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# The Meanings of Magic

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The establishment of a new journal titled *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* begs the question: what do these words mean? In what sense do they comprise a useful academic category or field of inquiry? The history of magic and the cultural functions it has played and continues to play in many societies have been a focus of scholarship for well over one hundred years. Grand anthropological and sociological theories developed mostly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer clear structures, and the classic definitions of Edward Burnett Taylor, James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, and others still reverberate through much scholarly work on this topic. While aspects of these theories remain useful, more recent studies have tended to take a much narrower approach, examining the specific forms that magic, magical rites, or witchcraft assume and the issues they create in particular periods and within particular societies. This has led to laudable focus and precision, yet it has also stifled communication between scholars working in different periods, regions, or disciplines. This journal is intended to promote such communication, and to provide a forum in which issues common to the study of magic in all contexts can be raised. Therefore, it will prove useful at the outset to present some thoughts about the significance of magic as a category, about the meanings it has carried and the approaches it has evoked, about some of the ways in which the study of magic might be advanced, and about some of the areas to which such further study might contribute.

Scholars in many fields recognize magic as an important topic. In its rites, rituals, taboos, and attendant beliefs, magic might be said to comprise, or at least describe, a system for comprehending the entire world. It provides a means for navigating among the varied forces that comprise and shape material creation, and promises its practitioners methods of controlling or at least

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affecting those forces. In certain circumstances, magicians claim that their rites can elevate them to a higher state of consciousness, allowing them to perceive occult aspects of nature or enter into communion with preternatural or supernatural entities. Not surprisingly, magic has often been linked to other expansive systems for understanding, interacting with, and influencing the whole of creation, namely, religion and science.<sup>1</sup> As part of such a powerful triad, magic appears central to human culture, and the study of the forms of magic that are accepted, practiced, or condemned in any society is necessary for a full understanding of that society.

Yet magic is a profoundly unstable category. In most circumstances it has typically been defined by authorities of various sorts (religious, legal, intellectual) who are either opposed to or at least condescending toward the practices and beliefs they see it entailing. These authoritative definitions have varied dramatically across time and between cultures. Yet the instability runs deeper, for even within a given society not all people who engage in magic will necessarily see their actions as part of a single coherent system, or accept all (or indeed any) other elements of that system. A remarkable aspect of magic is the degree to which many people in various social and historical contexts have engaged in acts that their culture as a whole, or at least certain cultural authorities, would categorize as magical without considering themselves to be performing magic. This seems especially true of simple spells or other common rites or superstitions that people may hold or practice without any systematic coherence.<sup>2</sup> This very instability, however, evident in so many contexts, makes magic a rich field of study and can even become a kind of unifying focus.

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1. Famously in classic works of anthropology and sociology by Edward Burnett Tylor, James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, and Bronislaw Malinowski (on each of whom more below); more recently, for example, in Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher, eds., *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

2. Regarding medieval Europe, for example, Richard Kieckhefer's discussion of the broad "common tradition of medieval magic" (Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 56–94) is framed by questions of whether contemporary practitioners regarded their actions as magical. Of course, in the absence of strict authoritative enforcement, people may also become quite idiosyncratic in the religious rites they observe or beliefs they express. Similarly, many people accept or dismiss various aspects of science without great concern for how their choices may or may not relate to some overall system of scientific thought.

Recognizing the value of present methodologies that stress specificity and contingency, scholars should use their mutual interest in those contingencies to direct their conversations toward one another, to identify and compare various meanings of magic across human history and cultures. Beyond such basic comparativism, there are other areas in which the category of magic, broadly conceived but always with an understanding of its inherent constructedness, can provide a useful scholarly focus. Conceptualizations of modernity can be approached through the study of magic, for example, and magical rituals can offer insight into specific ways in which objects and human bodies become inscribed with meaning and power. Whatever approach is taken, the goal should not be to resolve the complexity of magic, but to draw out of that complexity new avenues of exploration and discussion, and to enliven time-honored approaches to this subject with new energy and new horizons of inquiry.



Modern scholarship on magic has produced a number of overarching theories and definitions, and these have typically framed magic in relation to, or more frequently in distinction from, religion and science. The tendency toward sweeping theoretical definitions was most pronounced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when European and American social scientists bestrode the world like so many Aristotles, confidently categorizing all they beheld. Sociologists and anthropologists in particular advanced a number of general categorizations that could serve to distinguish magic from religion or science—but mainly from religion, as the distinction between magic and science appeared somewhat more self-evident in that period. One basic distinction, most commonly associated with James Frazer, held that magic typically sought to coerce or command spiritual forces while religion aimed to supplicate their aid. As Frazer wrote, the magician (like the scientist) assumed that certain actions properly performed would always produce identical results. Religion, on the other hand, emphasized the “propitiation and conciliation” of higher powers. Priests might hope for certain results, and beseech the gods for them, but they could not expect their prayers always to be answered.<sup>3</sup> Another essential distinction, associated with Emile Durkheim, posited that magic consisted primarily of private acts carried out for individual gain, while religion was essentially communal. Related to this was the definition ad-

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3. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., 12 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1913–20), 1:220–22; or see the abridged version of *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 48–51.

vanced by Bronislaw Malinowski that magical practices always aimed to achieve specific and immediately tangible effects, while religious rites were ends in themselves, their main purpose being the devotion and grace they fostered in their faithful practitioners and the broad understanding of the universe they promoted.<sup>4</sup> Marcel Mauss, Durkheim's nephew and pupil, argued that scholars should ignore the purported purpose of rites and focus instead on the social context of their performance. Magic, for him, was private, secret, mysterious, and above all prohibited, while religion consisted of rites publicly acknowledged and approved.<sup>5</sup>

None of these definitions, or others like them, have proven entirely sufficient for all circumstances and contexts. Many religions assert that certain of their rites may produce definite ends seemingly automatically, such as the *ex opere operato* (by virtue of the operation itself) functioning of Catholic sacraments. Such rites can appear to coerce or compel divine power to some specific action in “magical” ways. Religious rites may also have very specific ends as their goal, while the purposes of some magical operations (that is, operations deemed magical rather than religious) can be quite expansive, intended to promote an elevated state of mind or enhanced level of understanding or perception in those who perform them. Durkheim himself admitted that many religious devotions could be entirely private, although he considered these only a limited aspect of some religions, and not a defining feature of “religion” as a category.<sup>6</sup> Similarly throughout history, many rites considered by outside observers or even by their participants to be magical have been and continue to be communal in nature. The most obvious current example would be the communal rites of Wiccans.<sup>7</sup> Mauss, by focusing on social context and communal approval or approbation of various rituals, offers useful tools. Ultimately, however, he maintains an essentially Durkheimian view that magic is private while religion is public and communal, and he also advances the notion that magic seeks immediate and practical results, while religion is more abstract in its general moral goals.<sup>8</sup>

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4. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 39–44. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 67–69.

5. Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (1972; reprint London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 22–30.

6. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 41.

7. For a personal yet scholarly introduction to such a rite, see Nikki Bado-Fralick, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8. In this he links magic to science and technology, rather than to religion, in ways not entirely dissimilar to Frazer: Mauss, *General Theory*, 174–78.

While certain scholars continue to engage with general theoretical definitions of magic, and some perhaps even still seek to produce them, for the most part attempts at overarching systematization have given way to careful attention to particular contexts. Such movement has been evident across the humanities and social sciences, and this broad trend has shaped the study of magic as well. Academics in many disciplines now focus on historically and culturally specific understandings of magic, seeking to clarify not how we might distinguish between magic and religion, or between magic and science, but rather how a given society drew these or other distinctions at some particular moment.<sup>9</sup> A key aspect of such scholarship usually involves a careful examination of the words and concepts used to designate various magical actions, both by contemporaries and by modern scholars.<sup>10</sup> This specificity, both laudable and necessary, has contributed to the dwindling of much theoretical or comparative work on topics captured under the broad rubric of magic (one particular avenue for theorizing about magical beliefs and practices—a mode of theorization grounded in historical specificity—has remained open, and will be discussed later in this essay). Moreover, this more focused, case-specific approach can be seen to call into question the legitimacy of magic as a universal category. Yet even in this scholarly climate,

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9. The assertion that the most useful definition of magic is the one held by the people, society, or culture under investigation is a central argument of Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, for example, and is a running theme throughout Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999–2002). See also the addendum volume, Helen Berger, ed., *Witchcraft and Magic in Contemporary North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

10. E.g. David Frankfurter, “Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of ‘Magicians,’” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 159–78; Jan N. Bremmer, “The Birth of the Term ‘Magic,’” in *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, *Groningen Studies in Cultural Change* 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1–11. Related studies of religion include Peter Biller, “Words and the Medieval Notion of ‘Religion,’” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 351–69; John Van Engen, “Faith as a Concept of Order in Medieval Christendom,” in *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*, ed. Thomas Kselman (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 19–67. See also Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially Donald S. Lopez Jr. on “Belief” (pp. 21–35) and Jonathan Z. Smith on “Religion, Religions, Religious” (pp. 269–84); this latter now reprinted in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179–96.

aspects of older grand theories still attract attention and help to give some shape to the subject of magic, and there have emerged from newer approaches definite impulses for the study of magic as a coherent field.<sup>11</sup>



The complexities revealed by careful study of specific magical rites and systems pose problems, but also open up many areas of potential scholarly exploration, so long as that exploration intends to more fully understand those complexities rather than simply to overcome them. One such area involves the revival of nuanced comparativism, aiming to extract both useful similarities and important differences from various highly focused studies.<sup>12</sup> As scholars have increasingly turned to the careful examination of specific magical beliefs and systems of practice, they have amply demonstrated how such social and cultural constructions depend on and must be understood within particular contexts. Their work, however, has also built up substantial support for the basic proposition that, despite important variances, many cultures have had or have general concepts that largely equate to the Western category of magic, considering also that term's inherent lack of precision. Of course, such apparent similarities arise in part from modern scholars' inability to fully escape the shackles of modern and almost inevitably Western concepts and terminology. This is precisely the dilemma that highly focused and carefully contextualized studies are intended to mitigate, and any attempt to draw general or comparative points from such studies must pay careful attention to how well they achieve this goal.

Despite issues of terminology and conceptualization, there is abundant evidence that most cultures have drawn and continue to draw certain basic distinctions separating manipulations of spiritual or occult natural powers that are deemed appropriate and approved from those considered sinister and illicit. Moreover, these differentiations typically involve far more than simply distinguishing between good and bad forms of what are otherwise recognized to be essentially similar practices. Instead, illicit forms are often deemed to

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11. The six volumes of Ankarloo and Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, seek to frame the field for that area of the world. Richard M. Golden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*, 4 vols. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2006), is intended as a comprehensive reference work for the field of European witchcraft studies.

12. The need for comparative scholarship to focus on differences as well as similarities in its elucidation of patterns has been stressed by William Paden, "Elements of a New Comparativism," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 5–14.

belong to an entirely different category of action. In medieval Christian Europe, for example, authorities regularly defined magic as drawing on demonic power, while religious rites, however similar in form or intended outcome, comprised a wholly separate sphere of action because they were believed to draw on divine force.<sup>13</sup> Thus tied to Christian demonology, medieval European conceptions of magic became inextricably linked to Christian concepts of heresy, blasphemy, and idolatry, profoundly affecting the ways in which medieval authorities responded to supposed magical practices.<sup>14</sup>

In classical Greece, on the other hand, what modern scholars might label as either “religious” or “magical” rituals were often conceived as evoking the same sources of power (frequently spiritual entities called *daimones*). Within this range of powerful and effective practices, *mageia* referred quite precisely to foreign cultic rites, specifically those of Persian priests or *magoi*. In its etymological origins, the Western term “magic” was defined first by simple geography. Because the foreignness of *mageia* carried dark and sinister connotations, the term gradually became extended to include many illicit, covert, or private rites performed by Greeks themselves, but opposed to the publicly approved civic cults of the Greek *poleis*. Yet *mageia* in this sense was not simply “religious” ritual transported out of the confines of public cults, for the ancient world knew private cults, particularly familial ones, as well as prophets and priests who operated outside of clear cultic sites. Such people might arouse more suspicion than temple priests, but they were not automatically *magoi*.<sup>15</sup>

There is no doubt that the ancient pagan and medieval Christian worlds defined magic quite differently. As Christianity rose to dominance in the world of late antiquity, conceptions of magic underwent a profound shift

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13. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*; also Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 813–36.

14. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971); Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), slightly revised and reprinted as *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Edward Peters, *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978).

15. Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Georg Luck, “Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 91–158, and Richard Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic,” in *ibid.*, 159–275.



that Valerie Flint has characterized as a “demonization.” Christian thinkers transformed classical *daimones*, creatures of often ambivalent morality, into demons, fallen angels, and servants of the devil who were inherently evil and inimical to humanity.<sup>16</sup> Yet although classical and Christian culture had very different ways of separating magical operations from proper religion and cultic practices, they each posited such a division, and even described it in some of the same ways. In both pagan antiquity and medieval Christian Europe, the term “superstition” meant excessive or improper devotion or ritual practices. In fact, early Christian authors took the word *superstitio* directly from late-Roman usage. While to the Romans, Christianity was superstitious, in the Christian context a major element of superstition was the improper performance of rituals in honor of demons. This definition encompassed magic, but also the rites of all pagan cults. While this radical redirecting of superstition highlights the opposition between Christian and pagan culture, it also demonstrates that both pagan and Christian society, despite their very different understandings of magic, were similar in their identification of sharply differentiated spheres of ritual action.<sup>17</sup>



Conceptions of magic, however designated, function broadly in many cultures to differentiate certain actions sharply from otherwise potentially quite

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16. Valerie Flint, “The Demonisation of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity: Christian Redefinitions of Pagan Religions,” in Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, 277–348. The figure of the devil, present in early Judaism, became far more clearly articulated as the great oppositional force to God and enemy of humankind in later apocalyptic Judaism, and especially in early Christianity through the writings of the church fathers. See Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), and Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981). A more focused study is Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

17. Still the best overview of medieval concepts of superstition is Dieter Harmening, *Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1979). On antiquity, see Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). Specifically on ways the word “superstitio” could be used by either Roman or Christian authorities in the late-imperial period, see L. F. Janssen, “‘Superstitio’ and the Persecution of Christians,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979): 131–59; Michele R. Salzman, “‘Superstitio’ in the Codex Theodosianus and the Persecution of the Pagans,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 172–88.

similar rites, rituals, or practices. Drawing these distinctions is an exercise in power, and a major area of comparative focus must be to explore what roles such differentiation plays in various societies, who controls this differentiation, and to what ends that created difference is employed. In many cultures and across various historical periods, categories of magic often define and maintain the limits of socially and culturally acceptable actions in respect to numinous or occult entities or forces. Even more basically they serve to delineate arenas of appropriate belief. Whether defined as foreign rites, domestic but clandestine ones, or private rituals as opposed to public and communal ceremonies, magical practices and beliefs comprise a shadowy and tenuous, but still often carefully constructed, realm that helps shape a society's basic conceptions about both spiritual and natural forces that imbue the world with meaning. In many cultures individuals do not typically designate themselves as magicians or practitioners of magic. Those are labels ascribed to them by society, or by specific authoritative elites within a society. Such people may not deny the actions they perform, but they reject the sinister connotations (the means of differentiation) that the various terms that can be understood as designating "magic" frequently carry. Thus, to be labeled a magician is generally an accusation rather than a self-appellation. In fact, systems of magic tend to be defined by those who claim not to practice or, especially in the modern world, even to believe in them. While some medieval clerics did engage in ritual magic, for example, most of the theologians who described and dissected horrific demonic rites during the Middle Ages were never tempted to try a spell themselves. The anthropologists and sociologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who developed the major theories of magic discussed at the beginning this article never believed in magic as its practitioners did, and scholars of contemporary magic continue to face that issue today.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, in many contexts people have self-designated as magicians, and continue to do so (again, regardless of the actual terminology). Some readily confess to magical crimes when questioned by authorities. Others promote their image as a practitioner of powerful rites or a possessor of occult knowl-

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18. In one of the earliest academic studies of contemporary magic, the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann was careful to note that although she engaged in magical practices as part of her fieldwork, she did not consider herself a magician or a witch. See T. M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 16–18. Nikki Bado-Fralick, both a scholar and a practitioner, writes at length about the perceived dilemmas of this status. See Bado-Fralick, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle*, 4–21.

edge as a social identity. In Europe during the Middle Ages, educated but often lowly placed members of the clerical elite deliberately engaged in necromancy and other forms of ritual magic, frequently as an avenue to power in political courts.<sup>19</sup> Clerical necromancy continued to be a problem for religious authorities into the period of the Reformation, and of course the Renaissance was famous for its learned *magi* who grounded their magical systems in esoteric Hermeticism or aspects of Neoplatonic thought.<sup>20</sup> Whatever their particular situation, such people frequently acted to critique or challenge certain systems, structures, or norms within their society. This criticism could be tacit; no medieval necromancer ever seems to have openly questioned the authority of the church to pronounce on the legitimacy of various rites and rituals. Some Renaissance *magi*, by contrast, directly challenged the church and asserted the validity of their rites over official religion.

At quite another level from well-educated (and male) necromancers and Renaissance mages, the poor old women suspected of being witches in early modern Europe may have embraced that label in order to obtain, at whatever risk, some level of respect and even dark prestige within a community in which otherwise they were relatively powerless. Even if a suspect only began to confess in the course of a trial or under torture, this need not have represented simple submission to authorities' accusations. Scholarship on the European witch trials has begun to demonstrate how confessions could articulate deep psychological anxieties and social tensions that otherwise might not be expressible in any form.<sup>21</sup> Shielded from legal prosecution, although still open

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19. On the medieval "clerical underworld" of necromancy, see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 151–75. On the nexus of magical and political power in a courtly "demimonde," see Peters, *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law*, 112–25. Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), examines one late-medieval necromantic text in detail, and positions it in precisely such a courtly demimonde. See also Jan R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon's "Contra les devineurs" (1411)* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

20. William Monter, *Frontiers of Heresy: The Spanish Inquisition from the Basque Lands to Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 176–79, notes cases of clerical magic in counter-Reformation Sicily in the sixteenth century. The fundamental, although overstated, treatment of Renaissance Hermeticism is Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). Also essential on Renaissance *magi* is D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958; reprint University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

21. See several essays in Lyndal Roper, *Oepidus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale

to some level of societal ridicule and even persecution, modern Wiccans quite consciously appropriate the term “witchcraft,” seeking to destabilize its long-standing negative connotations and especially gendered stereotypes.<sup>22</sup> Ongoing debates and contestations over who controls the various appellations for “magicians” and what those appellations connote therefore offers another area of general concern shared by many scholars working in this field.



All the related issues thus far discussed cluster around the central problem of how various cultures have understood and employed categories they, or we, call magic. Many insights have been and will continue to be gained by careful examination of the precise historicized and contextualized meanings of various terms and categories roughly translatable as magic. Equally careful comparisons between these categories, exploring how they function in different societies, will yield further insights in many areas of cultural and social studies. This approach can also become problematic, however, because indigenous cultural understandings of magic and deployment of terms for magic can in fact mislead “external” scholars in some important ways. For example, scholars studying magic and witchcraft in medieval and early modern Europe used to stress strong divisions between popular and elite notions of magic. To some extent this tendency replicated earlier anthropological distinctions equating magic with primitivism, as something more advanced societies, and more elite groups within societies, should have moved beyond.<sup>23</sup> Yet as

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University Press, 2004). On social systems that promoted accusations and confessions, see Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Viking, 1996).

22. The neopagan author and journalist Margot Adler, for example, had to address the meaning of the term “witch” at the very outset of her account of modern witchcraft *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagan Peoples in America Today*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1986), 10–11. The important neopagan author Starhawk writes explicitly of “reclaiming” the term in her seminal book *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 31–32. A responsible scholarly account of the origins and early development of modern witchcraft is Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

23. To the work of Frazer and Durkheim mentioned already, add the foundational anthropological work by Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols. (1871; reprint New York: Harper, 1958), esp. 1:112–59 and to an extent 2:448–60 (on prayer); Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Native’s Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (1926; reprint New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), esp. 256–68; Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Men-*

Richard Kieckhefer demonstrated three decades ago, arguments for such distinctions also paid careful attention to how judges, accusers, and the accused presented sometimes quite different notions of magical practices, how such practices functioned, and what they entailed.<sup>24</sup> A strict dichotomy between elite and popular conceptions has proven inadequate, however, and has now largely been abandoned in favor of further careful study of how understandings of magic were distributed across society. Kieckhefer, for example, has modified some of his own earlier distinctions between popular and learned conceptions of magic by suggesting a broad “common tradition” of magic permeating all levels of medieval society, around which various more particular traditions clustered.<sup>25</sup>

Following Kieckhefer, other scholars have stressed an expansive spectrum of magical beliefs and practices running both horizontally and vertically across premodern European society. Yet some clear distinctions between elite and popular concerns evident in most witch trials remains. So too does Carlo Ginzburg’s remarkable discovery of the extraordinary system of beliefs surrounding individuals known as *benandanti* (literally, well-farers) in the remote northern Italian region of Friuli, which proved as surprising to modern scholars and it did to early modern Roman inquisitors. Ginzburg ultimately expanded his initial study to argue for a deeply rooted and fully popular, indeed folkloric, stratum of essentially shamanistic practices informing popular European images of witchcraft, but utterly closed to authoritative elites.<sup>26</sup> As other scholars have uncovered and explored additional examples of such beliefs, shamanism and remnants of shamanistic beliefs and practices has become an-

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*tality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York: Macmillan, 1923), esp. 35–51, 59–67, 89–96; Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitives and the Supernatural*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (1935; reprint New York: Haskell, 1973), esp. 153–96.

24. Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), drew perceptive distinctions based on careful readings of trial records that remain accepted to this day.

25. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*; also Karen Louise Jolly, “Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 1–71, esp. 27–58; for a rich study of the complexity of cultural interactions in the field of magic, see Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

26. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Penguin, 1992).

other facet of the broad “common magical tradition.” In particular, through a case study in every way as remarkable as Ginzburg’s own find in Friuli, Wolfgang Behringer has repositioned the shamanism paradigm in relation to beliefs about the afterlife and the complex restructuring of folk-culture during the Reformation. As his and other work suggests, some aspects of the old poplar/elite distinction remain both viable and useful.<sup>27</sup>

While a focus on specific and at first glance possibly peculiar subtraditions of belief can therefore open larger vistas, working at the other end of Italy from the region of Ginzburg’s *benandanti*, and following a very different methodology, David Gentilcore has sought to explore how people at all levels of early modern European society were, in practice, little confined by any set notions of magic or religion. Concerned less with methods than with the particular results they sought to achieve, they moved easily from “magical” rites to “religious” ones and back again. Finding even an extended common magical tradition too limiting to describe such behavior, Gentilcore argued instead for a very inclusive “system of the sacred” extending from simple witches to priests and bishops.<sup>28</sup> Evocative and useful as his term is, however, it risks losing the critical distinction that contemporaries at both elite and popular levels of society commonly understood to lie between magical and religious power in premodern, Christian Europe.<sup>29</sup>



Perhaps the most important area in which broadly theoretical and often comparative work dealing with magic remains a vital element of scholarship, in addition to focused studies, involves the complex interaction of magic with modernity. As scholars in many disciplines turn more attention to non-

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27. E.g. Gábor Klaniczay, “Shamanistic Elements of Central European Witchcraft,” in his *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*, trans. Susan Singerman, ed. Karen Margolis (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 129–50; Wolfgang Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoeckhlin and the Phantoms of the Night*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age*, trans. Szilvia Rédey and Michael Webb (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999).

28. Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d’Otranto* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

29. As stressed in Kieckhefer, “Specific Rationality.” He was responding here not to Gentilcore but to Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Western cultures, particularly in such fields as colonial, postcolonial, and subaltern studies, magic has become an important category to understand and evaluate Western culture's interaction with and impact on the rest of the world. Historians and anthropologists have begun to untangle the ways in which Europe exported its particular conceptions of magic and witchcraft, as well as the effects this exportation has had. Colonial authorities used these conceptions to categorize and control native peoples, yet such concepts have remained dynamic or even taken on new dynamism in the postcolonial period as native populations now seek to reassert traditional beliefs and practices, yet also necessarily strive to integrate these traditions with systems of Western modernity.<sup>30</sup> Such efforts have reflected back on Europe itself, and scholars are beginning to reconsider more seriously how basic elements of modern European thought and belief have been historically and culturally constructed, and to what effect on Europe and the rest of the world.

Major efforts have been made to trace the evolution of the modern category "magic," particularly since the period of the Protestant Reformation, and to uncover how, in Europe as well as in non-Western colonies, authorities have employed that category to distinguish the modern from the primitive or archaic.<sup>31</sup> A defining feature of Western culture at least since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and to some degree since the Reformation of the sixteenth has been "disenchantment"—the rejection, at least by authoritative elites, of many forms of magic, occult properties, or spiritual activity, or anything (including even elements of official religion) that might be dismissed as superstition. Despite the severity of the modern Western dismissal of supernatural powers operating in the world, however, many scholars

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30. A good introduction would be Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels, eds., *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003). Other examples include Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997); Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, eds., *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft, and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Raquel Romberg, *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003). On deployment of ideas of magic and witchcraft during colonial regimes, see (again examples only) Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987); Margaret J. Wiener, *Visible and Invisible Realism: Power, Magic, and Colonial Conquest in Bali* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

31. Most recently and profoundly Styers, *Making Magic*.

of modern Europe are now coming to argue that even in the West, magic has never disappeared as a serious and important cultural category, and that magical beliefs and practices remain integral to at least certain aspects of Western modernity.<sup>32</sup>

That European society moved along a historical trajectory toward official rejection of many magical practices and that disenchantment characterizes many aspects of the modern West are venerable suggestions, deriving from the early-twentieth-century work of Max Weber, who associated the “disenchantment of the [Western] world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*) primarily with the Protestant Reformation, and above all with the rise of ascetic Calvinism.<sup>33</sup> Weber’s ideas have encountered a good deal of criticism and revision in the century since he first articulated them, and historians of European magic and witchcraft in particular have rejected his claim that any serious disenchantment marked the Reformation era, when Europe experienced its major witch hunts. Instead they have pushed the real diminution in magical beliefs and practices back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment or to nineteenth- and even twentieth-century industrialization.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, few would

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32. Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005). These all deal with specifically modern forms of magic and occultism; on the continuation of earlier traditions see Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture 1736–1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), and Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies, eds., *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). On magical and occult practices during the Enlightenment itself, see Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt, eds., *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), and H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005). For an important statement on the degree to which the Enlightenment actually opposed magical and spiritual systems, see Martin Pott, *Aufklärung und Aberglaube: Die deutsche Frühaufklärung im Spiegel ihrer Aberglaubenskritik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992).

33. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1930; reprint London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 56–80

34. For a general critique, see Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 258; more specifically see R. W. Scribner, “The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the ‘Disenchantment of the World,’” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993): 475–94, reprinted in Scribner, *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400–1800)*, ed. Lyndal Roper (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 346–65.



deny that since the Enlightenment, modern Western societies have been significantly disenchanted, although endless debate persists about what exactly that term implies. While Western culture exports disenchantment as an essential feature of modernity, and other cultures both adapt to and contest this connection, the significance of this issue will only grow, making it another topic on which a broad conversation could profitably develop between students of magic working in widely disparate areas. Insofar as scholars identify disenchantment as a historical process yet have reached no final consensus about when it primarily occurred, room for debate exists among experts in almost any historical period.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, as disenchantment is a particularly European idea, framed within European categories of magic and religion (and to some extent science), which now shapes understandings of magical/religious systems around the globe, scholars working on almost any world culture might profitably join this discussion.

Linked to issues of disenchantment and the separation imposed by an increasingly disenchanted West between intangible belief and the manifest enactment of various rites, another quite specific yet important area emerges in which more generalized discussions of magic might prove useful. In European society, beginning already in the later Middle Ages and early modern period, Christianity largely separated “religious” elements of belief and contemplation from the physical performance of ritualized actions. While many rites were maintained, particularly by the Catholic Church, their centrality was downplayed, and many authorities, particularly Protestant ones, came to see elements of magic in many ritualized performances.<sup>36</sup> Similar dynamics may or may not be present in other cultures, but European and American academics long accepted the historically particular Western notions of magic and religion as normative, whether they studied the Western or non-Western world.<sup>37</sup> As with disenchantment, therefore, because these categories have

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35. I have recently made an effort to dislodge disenchantment in European history from an entirely post-Reformation context by suggesting that elements of disenchantment can be found in medieval, indeed in basic Christian, conceptions of magical operation: Bailey, “The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature,” *American Historical Review* III (2006):383–404.

36. The classic account of this process, focusing on Protestant England, remains Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribners, 1971).

37. Not focused on magic or religion, but addressing many complexities of the perceived normative status of Europe is Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

been exported beyond the West, here too a specific Western development has taken on wider importance, in both the degree to which it has pervaded the rest of the world and the degree to which it is resisted or contested in other world cultures.



The separation of essential religious belief from physical enactment in ritual forms tends to occlude the importance of physical objects and above all the human body in rites and ceremonies. The category of magic has not suffered any such imposed separation between its supposed essence and its enactment, yet magic too is far more often studied in terms of how it is understood and reacted to, mostly through prohibitions, than in terms of how it is enacted. In other areas of scholarship within many disciplines, the body has come to be an important topic of analysis, as physical entity, as cultural construction, and as symbol laden with meaning. The body has been studied as a locus of gender and sexuality, either their expression or their repression.<sup>38</sup> The anthropologist Mary Douglas has discussed the body as a central social symbol; the medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum has done much to reassert the central importance of the body in religion, identifying in its basic biological processes—either the consumption and production of food or even more essentially growth and decay—an important locus of human interaction with the divine and of individual salvation.<sup>39</sup> One might extend this insight to include the possibility of the body as locus of interaction with all variety of supernatural or spiritual forces, or natural but occult ones—in other words, the body as critical interface for “magic.” Such an approach would focus attention on the role of the body in any number of ritual performances or acts, both those that might be labeled religious and those that might be labeled magical. It would, in fact, necessarily blur the traditional distinction between religion and magic, at least as constructed in the West since the

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38. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

39. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (1970; reprint London and New York: Routledge, 1996). Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992); and Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

medieval period. How various cultures, societies, or groups perceive body functioning in and being affected by ritual could be an important way for scholars of magic to analyze their subjects.<sup>40</sup>

As with human bodies, little comparative work has been done on how physical objects function in magical rituals or otherwise-designated rites of power. Yet the association of amulets, talismans, wands, and other objects with the invocation, attraction, or repulsion of spiritual or occult natural forces is widespread, if not universal. How is it that various cultures identify or fashion such objects, linking them with preternatural power? And how are such items then employed in ritualized practices? Without retreating to a Frazerian category and describing all magical operations as being essentially sympathetic,<sup>41</sup> the basic notion that objects made to resemble certain people or things, or symbolically linked to them, might convey power to their possessor is evident in many widely separate contexts. Scholars of classical antiquity, for example, expressly write of “voodoo dolls” in ancient Greece, averring any direct comparison but still implicitly conflating such classical magic with practices common in the Caribbean two and a half millennia later.<sup>42</sup> Admittedly, comparisons pursued along these or similar lines could easily become simplistic or essentialist. Yet scholarship should not avoid areas of inquiry because of potential anachronisms.

Beyond an examination of the social and cultural roles specially designated objects of power might play, which would be the domain primarily of historians and anthropologists, greater attention to how social and cultural meaning and power were (sometimes literally) inscribed in objects would bring art historians more fully into scholarly dialogue about magic. Magical items and visual depictions of magical practices have too rarely been explored as artistic

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40. My initial thoughts on this subject derive from conversations with my colleague Nikki Bado-Fralick about the role of body and practice, as opposed to belief, in religion. See Bado-Fralick, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle*, 78–80, 102–4, 129–34. More generally on the significance of ritual as physically enacted performance Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 74, where she notes: “Some theorists appeal to kinesthesia, the sensations experienced by the body in movement, while others appeal to synesthesia, the evocation of a total, unified, and overwhelming sensory experience” in their attempts to unravel “the distinctive physical reality of ritual so easily overlooked by more intellectual approaches.” Body, however, is not a major element of Bell’s treatment of ritual.

41. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 1:52–54.

42. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 136–46. Graf is careful to criticize simple Frazerian notions of sympathetic magic (p. 145). See also Daniel Ogden, “Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds,” in Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, 1–90, at 71–79.

creations. In a recent work on several centuries' worth of visual images of European witches, Linda Hults has argued convincingly that such depictions did not simply reproduce contemporary understandings of witchcraft as developed in legal or theological texts. Rather, artists crafted images of witches and their magical acts that satisfied various artistic dynamics operating in early modern European culture.<sup>43</sup> Both focused and broader cross-cultural studies of how the magical is depicted (and why it is depicted in certain ways) seem a scholarly desideratum.



With witchcraft, as with magic and ritual generally, responsible scholarship must address the cultural specificity of the concept being employed, and the limits of that specificity.<sup>44</sup> Highly focused studies offer the advantage of being able to define carefully the ideas deployed. Witchcraft is generally taken to mean harmful magic performed by people of low social status. It is typically not a learned craft involving long study or highly developed ritual expertise. It often carries the implication of close alliance with or worship of evil supernatural entities. Its practitioners are more often women than men, although not necessarily so.<sup>45</sup> Understood in this way, witchcraft is a phenomenon or construction that has appeared in many cultures. In late-medieval and early modern Europe, however, authorities came to consider the practitioners of such magic to be members of large, organized, explicitly diabolical cults. Witches offered service and worship to the Christian devil, and often explicitly exchanged their souls for the ability to command demons and so perform magical acts. In this context, witchcraft represented the culmination of centu-

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43. Hults, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). In regard to my own area of chronological focus, I am reminded of the late art historian Michael Camille's complaint that art history was too often regarded as merely "supplementary" to medieval studies: Camille, "Art History in the Past and Future of Medieval Studies," in *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, ed. John Van Engen (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 362–82. Numerous articles on witchcraft and art by Charles Zika are collected in Zika, *Exorcising our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

44. That "ritual" too, at least in intellectual and academic usage, is a problematic construction of the post-Reformation West rooted, above all, in Reformation-era theology, see Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 161–247.

45. Devotees of neopagan Wicca, who often identify their practices as witchcraft, would certainly object to all but (perhaps) the last of these definitions. Modern neopagan witches, however, employ the term in a historically nontraditional way.

ries of linkage drawn by Christian authorities between the performance of magic and demonic forces. Some scholars contend that this conception of harmful magic and society's response to it (i.e., witch trials and the major witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) were so deeply enmeshed with Western Christian theology and with Western European religiosity of this period that they comprise a unique historical phenomenon. By implication, few worthwhile comparisons can be drawn between European witchcraft and systems of harmful magic in other cultures.<sup>46</sup>

There are deep historiographical reasons for this tendency to regard European witchcraft as exceptional. The founding fathers of the modern historical study of the European witch hunts, men like Henry Charles Lea and Joseph Hansen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had inherited an essentially Enlightenment mentality that regarded the medieval church as a bastion of superstition and intolerance. They tended to emphasize the demonological elements of the witch-stereotype—worship of demons and the devil, membership in cults, and participation in horrific witches' sabbaths where, typically, witches renounced God, trampled on the cross, and desecrated the Eucharist. They attributed the impulse to construct witches in this way primarily to medieval clerical authorities, above all inquisitors who drew on only slightly less fanciful notions of medieval heretical cults and their supposed demonic gatherings.<sup>47</sup> In the later twentieth century, scholars began

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46. The standard English-language survey of early modern witchcraft, Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1995), 4–9, distinguishes the elements of *maleficium* in the European conception of witchcraft from elements of diabolism. He states that “it was in the performance of *maleficia* that European witchcraft most closely resembled the practice of witchcraft in primitive and non-European societies today” (p. 4), while “it is the diabolical component of early modern European witchcraft that distinguishes it most clearly from the witchcraft of many primitive societies in the world today” (p. 9). Levack is of course correct that there were many unique elements in European witchcraft, just as there are in any specific system of beliefs. Moreover, he is certainly not averse to comparative scholarship. He has edited two multivolume collections of scholarly articles on witchcraft. In the first, he included a full volume of comparative anthropological studies (Brian P. Levack, ed., *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology*, 12 vols. [New York: Garland, 1992], vol. 1, *Anthropological Studies of Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion*). In the second, he included several articles on African witchcraft in the volume on modern witchcraft (Levack, ed., *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology*, 6 vols. [New York: Routledge, 2001], vol. 6, *Witchcraft in the Modern World*, 342–448).

47. Joseph Hansen, *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozess im Mittelalter, und die Entstehung der grossen Hexenverfolgung* (1900; reprint Aalen: Scientia, 1964); Hansen, ed., *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung*

to approach the study of European witchcraft from the perspective of social history, seeking to understand witchcraft not as the imposed construct of maniacal religious elites but as a sensible and even useful social structure. In this effort, historians such as Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas, while focusing their own studies mainly or entirely on early modern England, were deeply influenced by earlier anthropological work done on African societies.<sup>48</sup> Yet this influence did not move European scholarship on witchcraft or witch-hunting in any strongly comparative direction. Rather, historians continued to emphasize the particularly Christian nature of witchcraft, and the particular Western European political, social, and intellectual structures and developments that promoted fear and prosecution of witches.<sup>49</sup>

Such studies are important and of course correct in their basic assumption that witchcraft needs to be situated in particular social and cultural milieus, and certainly the ways in which particular societies conceived and employed witchcraft as a category of magical action must be analyzed and understood. Yet scholars have now also begun to emphasize how much European witchcraft, even with all of its demonological elements appended by authorities, remained primarily about the performance of simple, harmful magic—*maleficium* in medieval and early modern legal parlance.<sup>50</sup> Combining aspects of this approach with evidence of significant revivals of legal prosecution for the supposed practice of malevolent magic mainly in regions of Africa, Wolfgang Behringer, a leading expert on early modern European witchcraft, has called for scholars to reconsider the basic ways they have defined witchcraft. He notes that fear of harmful magic has been prevalent in most historical cultures, and that it continues to exist in many cultures, including (albeit in significantly reduced form) Western European culture. While suspicions

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*im Mittelalter* (1901; reprint Hildesheim; Georg Olms, 1963); Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1888), 3:492–549; Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, ed. Arthur C. Howland, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939).

48. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Both were influenced especially by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937).

49. For example, Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), demonstrates magisterially how deeply embedded the European witch-stereotype was in many areas of intellectual activity, by no means exclusively “religious” thought.

50. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, aggressively asserts that simple acts of *maleficium*, not demonology or even the mechanics of major witch hunts, should be the basis for the historical study of European witchcraft.

concerning the sort of person who supposedly engages in harmful magic can be quite diverse, Behringer notes a widespread tendency to attribute at least certain types of harmful magic to people believed to be deeply involved with sinister spiritual forces. Such conceptions of evil magical practitioners seem to engender, or at least reveal, certain basic and similar fears in many societies. Social and legal response to such suspected magicians frequently takes the form of sporadic waves of serious repression and prosecution—in other words, hunts. Those suspected of these crimes are often conceived as operating in conspiratorial groups, and they are often considered more likely to be women than men. For all these reasons, Behringer suggests, it is appropriate for scholars to label them as witches and the actions they supposedly engage in as witchcraft.<sup>51</sup>

While recognizing the continued necessity of highly focused studies of witchcraft in particular social, cultural, and historical settings,<sup>52</sup> Behringer intends more than simply to suggest that responsible comparative studies may also be possible and profitable. He insists on the need for such studies and on the more expansive definition of witchcraft that they entail. So long as witchcraft remains linked to medieval and early modern Western Christian demonology, he contends, it will remain an essentially Eurocentric notion inapplicable to the present age when activities that Behringer persuasively labels as witch hunts are prevalent and actually increasing in many regions of Africa and other parts of the world. More generally, the underlying notion that witchcraft and witch-hunting represent a terrible but essentially completed chapter in human history—itsself a Eurocentric concept derived from Enlightenment authorities' confidence in their ability to promote disenchantment—must be challenged not just in Africanist or Asianist scholarship, reassessed not merely by postcolonial studies or by subaltern studies, but rather must be a focus of genuinely ecumenical scholarship on this topic.<sup>53</sup>



So with witchcraft, as with magic as a whole, there is a need for discussion and debate about terms employed, limits imposed, and the basic possibilities of scholarly inquiry. There is and probably can be no simple methodological

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51. Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

52. Behringer's own *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe*, trans. J. C. Grayson and David Lederer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), is an excellent regional study.

53. Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts*, 1–10.

solution to the definition or study of magic. A clear understanding of the terminology employed to designate magical acts in any particular context is critical, but a strict adherence to that terminology or even the basic distinctions it draws upon will not be suitable to all scholarly purposes. Moreover, terminology for and concepts of magic are almost universally vague, mutable, and “occult” in the literal sense of hidden or obscured. This basic methodological problem, however, is itself an element that all scholars working in the many fields bearing on magic, magical rituals, and witchcraft have in common. Obvious benefits, if most likely never any definitive solutions, will accrue from broad discussion of these issues, as well as from close comparison of different studies focused on different cultures and historical eras that deal with them.

There are vital reasons for scholars engaged in focused studies to pay attention to each other’s work, and there are calls to attempt comparative or theoretical work based on focused studies. Categories constructed in the West dominate and indeed still define the field, but scholars of Western culture continue to evaluate the historical development and contingency of those categories, and scholarship is becoming increasingly concerned with how those categories have been imposed, accepted, and negotiated elsewhere in the world. Those stories, too, have now become critical in understanding the development of this field. The goal should not be to revise and reassert grand theories and sweeping definitions of magic such as those that dominated late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century sociology and anthropology, and then to test the degree to which magic thus understood appears in any given society or culture. Rather the goal should be to understand more completely how human societies and cultures have conceived, constructed, and reacted to magic and other comparable categories, and to develop and debate vigorously the ways in which such comparisons may be possible and profitable. Multiple meanings attach to the categories of magic, rituals and rites of power, and witchcraft. Scholars need to be open and alert to them all.