compensation offered by religion.5 Even though many scholars stress the scholarly artificiality categorically distinguishing between religion and magic the need to maintain such distinctions appears to live strong. This can probably be traced to (Christian) theological influences where ‘proper religion’ is supposed to be devoid of ‘magical’ elements. It is indeed very hard to absolutely separate magic and religion,6 and Clayton Crockett’s observation on religion as an object of study are equally valid for magic:

---

1 For a thorough discussion of various ways in which magic has been construed, see Otto & Stausberg, Defining Magic.
3 Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 41–42.
4 Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, 13.
5 Bainbridge & Stark, A Theory of Religion, 36–42.
Chapter 1

The fact that reality is not given to human understanding implies that any data which is described as religion or religious can claim only phenomenal status. This means not only that religion cannot be known immediately as a thing in itself, but also that it is at least partially constructed as an object by the observer, interpreter, or scholar.\(^7\)

The problem is that while religion has been the focus of much theoretical and methodological debate,\(^8\) magic has largely remained a subordinate category. This has resulted in a situation where magic is often, although certainly not always, considered a static and more or less transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon. In European cultural history the practices, motivations, philosophical underpinnings, and social contexts (among other variables) of ‘magic’ in different periods vary so greatly that ‘it is questionable if it is even meaningful to treat the term as an expression of a coherent phenomenon’.\(^9\) This is certainly no less true in regard to cross-cultural comparisons. ‘Magic’ is not the same in all cultures and in all times, and it is extremely naïve to think so. Furthermore, in its pre-Enlightenment use it referred primarily to a cultural category at home in European intellectual contexts,\(^10\) and it is problematic to transpose the term more or less intact to non-European cultures. As the term has come to be primarily interpreted through research conducted on non-European ‘primitive religion’ considerable obstacles to properly understanding European magic have been introduced. Gini Graham Scott’s study of the Temple of Set is an illuminating example.\(^11\) In basing her understanding of

\(^7\) Crockett, ‘On the Disorientation of the Study of Religion’, 3.

\(^8\) For a discussion of how the study of religion has been challenged and consequently transformed during recent years, even to the extent that the term religion itself is being viewed as an ‘arbitrary and Eurocentric construction’ and largely a false category in itself, see von Stuckrad, ‘Discursive Study of Religion, 256; cf. King, ‘Orientalism and the Study of Religion’, 283–284.

\(^9\) Gregorius, Modern Asatro, 25, my translation.

\(^10\) Lehrich, The Language of Demons and Angels, 10. The origin of the modern English word ‘magic’ lies in the Greek magéía, which was borrowed from the Persians (where the Zoroastrian priesthood were termed magi, in Greek magoi – see Chosky, ‘Zoroastrianism’, 9990). In Latin the term was adopted as magia (Pasi, ‘Magic’, 1134). From Latin it was transformed into the Old French magique to likely be adopted into the English language in the late fourteenth century (Online Etymology Dictionary, ‘Magic’). Systematic philosophies concerning magic were developed primarily from the Renaissance onwards, by authors such as Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516), and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535). The Greek appropriation of this word with a Zoroastrian religious origin is itself an example of a form of positive orientalism in Antiquity, see pages 181–182.