

DECONSTRUCTING THE DECONSTRUCTIONISTS:
A RESPONSE TO RECENT CRITICISMS
OF THE RUBRIC “ANCIENT MAGIC”*

Joseph E. Sanzo, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

The utility of “magic” as an analytical category has been the subject of a robust debate within the Humanities and Social Sciences over the past several decades.¹ This debate has produced a range of voices in the study of antiquity. Many scholars have found heuristic value in the term magic. Accordingly, they have produced monographs, edited volumes, and essays on ancient magic over this period.² Although these works do not completely dispense with the term magic (at least not in their titles), most of the authors, editors, and contributors behind them seek – or at least claim – to offer more critical approaches to this lexeme than prior scholarly analyses.

Other scholars, however, are unconvinced that magic ought to remain a vibrant part of our scholarly lexicon. In fact, the view that magic should be removed from the analytical vocabulary of ancient studies has gained considerable traction in recent decades. John Gager underscored already in 1987 how the term magic might distort the study of the so-called Greek Magical Papyri (PGM):

...by labeling these texts and the human activities described and prescribed in them as ‘magic,’ they [i.e., Karl Preisendanz and his colleagues] succeeded in relegating them to the periphery of Greco-Roman culture, the superstitious zone, the realm beneath religion, philosophy, and other human activities of a more respectable sort.³

Of course, Gager penned these words before many of the monumental volumes, which have helped dispel such biases against ancient magic, were published. Consequently, despite the marginal status of magic within current religious studies and history, few

* The title of this chapter pays homage to Denis Donoghue’s essay (“Deconstructing Deconstruction”) in *The New York Review of Books* (Donoghue 1980). As will become evident over the course of this paper, however, I do not use the term “deconstructionism” (and its cognates) in a technical, Derridean sense, but as a shorthand for (hyper-)critical analysis and for scholarly approaches that call for the complete abandonment of analytical terms (esp. magic) on account of ambiguity, anachronism, ethnocentricity, and the like. This more general or colloquial use of deconstructionist terminology has precedent in the study of ancient magic (e.g., Otto 2013, 321, n. 55 [cited below]).

1 E.g., Winkelmann 1982; Brown 1997; Cunningham 1999; Styers 2004; Sørensen 2007. For a convenient survey of these debates, see the chapter by Antón Alvar Nuño and Jaime Alvar Ezquerro in this volume.

2 E.g., Faraone and Obbink 1991; Meyer and Mirecki 1995; Graf 1997; Mirecki and Meyer 2002; Bohak 2008; Collins 2008; Bohak, Harari, and Shaked, 2011; Stratton and Kalleres 2014.

3 Gager 1987, 80–81.

critical historians and religionists today would use such demeaning language to describe ancient texts and artefacts, such as the PGM.

Nevertheless, the deconstructionist position that Gager articulated shows few signs of abating. This line of scholarship more or less maintains that the term magic is too laden with cultural and analytical baggage to remain a useful scholarly rubric in the study of antiquity. Two scholars have recently championed this deconstructionist position, contending that magic ought to be removed from scholarly analysis of the ancient world. In a 2007-essay, David Aune provided a detailed study of the problems endemic to the term magic and, accordingly, called for its removal from scholarship in early Christian studies.⁴ Aune not only stressed that magic is a fundamentally problematic construct, but he also highlighted the problems associated with the term “religion,” which, he rightly claimed, has often been overlooked in the study of ancient magic.⁵ Aune concluded that scholars ought to replace the term magic with “sorcery,” which, he contends, is not burdened with the same degree of ideological bias.⁶

This 2007-study marked a radical departure from Aune’s widely influential essay, “Magic in Early Christianity” (1980), in which he advocated for what might be usefully described as a deviance approach to magic:

...magic is defined as that form of religious deviance whereby individual or social goals are sought by means alternate to those normally sanctioned by the dominant religious institution...Religious activities which fit this first and primary criterion must also fit a second criterion: goals sought within the context of religious deviance are magical when attained through the management of supernatural powers in such a way that results are virtually guaranteed.⁷

In this earlier instantiation of Aune’s thoughts on magic, the term was thought to possess heuristic utility – albeit only in dialogue with culturally specific notions of acceptable religious behaviour and when it refers to acts achieved by means of “virtually guaranteed” mechanisms of “supernatural powers.”⁸

In 2013, Bernd-Christian Otto penned an important essay that also called for the removal of the term magic from scholarship on antiquity.⁹ Otto correctly underscored many of the problems associated with magic, including its ambiguous use by scholars¹⁰ and its long history of devaluing religious beliefs outside the acceptable bounda-

4 Aune 2007.

5 On this point, see Sanzo 2013, 357–58.

6 Aune 2007, 293–94.

7 Aune 1980, 1515.

8 It is also worth noting that, within Aune’s governing taxonomy, magic constitutes a particular “species” of the “genus” religion (Aune 1980, 1516).

9 Otto 2013.

10 Otto highlights this ambiguity dimension of “magic” to an even greater degree in Otto 2017. In this latter work, he addresses the broader problem of “critical categories” in the study of religion, with a particular emphasis on “religious individualization.” For a more detailed critique of Otto’s approach in this article, see the Conclusions (esp. n. 86) below.

ries of elite religious discourse.¹¹ He concluded that magic should be replaced as an analytical category by “[a] critical interpretation of the concept of ‘religion’ accompanied by modern interpretations of the concept of ‘ritual’ and subordinate functional terms (describing ritual goals such as ‘divination,’ ‘healing,’ ‘binding,’ etc.)...”¹² For Otto, therefore, the concepts “religion” and “ritual” – albeit only when critically engaged – provide better alternatives to magic. By disassociating magic from its associative constituent parts, Otto aligned himself with the methodological position that Jonathan Z. Smith promoted nearly two decades earlier (1995):

We have better and more precise scholarly taxa for each of the phenomena commonly denoted by ‘magic,’ which, among other benefits, create more useful categories for comparison. For any culture I am familiar with, we can trade places between the corpus of materials conventionally labeled ‘magical’ and corpora designated by other generic terms (e.g., healing, divining, execrative) with no cognitive loss.¹³

For Smith (and Otto), more specific categories of function, such as healing and divination, are preferable because they do not carry the same pejorative connotations and taxonomic limitations as the term “magic.” Otto’s deconstructive analysis ultimately led him to adopt a “historicizing” approach to magic. This approach consists of tracing the history of the “concept” “magic,” examining how particular writers used terms for “magic” (e.g., *μαγεία*), especially in light of what he calls the “discourse of exclusion” (i.e., using “magic” in its negative sense) and the “discourse of inclusion” (i.e., the self-referential use of “magic” terminology).¹⁴

In 2014, David Aune entered once again into this discussion, publishing a theoretical chapter on magic in the *Festschrift* for John H. Elliott.¹⁵ In keeping with his position from 2007, Aune argued here that “magic” ought to be removed from the field of early Christian studies. In contrast to his 2007-essay, however, Aune concluded in this more recent piece that the practices and texts typically regarded as “magical” should not be labelled “sorcery,” but should fall under the rubric “ancient religion” – a concept that the scholar must disaggregate.¹⁶ He writes, “[i]t is more important to focus on the individual components of the complex reality of ancient religion, including prayer, ritual, exorcism, curse tablets, divination and the like.”¹⁷ Although Aune advocated in this 2014 essay a more ritually and materially oriented list of religion than the functional lists of magic found in Smith and Otto, Aune joins those scholars in promoting a methodology whereby the items typically deemed magical are disaggregated into their respective “religious” components.

11 Otto also appropriately highlights, however, that *μαγεία*/magic (and their cognates) could be used in a positive sense (Otto 2013, 315).

12 Otto 2013, 320–21.

13 Smith 1995, 16–17.

14 Otto 2013, 319–39 (cf. Otto 2017, 44–50). Otto provides a more detailed historiographical sketch of magic in the published version of his dissertation (Otto 2011).

15 Aune 2014.

16 Despite their overlapping ideas, Aune does not cite Otto in his essay.

17 Aune 2014, 24.

These studies collectively not only pose a considerable challenge to the scholarly use of the term “magic,” but they also agree that disaggregating the practices and functions typically classified under the category magic provides a valid methodological alternative. Whilst there is much to commend in these studies, I find that their conclusion to abstain from using the term magic in scholarship is ultimately unhelpful. By contrast, I will argue that magic should in fact be kept as one of our heuristic categories in the study of antiquity. Of course, I contend that, like all categories of scholarly analysis, magic must be continually subjected to critical reflection and scrutiny, so that we might uncover further biases and distortions of the evidence attached to it.¹⁸

1. MAGIC: A PROBLEMATIC CATEGORY

It is necessary to stress at the outset of this section that most of the criticisms levelled against “magic” in the studies of Aune, Otto, Smith and others are beyond dispute. For instance, many of the assumptions, which have long been associated with “magic,” fail to do justice to the complexities of ancient religious life. The Augustinian/Durkheimian distinction between private and public rituals – which, within the scholarly tradition, corresponds to magic and religion respectively – does not accurately reflect all the social realities of antiquity.¹⁹ For instance, Andrew T. Wilburn’s archaeological analysis of the curse tablets from the Ballesta necropolis in Empúries (Spain) demonstrates that these objects were deposited in cinerary urns before or during inhumation.²⁰ Accordingly, the deposition of these curse tablets required the participation (on at least some level) of the families of the deceased who were placed in the urns. This social setting thus challenges facile notions of the public (religion)/private (magic) distinction.²¹ In addition, it has long been stressed that the simple supplicatory (= religion) vs. manipulative (= magic) dichotomy, for which Frazer famously advocated, fails to capture accurately the divisions of ancient ritual practice.²² To this end, many ostensibly “magical” artefacts cite the Lord’s Prayer – the epitome of “religious” supplication – as the primary or only authoritative tradition in their spells.²³

18 The argument presented in this essay has many points of resonance with (prior) scholarly discussions. Alongside the literature cited throughout this essay, the reader is especially encouraged to examine Bremmer 1999; Johnston 2003; Frankfurter 2019.

19 The private/public distinction was central to St. Augustine’s view of magic. For a discussion, see Markus 1994. Such a view also has difficulty accounting for ostensibly “magical” rituals performed on behalf of groups more generally. On this point, see Mair 1972, 225.

20 Wilburn 2013, 219–53.

21 What is more, it is even possible that the efficacy of curses, for instance, was sometimes partially contingent upon its partial revelation or “semi-public” nature (Wilburn 2013, 261–63).

22 E.g., Frazer 1911, 220–23 (cf. Weber 1993, 28 [original 1920]). For discussion of magic as manipulation in early ecclesiastical texts, see Remus 1982, 134–36.

23 E.g., P. Schøyen I 6; P. Oxy. LX 4010; BGU III 954; P. Duk. inv. 778; Athens Nat. Mus. nr. 12 227. For discussion of the use of the Lord’s Prayer on amulets, see Sanzo 2014, 47–51; de Bruyn 2017, 157–65. R. Greenfield is thus incorrect and merely recapitulates the rhetoric of certain

Moreover, as I have noted above, magic – and ancient terms that scholars have linked with the English word (and its equivalents in other modern languages) – has been used to denigrate practices ancient writers and modern colonialists attempted to suppress and marginalise. Such “discourses of ritual censure” have taken a variety of forms, even in antiquity.²⁴ As Michelle Salzman has demonstrated, Christian emperors – beginning already in the fourth-century C.E. – ushered in a new age of castigating traditional Roman rituals under rubrics, such as *superstitio*.²⁵ Moreover, David Frankfurter, drawing cross-culturally on the work of Robert Redfield, has argued that specific rituals, which were a normal part of local religion, could be recast as deviant or magical once they appeared in global or central contexts.²⁶ In addition to such temporal and spatial considerations, Kimberly Stratton has demonstrated that magic could, under certain cultural conditions, be used as a tool for slandering and prohibiting various types of female knowledge and rituals²⁷ – though we must acknowledge along with Annette Yoshiko Reed that the overarching gendered stereotype of ancient magic is largely dependent upon scholarly projections of misogyny onto the pre-modern world.²⁸ Perhaps more counterintuitive is the fact that objects, which scholars have labelled magical (e.g., amulets and spells), occasionally organise other ritual practices considered harmful or detrimental under rubrics, such as *μαγεία*, *φαρμακεία*, and the like.²⁹ For instance, Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 (a.k.a. P. Anastasi 9), a sixth-to-eighth century C.E. Coptic codex that includes spells for healing, protection, and exorcism, condemns as “evil” (ΠΟΝΗΡΟΣ) those who practice “sorcery” (ΜΝΤΡΕΦΡΙΚΝΕ), “invocations” (ΜΝΤΡΕΦΜΟΥΤΕ) and other harmful rituals.³⁰ This litany of discourses clearly demonstrates that magic and magician – and the ancient terms related to them in scholarly practice – by no means represent culturally neutral, unbiased, or unproblematic categories.

ecclesiastical leaders when he writes: “[magic is] a form of religious belief and activity which did not conform to the doctrinally defined dominant orthodoxy Christianity; it was essentially associated with the demons and/or with the notion of automatic control of desired outcome or response” (Greenfield 1995, 118).

24 For the term “discourse of ritual censure,” see Frankfurter 2005, 257.

25 Salzman 1987.

26 Frankfurter 1997.

27 Stratton 2014.

28 Reed 2014. It is important to note that Stratton is also quite nuanced in her account, highlighting instances of both female and male witchcraft accusations (Stratton 2014).

29 For a fuller treatment of this phenomenon, see Sanzo 2019a.

30 Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, 1r, 1–13. For the editio princeps, see Pleyte and Boeser 1897, 441–79. The pagination of this artefact does not agree with Richard Smith, who paginated this artefact incorrectly. I have paginated this manuscript in consultation with images of the original manuscripts provided online by the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (<http://www.rmo.nl/collectie/zoeken?object=AMS+9>). I would like to extend my gratitude to Jacques van der Vliet, who confirmed my readings of the online images through an in-person examination. On the dating of this artefact, see Petrucci 1995, 10; Szirmai 1999, 43 n. 6. It is also possible that it was part of a monastic library (de Bruyn 2017, 87).

2. THE PROBLEMS WITH THE ALTERNATIVES TO MAGIC

Highlighting the analytical limitations endemic to magic and its cognates, however, ought also to bring into sharper relief the problems inherent in the proposed alternatives to magic in these and other studies. Many scholars have avoided magic in favour of other terms to describe artefacts and practices that have traditionally been labelled magic. Perhaps most importantly, Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith have proposed the rather influential lexeme “ritual power” as an alternative to magic.³¹ Yet, merely altering the terminology in this way does little to offset the problems and biased perspectives we inherit. What was “ritual power” in antiquity? Which practices did or, perhaps more significantly, did not involve “ritual power” in antiquity? In light of the facile nature of this new lexeme, it is not surprising that Meyer and Smith’s volume was not only titled *Ancient Christian Magic*, but the corporal limits of their book were also restricted to objects that had previously been associated with “magic.”³² In the end, “ritual power” is little more than a euphemism for “magic.”

The intersection of ancient and modern terminology has also been a site for taxonomic reflection – and confusion – and for offering potential alternatives to magic. Many scholars have wedded magic with ancient terminology, such as *μαγεία*, as a matter of intuitive reflex. As it relates to the canonical Acts of the Apostles, for instance, New Testament commentators have habitually translated, referred to, and analytically framed Simon’s *μαγεία* as “magic” (Acts 8:9–24).³³ But *μαγεία* is *not* “magic.”³⁴ I would argue that the English “magic” (or the rough equivalent in other modern languages) is especially inappropriate for the Simon narrative because his stated practices hardly resemble anything we would call “magic” or a witchcraft accusation: the text does not mention any ritual objects or practices; Simon is not said to have manipulated any divinities or anything of the sort; and his actions were not considered deviant (by the audience in the narrative), but were *publicly* praised. If anything, *μαγεία* in this text is more closely linked to charlatanry, spectacle, or inferior (ritual)

31 Meyer and Smith 1995 (rev. ed. 1999). The notion of ritual power also plays a considerable role in Lesses 1998.

32 On the presence of “magic” behind our collections of ancient sources, see, for instance, Versnel 1991; Frankfurter 2019, 10. In the interest of full disclosure, Richard Smith personally communicated to me that it was the original publisher (Harper San Francisco) that insisted on the title *Ancient Christian Magic*.

33 The scholarly literature tying the Simon in Acts to “magic” is immense. See, for instance, the following monographs: Garrett 1989, 61–87; Heintz 1997; Klauck 2003, 13–30. See also Stratton 2007, 98; Twelftree 2009. In addition to the noun *μαγεία*, the redactor also uses the verb *μαγεύω* (Acts 8:9).

34 On the problems with confusing *μαγεία* with “magic,” see Frankfurter 2019, 4; Aune 2007, 236–49; Graf 1997, 26 (and several other places). Rather interestingly, Otto translates *μαγεία* as “magic” (with scare quotes) several times in his essay. For instance, as part of his historicising analysis of magic, he asks the following question about the “self-referential” use of *μαγεία* in the PGM: “[w]hy did the authors of the PGM employ the concept of ‘magic’ as a self-referential term?” (Otto 2013, 337).

activity (in comparison with Philip);³⁵ Peter ultimately condemns Simon for his monetary improprieties (Acts 8:18-24).³⁶ We must, therefore, always bear in mind that, despite their etymological relationship and occasional overlaps (see below), magic and *μαγεία* are not identical.

In response to the differences between modern and ancient conceptions of illicit ritual, other scholars have preferred to retain the ancient terminology (i.e., using the native words in the ancient text [e.g., *μαγεία* or *φαρμακεία*] instead of terms, such as “magic” and “sorcery”). Although there are many research questions for which the use of native terminology is viable (and perhaps even preferable), Jan Bremmer’s words about the use of native Greek terminology in scholarly analysis are apt: “[t]he exclusive use of Greek terms may suggest an absence of the modern world, but one’s own cultural framework will inevitably serve as a point of reference.”³⁷ In other words, this approach can mask scholarly presuppositions about antiquity, giving an air of objectivity whilst tacitly organising analysis around contemporary biases. At the same time, this approach has the potential to stifle comparative analysis by obscuring with ancient language meaningful conceptual parallels between the ancient Mediterranean and other times, locations, and cultures. We would do well to attend to the work of historian Victoria Bonnell on comparison, in which she distinguishes between the analytical use of comparison (i.e., oriented around similar kinds of individuals/groups at a particular period of time) and the illustrative use of comparison (i.e., attempting to illuminate a broader idea, concept, or model that transcends specific groups or a particular time period).³⁸ One assumes differences between the various groups and practices in the latter illustrative mode. Drawing from the work of Bonnell and Jonathan Z. Smith, David Frankfurter has usefully summed up the values and limitations of this illustrative use of comparison:

We engage in it for the greater understanding of human society. For this kind of *illustrative* comparison our own specialty areas – through which we investigate patterns comparatively – really constitute a kind of ethnographic fieldwork for the larger understanding of religion. We do not, of course, delude ourselves with the impression that the patterns exist apart from their *heuristic* function in making sense of religion in context or that they grasp in any way the totality of content or experience. They simply aid us in making sense of phenomena and in bringing our observations to new situations.³⁹

35 I would argue, therefore, that the English word “magic” is not the best term for this kind of activity.

36 On the problems with understanding Acts more generally through the lens of magic, see Sanzo 2019b, 198–202. To be sure, the association of illicit ritual practice with avarice and other dubious financial practices was widespread in antiquity (e.g., Plato, *Respublica*, 2.364; Sophocles, *Antigone*, 1055; Cicero, *Divinatione*, 1.58; Josephus, *Antiquitates*, 6.48; 18.65–80). Nevertheless, the redactor does not directly connect the *μαγεία* with Simon’s financial misdeeds.

37 Bremmer 1998, 12.

38 Bonnell 1980.

39 Frankfurter 2012, 88 (emphasis in original).

Indeed, as I will highlight in more detail below, ancient and modern categories of licit and illicit ritual do in fact *partially* overlap, thus imbuing the term “magic” with some explanatory power for certain research questions.

To be sure, many of the scholars calling for the end of the category magic are well aware of the problems with other categories and rubrics, especially their primary replacement category, religion. In addition to the many classic essays of Jonathan Z. Smith on the category religion⁴⁰ and Aune’s 2007 essay, in which he simultaneously deconstructed both magic and religion, Otto’s 2013 article also emphasised the analytical problems with religion in a concessionary footnote. Given the importance of this footnote, I will cite it *in toto*:

Of course, one could argue that the concept of ‘religion’ implies problems similar to those of ‘magic’; likewise, ‘religion’ is characterized by fuzzy semantics, implicit judgments, and a long and diverse history; it provoked, similarly, an ongoing academic dispute offering no final answers. As a matter of fact, no academic term is able to survive the critical analysis of a postmodern deconstructionist; monolithic, well-defined concepts have become (quite rightly) extinct alongside the burial of the phenomenological school and its grand narratives. However, one has to make choices: it seems reasonable to argue that some terms are (in a quite pragmatic sense) *better* than others. ‘Religion,’ with a loose working definition of *belief in spiritual beings*, is no doubt applicable in Classical Antiquity (and is, in fact, usually applied in this sense in Classical Studies). Bringing in the concept ‘magic’ while analyzing ancient sources evokes the well-known arsenal of theoretical problems implied in the terminological dualism of ‘magic’ and ‘religion.’ Thus, instead of working with two problematic concepts the distinction of which may forever remain unclear, it seems reasonable to stick to the more established (and less disputed) term and discard the other. In the end, this is a pragmatic decision which cannot be ultimately justified; however, as this paper will show, the methodological approach proposed here can actually help to make better sense of the ancient sources and, thus, contribute to academic progress.⁴¹

It is useful to unpack Otto’s rather helpful summary of the problems associated with definition in the Humanities and Social Sciences more generally since it raises fundamental questions about his (and Smith’s and Aune’s) methodological objections to magic. First of all, Otto appropriately underscores that most of the analytical categories scholars take for granted have been thoroughly deconstructed. In addition to “religion” and its contiguous sub-categories – such as Christian, Jewish, and Gnosticism – the terms that scholars have destabilised (for ancient studies) include: ritual;⁴² identity;⁴³ experience;⁴⁴ text;⁴⁵ author;⁴⁶ and history.⁴⁷ It is difficult to imagine a study of

40 E.g., Smith 1980; Smith 1998. See especially his collected essays in Smith 2004.

41 Otto 2013, 321, n. 55.

42 See Grimes 2000, 259–70. On the problems with identifying “ritual” in archaeological fieldwork, see e.g., Brück 1999.

43 See Brubaker and Cooper 2000.

44 Fitzgerald 2000a.

45 See Clark 2004, 130–55.

46 E.g., Woodmansee 1984; Malina 2014.

47 See e.g., Clark 2004, 9–28; 86–105.

antiquity, however, that does not use – or conceptually rely upon on some level – one or more of these and other “problematic” rubrics.

More to the point, although he alludes to the analytical shortcomings of religion, Otto claims that religion is “less disputed” than magic. This claim inappropriately downplays the growing sentiment in the field of religious studies that religion constitutes an inherently biased category and, according to some, should thus be removed from scholarly analysis. Already in 1962, Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s classic tome, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, argued that religion inappropriately oriented the scholarly discourse in favour of systems instead of feelings.⁴⁸ Talal Asad contended that religion – at least in the individualistic and definable way we currently conceive of it – is a post-Reformation-era product.⁴⁹ Even Randall Styers’s interesting critique of the category magic, which Otto cites with verve, is ironically based in large measure on Timothy Fitzgerald’s similar deconstructive analysis of religion.⁵⁰

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of religion in the promotion of colonial ideals and thereby in the construction, maintenance, and defence of modern secular society.⁵¹ In this vein, Otto’s claim that magic is particularly problematic because it necessarily involves another category (i.e., “religion”) is not only disputable in and of itself,⁵² but it is also misleading since it fails to account for the historical linkage between the categories “religion” and “secularism” that many scholars have stressed. Asad writes, “... ‘religion’ is a modern concept not because it is reified but because it has been linked to its Siamese twin ‘secularism.’”⁵³ More recently, Craig Martin has expressed his concern with the intrinsically binary nature of the term religion:

The norms [associated with the term religion] typically adhere to or are inherent in binary schemas, wherein two opposing terms are conceived as properly or essentially distinct, either *de facto* or *de jure*: for example, religion vs. magic; religion vs. superstition; religious experience vs. organized religion; individual religion vs. institutional religion; outward ritual vs. inward sincerity; reasonable religion vs. fundamentalist religion; church vs. the state; religion vs. politics; religion vs. the secular; the private sphere vs. the public sphere; religion vs. spirituality; religious faith vs. scientific knowledge; revealed knowledge vs. empirical knowledge; etc.⁵⁴

This expanded list of binaries – of which religion is a contrasting component – ought to make it clear that Otto’s critique of magic on the basis of its binary quality equally applies to religion and, therefore, should also preclude him from using the latter term.⁵⁵

48 Smith 1962.

49 Asad 1993, 27–54.

50 Styers 2004, 11 (cf. Fitzgerald 2000b). For the impact of Styers on Otto, see Otto 2013, 317, 318.

51 As Fitzgerald noted, “[t]he category religion is at the heart of modern western capitalist ideology...it mystifies by playing a crucial role in the construction of the secular, which to us constitutes the self-evidently true realm of scientific facticity, rationality, and naturalness” (Fitzgerald 2000b, 3).

52 Bremmer 1999, 9–12.

53 Asad 2001, 221.

54 Martin 2015, 297–98.

55 On the binary quality of most of our analytical vocabulary, see Frankfurter 2019, 11.

But it is not only modern theorists of religion that have advocated for religion's removal from scholarship. Given the significant role the category religion has played in the construction of modern political and economic systems and sensibilities, scholars have questioned its utility specifically for the study of antiquity. Aune raised questions in 2007 about the explanatory power of religion for ancient studies on the grounds that religion did not constitute a discrete domain of Graeco-Roman antiquity: "[w]hat modern scholars call 'religion' was embedded in ancient Greek and Roman culture to such an extent that it is impossible to disentangle the one from the other."⁵⁶ This critique of the category religion has not gone out of style in scholarship on antiquity. In fact, Brent Nongbri has recently devoted an entire monograph to the subject of religion's numerous anachronistic biases and assumptions with respect to the study of the ancient Mediterranean world.⁵⁷ Whether or not one agrees that religion ought to be removed from the scholarly study of antiquity – I personally do not – it is clear that religion is susceptible to the very same critiques of anachronism as magic.

Otto's particular definition of the term "religion" (i.e., religion as belief in "spirit beings") also requires critical reflection. The isolation of belief as the primary definitional criterion for religion is not merely anachronistic; ironically, it also orients analysis around the very same Protestant proclivities that constructed magic as a foil for religion (i.e., [Protestant] religious beliefs in contrast to [Catholic] magical rituals).⁵⁸ What is more, religion – if it is characterised as belief in "spirit beings" – is also a generic category that, if applied to antiquity, encompasses virtually the entire corpus of ancient primary source material.⁵⁹

To be sure, Aune (2014) and Otto – drawing on Smith – mitigate the dangers of this potential pitfall by advocating for an atomising approach, whereby "ancient religion" (including "magic") is disaggregated into a series of discrete rubrics, such as healing, protection, exorcism, and curse tablets. Yet, this approach is not without its own theoretical and methodological problems. The automatic impulse to sub-divide practices according to function or specific ritual practice *can* distort our understanding of antiquity by fragmenting domains that some ancients considered unified. Natalie Zemon Davis has appropriately warned against such fragmentation:

56 Aune 2007, 235.

57 Nongbri 2013. Although the majority of this book leads one to conclude that scholars ought to abandon the category "religion" in the study of antiquity, Nongbri changes course in the end of his study, arguing for a "more informed" way of discussing this category (Ibid., 154–59). Simon Price has also highlighted problems with the term "religion" in the ancient Greek world (Price 1999). Likewise, Jan Bremmer has written, "...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" (Bremmer 1999, 10).

58 On the role of Protestantism in the construction of the religion–magic binary, see e.g., Thomas 1971, 51–77; Thomas 1975, 96; Smith 1995, 44.

59 Even letters written for practical concerns, such as P. Oxy. 46. 3314, include prayers and use expressions, such as "divine providence." For a useful discussion of this object, see Blumell 2012, 28.

[we should] examine the range of people's relations with the sacred and the supernatural, so as not to fragment those rites, practices, symbols, beliefs and institutions which to villagers or citydwellers constitute a whole. We consider how all of these may provide groups and individuals some sense of the ordering of their world, some explanation for baffling events or injustice, and some notion of who and where they are.⁶⁰

Davis' words are particularly apt since several artefacts reveal that ancients grouped together various ritual practices.

In fact, at least on occasion, the practices and texts that make up our category "magic" were likewise organised under a single conceptual rubric in antiquity. As Michael D. Swartz has noted about Jewish magic, "...there is a great deal of formal cohesion among amulets, magical handbooks, and the like."⁶¹ The Greco-Egyptian magical materials likewise display a degree of "formal cohesion," especially when compared to other kinds of objects. Certain Egyptian scribal habits tend to be exclusive to – or at least uncommon outside of – the various texts and practices scholars deem "magical." For instance, the so-called *charaktêres* were commonly used in late antique curses, healing rituals, and apotropaic contexts, yet were uncommonly – if ever – used in contexts we would typically regard as "non-magical."⁶² There is, therefore, tremendous heuristic value in calling the *charaktêres* a "magical" practice.⁶³

In close dialogue with the material evidence – and, for that matter, our modern taxonomies – certain texts primarily designed to dictate and manage normative behaviour reveal that the practices we consider "magic" were at times conceptually related in late antiquity. For instance, the text traditionally labelled Canon 36 of the Council of Laodicea states:

Those who are of the priesthood, or of the clergy, ought not be magicians, enchanters, numerologists, or astrologers; nor ought they make what are called amulets, which are chains for their own souls. Those who wear (amulets), we command to be cast out of the Church.⁶⁴

In this text, the ritual practices of "magicians" (μάγους), "enchanters" (ἐπαιδούς), "numerologists" (μαθηματικούς), and "astrologers" (ἀστρολόγους) were related to the extent that they constituted a single threat and thus relegated to a single canon.⁶⁵ What is more, these diverse ritual experts were connected to the production and use of

60 Davis 1974, 312 (cited in Frankfurter 2005, 268–69).

61 Swartz 2001, 190.

62 For a recent analysis of the *charaktêres*, which stresses its changes over time and across space, see Gordon 2014. See also Mastrocinque 2004, 92–98. For the ability of the *charaktêres* to reshape mundane objects as "magical," see Gordon 2015, 160.

63 In this sense, Bronisław Malinowski's "coefficient of weirdness" has analytical utility – though, of course, it must be constantly checked and reformulated in light of new insights into contemporary biases about the bizarre in antiquity (Malinowski 1935, 2:218–25). For the application of Malinowski's "coefficient of weirdness" to the study of ancient magic, see Wilburn 2012, 12–13; Frankfurter 2006, 15–19.

64 Translation taken from Stander 1993, 64. On the problems with connecting this canon to a single Council of Laodicea, see Joannou 1962, 127–28; de Bruyn 2017, 39.

65 On this point, see Sanzo 2019b, 216–17.

φυλακτήρια, a Greek term often translated as “amulet” (see above). To be sure, as Fritz Graf has deftly demonstrated, the taxonomic relationship between *μαγεία* and divination was not consistent throughout antiquity.⁶⁶ Although practices associated with divination were in earlier periods generally thought to be distinct from *μαγεία*, they were linked under a larger demonological umbrella by Christian thinkers.⁶⁷ The same holds true for the relationships between magic and other subcategories of “ancient religion,” such as astrology. It is not surprising, therefore, that Epiphanius of Salamis cast aspersions on Nimrod as the source of both *ἀστρολογία* and *μαγεία* (*Pan.* I.3.3). Such taxonomic developments notwithstanding, ancient and modern classifications of ritual do in fact *occasionally* overlap in substantive ways. The strict avoidance of magic can, therefore, occlude such instances of intersection.

The atomising approach is problematic for another reason: it is predicated on the assumption that the disaggregated categories (e.g., amulet, healing, protection, cursing, and divination) constituted clearly identifiable and distinct spheres of ancient religious practice. Yet, within the cluster of social contexts we call the ancient Mediterranean world, the demonological and pathological domains were often inextricably linked.⁶⁸ The material record from Christian late antiquity testifies to the blurred boundaries between curative, protective, and exorcistic rituals. Take, for instance, BGU III 954, a now-lost sixth-century CE “amulet” from Heracleopolis Magna (Egypt):

Master, Oh God Almighty, The Fath[er] of our Lord and Savior [Jesus Christ], and Saint Serenus, I, Silvanus, Son of Sarapinus, give thanks and bow [my] head before you, asking and beseeching in order that you might chase away from me, your slave, the demon of the evil eye, the (demon) of the e[vil] d[e]d an[d] the (demon) of unpleasantness and remove every sickness and every malady from me in order that I might be healthy and [able] to speak the Gospel-prayer [of health]. Our Father, who resides in the heaven[s, may] your name [be holy,] may [y]our ki[n]gdom arrive, may [your] will be done on earth [as] it is in heaven. Give u[s] today o[ur] daily bread and forgive our deb[t]s [a]s also [we] forgive those who are indeb[t]ed to us,] and do [not] bring us into temptation, Lord, b[ut] deliv[er] us from ev[il]. For yours is] the glor[y] forev[er...] and the [?] of those [?]....In the beginning was the [Wor]d. The book of the ge[n]ealogy of Jesus Christ, S[o]n of David, Son of Abraham.] Oh Light of light, True God, grant me, your servant, light graciously. Saint Serenus, beg for me that I may be completely healthy.⁶⁹

66 Graf 2011.

67 Graf 2011, 133. It must be noted, however, that magic and divination have not always been closely connected in scholarship. Sarah Iles Johnston has stressed how magic figured much more prominently in colonial discourses. As a result, magic has played a significantly greater role in postcolonial scholarship. Johnston appropriately notes: “...because the practice of divination had never acquired the same dangerously exotic stamp as had magical practices, and because the term ‘divination’ had never acquired as deeply pejorative overtones as those that had prompted attempts to redefine ‘magic,’ it failed to fascinate the same [postcolonial] scholars who began to take up the study of magic” (Johnston 2008, 26).

68 For this connection in the Gospel of Luke, see Twelftree 2014, 217.

69 Translation taken from Sanzo 2008, 31–32.