HELLENISTIC MAGIC: SOME QUESTIONS OF DEFINITION

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It is a pleasure to contribute this essay to a collection in honor of Dr. Quispel. His own work, like Jung’s, has shown that magical texts reveal much about man’s religious sentiments. Dr. Quispel has shown that magic, equally with religion, can be seen as an expression of man’s deepest psychological processes.¹

This paper will be directed to some definitional questions raised by the continued attention of scholars to the phenomenon of magic. Although many different definitions of “magic” have been offered throughout the history of religions and anthropological research, no one definition has reached general use. Magic’s relation both to religion and science has never been clearly delineated. Take the relationship between magic and religion: Religious leaders are often interested in strict distinctions between magic and religion so that the purity of religion can be maintained.² Social scientists hope to isolate

¹ See e.g., Gnosis als Weltreligion, Zurich 1951, 40f. and Gnosis und Religionswissenschaft, in Gnostic Studies II, Istanbul 1975, 261.

phenomena cross-culturally so that a consensus of methodology can be reached,³ hence many attempt to make clear taxonomies. So both anthropologists and religionists seek to make extremely careful definitions in order to carry on their analyses. For instance, Malinowski defined the difference between magic and religion as sharply as possible. Religion refers to the fundamental issues of human existence, while magic always turns round specific, concrete and detailed problems.⁴ Religion is concerned with questions of ultimate concern — salvation, death, the meaning of existence — while magic is concerned with immediate goals — control of the weather, good health, achieving a specific position. Magic is characterized by manipulation and attempts to control nature. Religion is expressive; magic instrumental.

This should appear extremely sensible to us, since it amounts to a concise statement of one of our culture’s definitions of magic. A surprising consequence of this definition is that magic can be viewed as an early form of science.⁵ Neat though it is, such a clearcut distinction leads to problems when cases are examined, as we shall see, since (1) it creates an ideal type which can only be approximated by a specific occurrence and (2) it rarely describes what the magician himself thinks he is doing.⁶

In this paper, I will argue that no definition of magic can be universally


⁴ A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays, 200.

⁵ This approach is typical of Frazer and Tylor and Thorndike for example.

⁶ See Remus for the complete history of research. Sensitive to these issues many anthropologists are inclined to resist a sharp distinction between magic and religion. Thus, e.g., R. Firth, P. Worsley talk about interpenetration of magical and religion. See also M. Douglas, Purity and Danger, 74ff. Jarl Fossum has called my attention to A. van Gennep, R. Williamson, R. Lowie, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, W. J. Goode, E. Norbeck, C. G. Diehl and others who have noted the similarity between the two phenomena. Though it is not my purpose to outline or review a history of the study of magic in this paper, the extent of this trend in the literature needs to be emphasized as well. Very often it seems to me as though theoretical work has tended to separate the two phenomena while field work has tended to combine them. My point is to recommend that we distinguish between the two enterprises and give more attention to how the term is actually used within the culture under consideration.