APPENDIX II

MAGIC AND RELIGION?

Over a long period of time, social anthropologists have now been debating the question whether there is a difference between magic and religion, and if so, how magic should be defined. Given the greatly increased attention to magic among classicists in recent years, it is hardly surprising that this debate has now finally reached the ancient world as well. In an important article, H.S. Versnel has argued that “rejection of the word ‘magic’ will soon turn out to be unworkable” and that it would be utterly unpractical to completely eliminate religion as one of the obvious models of contrast. He even argues:

the question whether distinctions should be drawn between magic and religion or magic and other features within religion is (...) 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.

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Versnel is a declared follower of the etic approach, that is, the use of concepts developed by us, not by the actors, in order to have a common platform for communication and discussion. This is undoubtedly the most satisfactory position from a scholarly point of view and in this respect I wholeheartedly agree with him. Yet, in order to be workable, the etic definition of a concept should always be as close as possible to the actors’ point of view: if not, it will soon cease to be a useful definition. In this respect questions may arise about Versnel’s position that we need religion as an obvious model of contrast to magic. I would like to make five observations which throw doubt on his (but not only his!) position.

First, attention in the debate is always focused on the definition of magic, as if the meaning of religion is generally agreed upon. In fact, religion was not yet conceptualized as a separate sphere of life in the Greco-Roman period and the term ‘religion’ only received its modern meaning in the immediate post-Reformation era, when the first contours of a separate religious sphere started to become visible.

Secondly, the example of religion suggests that when analysing a concept we must also be sensitive to its semantic development. Here, we may point to the relatively late appearance of the word ‘magic’ in Western Europe. Linguistically, English *magyk* long existed alongside *magique*, which derived from Old French *art magique*. Modern French *magie* replaces *magique* only in the sixteenth century, German *Magie* is not to be found before the seventeenth century and Danish *magi* appears only in the eighteenth century. Evidently, in the period stretching from the later Middle Ages to the beginning of the early modern era a need was felt for a new term, although the reasons for this development are still largely obscure. Moreover, magic was not a static concept, as we can

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4 For interesting considerations about the problem see B. Boudewijnse, “Fieldwork at Home,” *Etnofoor* (Amsterdam) 7 (1994) 73–95.


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