



PROJECT MUSE®

*Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern
World* (review)

David Allen Harvey

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 1, Number 1, Summer 2006, pp. 131-133
(Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.0.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/236426>

Conspiracy, grounded in archival research. However, he also seems committed to churning out brief synthetic works like the one under review here at a breathless pace, at least one per year. The product may be based on broad learning, but is inevitably patchy. For example, in this volume the author is aware of multiple manuscript variants of the popular medieval manual entitled *Clavicula Salomonis* (see p. 71), but avoids any detailed discussion of this problem. His footnotes are scanty and sometimes vague; his bibliography displays a perverse refusal to mention some generally acknowledged classics appropriate for his particular chapters (e.g., he omits Fritz Graf on ancient magic, Richard Kieckhefer on medieval magic, D. P. Walker on spiritual and demonic magic during the Renaissance, and even overlooks the most recent academic treatment of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*).

In the crucial aspect of weighing the veracity of preserved evidence, Maxwell-Stuart often pays insufficient attention to the complicated contexts from which accounts of magic might arise as he hurries on in his account. For example, his detailed portrait of a Roman Empire wizard, taken from the famous satirist Lucian (pp. 41–43), describes how the “master” ended his well-paid lessons by speaking too rapidly to be understood and then spitting three times into the neophyte’s face. Nevertheless, Maxwell-Stuart concludes that Lucian’s tale “does not appear to be exaggerated for comic or sarcastic effect.” This confuses Dr. Pangloss with Immanuel Kant.

WILLIAM MONTER

Northwestern University (Emeritus)

RANDALL STYERS. *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. vi + 290.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading, as it does not deal directly with practitioners of magic, however defined, but rather explores the variety of ways in which the category of “magic” has been constructed as an Other by Western philosophers, natural and social scientists, and theologians in the modern era, and has been used in multiple settings and contexts as the foil for various definitions of modernity. In this regard, Styers offers an ambitious and fascinating survey of European intellectual history, in which the vantage point of magic allows him to explore and shed new light on a wide range of familiar issues. In particular, Styers explores the role of magic in the thought of such

major figures of the high modern era as E. B. Tylor, James Frazer, Marcel Mauss, Emile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Sigmund Freud.

In the first chapter, Styers examines the emergence of the category of magic in Western thought from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. While he briefly notes the significance of Neoplatonist ritual magic to Renaissance high culture, most of the chapter focuses on the emergence of skepticism, beginning with criticisms of the witch trials of the early modern era and continuing on through the Reformation and its aftermath, and on the introduction of a mechanistic cosmos in the Scientific Revolution. The impact of these developments, Styers argues, is to construct a normative rationalist worldview, in which the boundaries between science, religion, and magic are drawn sharply for the first time. This period witnesses the “disenchantment of the world,” as Max Weber famously described it, as once widespread beliefs in supernatural forces and divine (or demonic) intervention in the natural world are cast out of the intellectual mainstream and confined to the conceptual ghetto of “magic.”

While the first chapter covers several centuries of European intellectual history, most of the remainder of the book focuses more specifically on Western social science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the location shifts from Europe itself to the colonized world. The second chapter studies anthropological approaches to the history of religion, in which, in keeping with the evolutionary paradigm of much of modern thought, the “primitive” societies of Africa and Oceania were taken as analogues of European prehistory, offering insights into the remote origins of civilization. Indigenous religious beliefs and practices were labeled as “magical”; that is, not corresponding to the somewhat rarified, abstract notions of “religion” held by the modern West (and which Styers identifies as culturally specific to Protestant Northern Europe). In fact, Styers makes the interesting observation that traditional Protestant diatribes against “magical” or “superstitious” aspects of Catholic rites were easily transferred to apply to the “fetishism” of tribal societies. The third chapter considers the relationship between magic and science, and notes the historical difficulties in drawing a clear line between the two. The final chapter, on “magic and desire,” explores psychological theories of magic from Freud to the present, and offers some interesting thoughts on the relationship of magic and (often “deviant”) sexuality.

A number of recurrent themes run throughout the chapters of the book. One of the most central of these is the relation of magic to modernity. Is magic an evolutionary stage, typical of “primitive” societies, from which modern religion and science later emerged, or, on the contrary, is magic the eternal enemy of modern rationality, fundamentally different in kind from

religion and science properly defined? Styers insightfully analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of both of these positions, noting that “evolutionary” thinkers, such as Tylor, were deeply troubled by the (to them) inexplicable survival and reemergence of magical modes of thinking in the modern world, while scholars who stressed the difference of magic, such as Mauss and Durkheim, drew arbitrary and ultimately untenable boundaries between magic and religion. Styers notes that religion cannot be fully divested of its “magical” elements without becoming completely internalized and largely irrelevant to daily life, and that the boundaries between science and magic, particularly in the early modern period, are notoriously porous, as the careers of figures such as Isaac Newton demonstrate. A second recurring theme is the association of magic with the colonial Other. Magic in this sense serves as a marker of the inferiority of colonized peoples, ignorant of modern science and (Christian) religion and beholden to shamans and witch doctors, who therefore should be conquered and assimilated for their own benefit. Even within western nation-states themselves, magic is associated with “backward” groups such as the peasantry, who are also in need of being civilized (there are echoes here of the “internal colonialism” thesis of Eugen Weber’s classic *Peasants into Frenchmen*). The concept of “magic” thereby becomes a necessary weapon in the arsenal of Western bourgeois civilization as it seeks to remake the world in its own image.

There is, in this reviewer’s opinion, a bit of an unresolved tension throughout the book between “magic” as an intellectual construct, created by Western thinkers as a foil to modernity, and “magic” as a set or sets of beliefs and practices actually held by people both within and outside the boundaries of European society. Styers offers a fascinating case study of shamanism and sexual deviance among Siberian Chuckchi tribesmen, but this is one of the few instances in which he examines a particular instance of magic in any detail. Given the extreme heterogeneity of magical beliefs and practices in the contemporary world, this omission is perhaps unfortunate, as the reader may reasonably conclude that “magic” throughout the world is more similar than it in fact is. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to fault Styers for not writing a different book than the one he has produced. This is a remarkably insightful and important study, which fundamentally challenges many of our received notions about the boundaries between magic, religion, and science. It deserves a wide audience, and should be of interest to intellectual historians beyond the growing, but still narrow, community of scholars who specialize in “magic” or “occult” topics.

DAVID ALLEN HARVEY
New College of Florida