
A raven, looking backwards as if in sudden awareness of an approaching light far away in a clouded sky, adorns the cover as well as the section headings of this volume of not entirely forgotten lore. Like the other volumes in the Critical Categories in the Study of Religion series, it is a book of readings on a critical and, in this case, indeed also criticized and challenged, category in the study of religions. The notion of magic is certainly part of the “blurred bundle of ideas” that, according to Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (writing in 1902), was the very basis of our discipline (1972:7). When they set out to clarify terms and create a more precise conceptual basis of the new discipline, they knew that it would have to be provisional, but they hardly imagined that even after more than a hundred years, the meaning and definition of the notion of magic would still be an issue — and we should not necessarily be proud of this state of affairs.

It has, however, an advantage, and this is also what makes this book an excellent illustration of the history and peculiar position of our discipline. Magic or mageia was, from the very beginning, a polemical term that was used by the Hippocratics to denote the obsolete or barbarian practice of traditional healers. Selections from religious and philosophical literature (from Plato to Agrippa von Nettesheim) exhibiting ideas of magic make up the first part of the book — with Diderot and Madame Blavatsky as links to the modern debate. In early anthropology and history of religions, the term “magic” was a fitting expression of what then counted as a scholarly attitude toward non-European and pre-Christian peoples, and, once accepted as a descriptive term in the study of ancient and exotic cultures, it was increasingly thought to denote “something” out there. This “something” was really twofold: the European idea of magic sometimes coincided with local ideas of types of practice that were despicable, religiously offensive, or even illegal, and at the same time, “magic” was also a convenient generalizing description of local — explicit or implicit — postulates of ritual efficacy. To radical monotheists, these two aspects seemed naturally and intimately united, since the religious offense was exactly the failure to acknowledge God’s omnipotence implied in any postulate of ritual efficacy. In the world out there, however, postulates of efficacy and social marginalization are really quite different things; without the dogma of God’s omnipotence, they are not in any way connected. This is, as it were, the basic logical intricacy behind more than a hundred years of discussion about the nature, scope, and limits of magic.
The descriptive terms of scholarship should not reproduce or be dependent upon religious dogma; but they might, of course, happen to coincide with it. As the excellent selection from the classics of our discipline in this book shows, they tend to do so even in authors opposed to confessional bonds. James George Frazer considered his magnum opus (*The Golden Bough*) a warning against the “snares and pitfalls” of superstitious beliefs (1936b:vii), probably including substantial parts of his own Christian tradition. But he ended up with a narrative worldview in which sympathetic magic was the “truly catholic creed” of early mankind (1936a, 1:235), while religion was “a truer theory of nature” based on the later discovery, by “the more thoughtful part of mankind,” that magic does not really work (1936a, 1:237). Hubert and Mauss were declared atheists, but they based their general theory of magic on a polarization of religion proper and magic: “pôle du sacrifice, pôle du maléfice” (1983:14). Sacrifice and other communal forms of ritual were social acts supporting the solidarity of the community by displaying its collective representations, while magic would usurp the same collective representations in private ritual for individual or even illegal purposes. The idea of ritual efficacy through the display of collective representations was, to Hubert and Mauss, common to religion and magic, but religion was about the sacred (with all of its social implications), while magic was about *mana*.

It is quite a paradox that among the mid-twentieth century classics selected for part III, Protestant historian of religions and theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw and Catholic anthropologist Edward E. Evans-Pritchard represent the moderate view that magic, although a distinct type of practice, is certainly continuous with other kinds of religious practice, i.e., part of religion. The selection from van der Leeuw is pp. 543–555 of *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* or § 83 of the German second edition of his *Phänomenologie der Religion*. It is a good choice in as far as it is probably the more widely read, but the alternative, his essay entitled “Die sog. ‘epische Einleitung’ der Zauberformeln” in *Zeitschrift für Religionspsychologie* 6:161–180, would certainly have been attractive — as would indeed an English translation of this precious paper, rich in examples and, until now, I believe, the most salient and learned demonstration of the continuity between “magic” and “religion.”

Other mid-century writers of phenomenological treatises, like Friedrich Heiler (1961) and Geo Widengren (1969), were profoundly convinced of a fundamental distinction between magic and religion. They are not, and should not necessarily be, represented by a selection in this anthology. Bronisław Malinowski’s famous essay, “Magic, Science and Religion,” however, should not be — and is not — missing among the mid-century classics. Like the two missing phenomenologists, Malinowski was an advocate of a distinction between...