



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Magic

Hanegraaff, W.J.

#### DOI

[10.1017/CBO9781139027649.034](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139027649.034)

#### Publication date

2016

#### Document Version

Final published version

#### Published in

The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism

#### License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Hanegraaff, W. J. (2016). Magic. In G. A. Magee (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* (pp. 393-404). Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139027649.034>

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## MAGIC

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

## 1 Introduction

Magic is a wretched subject.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps no other concept in the study of religion has caused so much confusion and frustration among scholars, because it seems to resist all attempts at defining its exact nature, thus causing serious doubts about whether it refers to anything real at all – or if so, in what sense. In spite of all the trouble that the concept has caused, nobody has seemed capable of exorcizing it from the academic vocabulary.<sup>2</sup> Like the monster in cheap horror movies, “magic” always keeps coming back no matter how often one tries to kill it.

To explain this strange situation, we must begin by distinguishing sharply between two ways of understanding magic. On the one hand, we can look at the many different meanings and connotations that the term has acquired in Western culture from antiquity to the present. We will see that this gets us closest to understanding the actual role of magic in the context of Western esotericism. On the other hand, there is the common use of “magic” as a general reified concept that is part of the triad “magic–religion–science.” We will see that this latter perspective is the chief cause of all the confusion about the term. Thus, before getting to magic in the history of Western esotericism, we will begin with this second perspective.

## 2 The Reification of “Magic”

Although there are countless academic definitions of magic, they are essentially variations on three extremely influential theories. First, there is the

<sup>1</sup> Otto Neugebauer, “The Study of Wretched Subjects,” *Isis* 42:2 (1951), 111.

<sup>2</sup> H. S. Versnel, “Some Reflections on the Relation Magic-Religion,” *Numen* 38 (1991), 177–197.

“intellectualist” approach, associated with the work of the two famous Victorian armchair anthropologists Edward Burnett Tylor and James G. Frazer.<sup>3</sup> Tylor, the nineteenth-century pioneer of cultural anthropology, defined magic as based on “the error of mistaking ideal analogy for real analogy.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, he claimed that it was grounded in the erroneous assumption typical of “primitive man” that things associated in thinking must be connected in actual fact. Frazer integrated Tylor’s theory in his famous evolutionist triad, claiming that humanity had progressed from primitive “magic,” first to the higher level of “religion,” and from there to “science,” the highest level of all.

For Frazer, magic actually meant “sympathetic” magic: It was based on the assumption that “things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy”<sup>5</sup> (a concept that goes back to Plotinus) or “an invisible ether” (a concept that, ironically, was still very popular in mainstream scientific theorizing even in Frazer’s day).<sup>6</sup> The important point to emphasize about the Tylor-Frazer theory is that it holds science, not religion, to be the theoretical opposite of magic: The essence of magic was its belief in merely imaginary analogies, correspondences, and invisible forces, in contrast to the real causal mechanisms basic to science.

The second, “functionalist” theory of magic concentrates on ritual action and is linked to another scholarly couple: the French sociologists Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim. For Mauss, the term referred to “any rite that is not part of an organized cult: a rite that is private, secret, mysterious, and ultimately tending towards one that is forbidden.”<sup>7</sup> Following a similar line of reasoning, Durkheim defined religious beliefs as shared by, and constitutive of, a social group, which he referred to as a “Church.” In contrast, magic was inherently nonsocial: “*There is no Church of Magic.*”<sup>8</sup> Functionalist approaches are therefore based on the opposition of magic to religion, not

<sup>3</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Emergence of the Academic Science of Magic: The Occult Philosophy in Tylor and Frazer,” in *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, ed. Arie L. Molendijk and Peter Pels (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 253–275.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (1871), vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1913), 116.

<sup>5</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1900), vol. 1, 2nd ed. (reprinted London: MacMillan & Co, 1951), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Egil Asprem, “Pondering Imponderables: Occultism in the Mirror of Late Classical Physics,” *Aries* 11:2 (2011), 129–165.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie,” (1901–1902), in Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (1950; Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaire de la vie religieuse* (1912; Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), 61. Emphasis in original.

science. In Durkheim's opinion, there was "something inherently anti-religious about the maneuvers of the magician."<sup>9</sup>

Finally, a third approach is derived from a theoretical concept that is central to the oeuvre of the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (remarkably enough, since he himself saw it as applicable equally to magic and religion). It was based on the perceived contrast between a worldview or mentality grounded in "instrumental causality" (which assumes the presence of secondary causes or mechanisms that mediate between causes and effects) and an alternative one, grounded in "participation" (where causes and effects are seen as associated, or merging, to the point of identity or consubstantiality).<sup>10</sup> While Lévy-Bruhl originally saw participation as typical of "primitive" cultures, he eventually came to understand it as a primary and irreducible constant that is present in any society, including our own. Later scholars came to assume, quite incorrectly, that participation and magic were meant to be equivalent terms, resulting in all kinds of theories that interpret magic as grounded in a "different kind of rationality."<sup>11</sup> In these cases, it is clear that science, not religion, serves as the theoretical opposite of magic: It is all about alternatives to instrumental causality.

The three theoretical approaches linked to the names of Tylor and Frazer, Mauss and Durkheim, and Lévy-Bruhl have been mixed and combined in many different ways, but almost without any exception this has happened within a more general context that has very much been taken for granted, explicitly or implicitly. This is the famous triad "magic-religion-science" itself, with its ambitious suggestion that all forms of human culture can essentially be analyzed in terms of three perspectives or worldviews. The triad has its origin in the period of the Enlightenment, although most of its underlying assumptions go back much further in history, as will be seen. Its point of departure is the relatively unproblematic recognition that "religion" (however defined) is clearly something different from modern science and rationality.

Once this distinction has been made, it is bound to be followed by the further observation that a whole class of phenomena in human culture and society apparently do not fit too well within either of these categories: They

<sup>9</sup> Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaire*, 59–60.

<sup>10</sup> Analysis in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World," *Religion* 33:4 (2003), 357–380, here 371–374.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and see the overview in Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 345–356.

too appear to be clearly different from science and rationality, and yet one hesitates to call them “religion.” If one looks at it more closely, one finds that this third category is in fact a kind of wastebasket filled with materials that have been known by many different names: Next to the term “magic,” they have been referred to, or associated with, a whole series of generalizing concepts such as “the occult” (respectively, “occultism,” “occult science”), “superstition,” “mysticism,” “esotericism,” “the irrational,” “primitive thought,” “paganism,” “idolatry,” “fetishism,” and so on. These many terms refer to an even greater variety of practices and ideas, and their association is highly problematic. (For example, what does the invocation of demons have to do with the drawing of horoscopes, or alchemical transmutation with the animation of statues or the making of amulets?) Nevertheless, the idea is that they can all be subsumed under the single unifying label of “magic,” thus setting them apart from whatever belongs to the similarly unifying categories called “religion” and “science.”

Tacitly assuming the existence of such a triad, scholars and intellectuals have tended to be favorable toward “science and rationality,” respectful toward “religion,” and quite negative about “magic” (or whatever equivalent term they might use). Now, to get to the core of the problem: It is quite evident that the distinction between magic and religion is a direct legacy from Christian theology and doctrinal polemics. Implicitly or explicitly, religion really meant Christianity (or more precisely, “true” or theologically correct Christianity), whereas magic meant such things as demonic worship and pagan idolatry (i.e., false religion). Clearly, this framework is so transparently normative and biased toward Christian theological agendas that it should never have had a chance to be accepted in a purportedly neutral scholarly framework. But the opposite occurred: It has been adopted as a matter of course by countless academics.

That this could happen so easily and successfully has to do partly with a second historical legacy in addition to the theological one, which has created further confusion. Since the twelfth century, as we will see, intellectuals had begun promoting the idea of *magia naturalis*: magic understood in non-demonic terms, as based on the workings of the hidden (occult) forces of nature, and therefore easier to legitimate theologically. In fact, those who were defending “natural magic” in the early modern period found themselves open to attack from all sides. The Protestant Reformation had given a new sense of urgency to anti-magical polemics, often targeting Roman Catholicism. Many theological critics failed to be convinced by the argument that natural magic was free from demonic influence. And they were now joined by natural philosophers and scientists who accused any defender of

magic – natural or not – of obscurantism and irrational superstition. The upshot of this confused debate was that magic always found itself on the wrong side of things, regardless of how it was defined or what arguments were being used against it.

It is therefore quite evident that the magic-religion-science triad relies entirely on normative distinctions between “true” and “false” religion as well as between “true” and “false” science. The fact that, in this context, magic is a polemical category of exclusion, not an unbiased instrument for analysis or a straightforward descriptive label should already be sufficient to discredit it as suitable for scholarly research. But there is more. What makes the triad particularly problematic (although, paradoxically, it is precisely this further weakness that accounts for its enormous popularity) is the almost automatic mental *reification* of the three terms. In other words, it is widely assumed that certain kinds of human thought and behavior really *are* magical in and by themselves, while others *are* religious, and yet others *are* scientific.

Magic, religion, and science come to be perceived as universal categories *sui generis*. And this is what made it possible for them to play a central role in the complex processes of identity formation and “othering” through which the dominant parties in modern Western culture – Christians on the one hand, scientists and rationalist philosophers on the other – have been trying to promote their hegemonic agendas. For example, Protestants might argue that Catholic veneration of images is not really Christian but a form of magic; Catholics, however, might come up with sophisticated arguments to the effect that such practices may look like magic to their opponents but were really a genuine religious practice; and rationalists could argue that all kinds of practices that are seen as supernatural by the common people can really be given a straightforward rational and scientific explanation. The deep irony of the situation is that the very process of reification, as practiced by Christians and rationalists alike, is a perfect example of what Tylor had described as magic! That is to say, it entails the confusion of mental concepts with actual realities, so that what we believe we understand in our mind seems to exist in the external world.<sup>12</sup>

This process of projection makes it possible for magic to be perceived as an ominous and almost omnipresent threat, often leading to alarmist rhetoric:

It is beneath our feet – and not very far beneath them – here in Europe at the present day. . . . This universal faith, this truly Catholic creed, is a belief in the efficacy of magic. . . . [T]he permanent existence of such a solid layer

<sup>12</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 168.

of savagery beneath the surface of society, and unaffected by the superficial changes of religion and culture [is] a standing menace to civilization. We seem to move on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by subterranean forces slumbering below.<sup>13</sup>

But reification can work in favor of magic as well. Once the magic-religion-science triad was firmly in place, it became possible for critics of established Christianity and mechanical science – mostly Romantics and their heirs – to idealize magic as a noble worldview of enchantment. Not least through the medium of fiction, such perceptions have become particularly widespread among the general population.

It is undoubtedly *because* of its normative and ideological foundations, not in spite of them, that the magic-religion-science triad has become an indispensable component of how intellectuals have conceptualized modernity. How deeply the reification of magic is ingrained in modernist theory can be seen clearly, for example, in Max Weber's theory of *Entzauberung*, or Disenchantment, as explained in a famous lecture, "Wissenschaft als Beruf" (Science as a Vocation).<sup>14</sup> But it also became essential to the missionary and colonialist enterprise: With constant implicit or explicit reference to traditional heresiological stereotypes about the alleged horrors of paganism, the magic-religion-science triad (particularly understood from an evolutionist perspective) lent intellectual and scientific legitimacy to the project of converting non-European peoples from their supposedly magical superstitions to the superior truths of Christianity, Enlightenment, and science. In short, the rejection of magic became a hallmark of civilization. But here, too, the logic could work in reverse as well: Again, those who were critical of Western civilization could be attracted, precisely for that reason, to magic as an enchanted worldview that was still alive among the "primitives" or "noble savages" and should be revived in the modern world.

We may conclude that precisely because of its status as the "other" both of religion (i.e., Christianity, or more specifically, Protestantism) and science (i.e., a mechanistic worldview with atheistic implications), the category of "magic" since the eighteenth century has become a favorite projection screen for Western hopes and fears. Far from actually recovering or reconstructing any observable or structural reality existing "out there" (in the past or in the present, or on other continents), it *constructs* such a reality on the

<sup>13</sup> Frazer, *Golden Bough*, vol. 1, 235–236.

<sup>14</sup> Max Weber, "Wissenschaft als Beruf," in *Wissenschaft als Beruf 1917/1919. Politik als Beruf 1919* (Studienausgabe der Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe Band 1/17; ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter) (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1994), 1–23.

basis of normative and ideological assumptions and agendas. Implicitly or explicitly, its real function is to distinguish “truth” from “error” in terms of a simplifying post-Enlightenment discourse; but this normative and prescriptive function is concealed behind the deceptive claim of mere objective description. The discovery of magic is in fact its creation.

### 3 Concepts of Magic

From a strictly historical point of view, any attempt to write a “history of magic” is therefore misleading in principle: It can only lead to anachronistic distortions that prevent us from perceiving what has actually been going on. What can be written, however, is a history of *concepts* of magic. In any such attempt, one must be continually attentive to the question of *who is speaking*: Are we dealing with a “self-referential” discourse in which people claim to be doing magic themselves or with an “other-referential” discourse in which they claim that others are doing it?<sup>15</sup> In this short essay, it is obviously impossible to make even a preliminary attempt at writing such a history in chronological order. Instead, we will be looking at some of the main concepts of “magic” that have emerged over the course of time. In what follows, we will distinguish between seven categories, but this categorization is not intended to be either final or absolute. It is perfectly possible to expand the list further, and the main reason for presenting it here is to illustrate that a great variety of different practices and beliefs have been called “magic” at one time or another, in some context or other, always according to specific intellectual contexts and contingent factors, so that the attempt to reduce them all to some abstract master category is a hopeless undertaking. This initial list of categories, then, looks as follows:

1. Magic as ancient wisdom
2. Magic as worship of demons
3. Magic as natural philosophy and science
4. Magic as occult philosophy
5. Magic as pseudoscience
6. Magic as an enchanted worldview
7. Magic as psychology

The Greek complex of words relating to magic (μάγος, μαγεία, μαγικός, μαγεύω, etc.) is derived from the Old Persian *magu-*. Its exact meaning is

<sup>15</sup> Bernd-Christian Otto, *Magie: Rezeptions- und Diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).



unclear, but it must have referred to a religious functionary of some kind. The historical career of the first meaning of magic, *ancient wisdom*, relies to a remarkable extent on only one short reference in Plato's *Alcibiades I* (122a), where Socrates refers to Zoroaster's *mageia* as "the worship of the gods." The passage was quoted by a surprisingly great number of classical authors, and this initial and quite positive understanding of magic survived at least as late as Apuleius in the second century.<sup>16</sup> It underwent an impressive revival in the Renaissance, partly under the influence of George Gemistos Plethon's attribution of the *Chaldean Oracles* to Zoroaster, who became one of the chief authorities of "ancient wisdom" in the context of the *prisca theologia*. Because Zoroaster was also known as the originator of *mageia*, Plethon titled his edition *Magical Sayings of the Magi, Disciples of Zoroaster*, and the result was a widely popular perspective that may conveniently be referred to as *prisca magia*: Here magic was understood very positively as referring to the wisdom of the ancients that had been passed on through history to Plato and the Platonists but had later come to be confused with demonic and superstitious practices of all kinds. It is on this basis, for example, that Cornelius Agrippa wrote his famous *De occulta philosophia* in an attempt to restore magic to its ancient state of honor. It also led to endless repetitions of the apologetic argument that true magic is a good and divine thing but should not be confused with the despicable dark practices of *goetia*.

This brings us to our second category. Even though the term *mageia* may sometimes have been understood in a positive sense in antiquity, it appears to have rapidly lost that status as it acquired most of the negative connotations that already adhered to the native term γόης – whence *goetia*. Such negative understandings were normative in Christian culture since the first centuries, leading to the understanding of magic as *worship of demons*. Christians, of course, argued that those demons were none other than the gods of the pagans; what the latter described as "ancient wisdom" was in fact an idolatrous practice forbidden by the true God. There is no need here to dwell on this second category: The assumption that magic relies on contact with demons is so widespread and well known that it hardly needs further demonstration.

But as already briefly mentioned, the demonic theory of magic came to be contested beginning in the twelfth century, when great numbers of manuscripts concerned with the ancient natural sciences were translated from

<sup>16</sup> Albert F. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 213 note 29; Otto, *Magie*, chaps. 6–7. On the contested authenticity of the *Alcibiades*, see Nicholas Denyer, "Introduction," in Plato, *Alcibiades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Arabic into Latin. This leads us to our third category. Intellectuals began to argue that many miraculous effects attributed to demonic activity by the common people could in fact be explained in purely natural terms. The scholastic notion of *qualitates occultae* (occult qualities), originating in the Greek *ιδιότητες ἄρρητοι*, came to play an important role in this argument. It is not entirely correct to describe the new concept of *magia naturalis* as an attempt to present magic as scientific: More precisely, it was an attempt to protect the study of the ancient sciences against theological censure and thus legitimate them as a serious object of study for natural philosophers.<sup>17</sup>

The rediscovery of the ancient sciences from Arabic sources was joined, since the fifteenth century, by the translation of multiple Greek manuscripts concerned with Platonic and hermetic wisdom, and Hebrew manuscripts concerned with Kabbalah and other forms of Jewish speculation, followed by the unprecedented dissemination of these materials thanks to the invention of printing. As a result, scholars and intellectuals were faced with the daunting task of trying to synthesize a wide variety of ancient and medieval traditions concerned with miraculous effects of all kinds. This brings us to our fourth category. As Jean-Pierre Brach has remarked, “the elaboration of a synthetic approach had, in many cases, the paradoxical effect of partially blurring the basic differences that were assumed to exist between them.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, magic in the Renaissance took the form of a syncretic “occult philosophy” that made heroic attempts at achieving the impossible: harmonizing widely divergent materials from Greek, Arabic, and Latin sources, combining Aristotelian with Platonic strands of natural philosophy and metaphysics, convincing theologians that these “pagan” traditions were strictly natural (in spite of multiple references to the involvement of intelligent agents, whether demonic or angelic), and yet presenting this “natural magic” as part of one single, supreme tradition of *religious* wisdom derived from sages such as Zoroaster or Hermes Trismegistus.

This Renaissance project of an “occult philosophy” – the attempt to synthesize an enormous range of textual materials concerned with astrology, alchemy, Kabbalah, *magia naturalis*, and Platonic or hermetic speculation, while presenting them as one single whole – was still very well known during the advent of the Enlightenment and came to be seen by its representatives as the sum total of “traditional error and superstition.” While orthodox Christians had already rejected much of it as demon-inspired idolatry and

<sup>17</sup> For the longer argument on *magia naturalis* and *qualitates occultae*, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 170–175, 178–182.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Pierre Brach, “Magic IV,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 732.

pagan superstition, representatives of the new science and rational philosophy were bound to perceive it as “pseudoscience” and dismiss it under the convenient label of “magic.” This, then, is how the magic-religion-science triad came into existence: The occult philosophy of the Renaissance became the Enlightenment’s wastebasket of “rejected knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> As we have seen, this fifth understanding of magic was widely adopted as a polemical tool by intellectuals and academics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

But whatever the Enlightenment rejected as unacceptable was bound to become attractive to those who criticized or rejected the new forms of philosophical rationalism and mechanical philosophy. As illustrated in exemplary form by a large *History of Magic* published by the Romantic physician Joseph Ennemoser in 1844,<sup>20</sup> it was possible to reinterpret all the contents of the wastebasket in a positive manner and present them as parts of a venerable tradition of ancient wisdom grounded in a thoroughly enchanted view of the world. According to this sixth understanding of magic, nature is full of strange and miraculous powers – “mysterious and incalculable forces” in Max Weber’s formulation – that are ultimately grounded in the powers of the soul. This new theory was part and parcel of Mesmerism as interpreted by German Romantics. Next to the “daylight rationality” of the Enlightenment, it claimed that the human mind had a natural connection to the mysterious and much more profound “nightside of nature”: the source of dreams, visions, ecstasies, and all the strange powers and abilities that were ignorantly attributed to demons from a perspective of religious superstition and prematurely dismissed as nonsense by narrow-minded rationalists.

German Romantic Mesmerism and its concern with the nightside of nature eventually led to what has been called the “discovery of the unconscious,”<sup>21</sup> and this brings us to our seventh category. As the hard sciences were more and more successful in uncovering the secrets of external nature, the human unconscious – internal nature – became the privileged location of occult or “mysterious and incalculable” forces. The trend toward psychologization of the sacred went hand in hand with a sacralization of psychology; it is emblematic of this development that in late nineteenth-century forms of occultism, and increasingly since the twentieth century, the personal inner development of the practitioner came to be seen as the main goal of magic. Another central heir of German Romantic Mesmerism, Carl

<sup>19</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chap. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 260–277.

<sup>21</sup> Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1970).

Gustav Jung, developed a highly influential theory of “synchronicity” designed to rehabilitate the *magia naturalis* and occult philosophy of the Renaissance by interpreting it in psychological terms and harmonizing it with quantum physics as a more advanced alternative to post-Newtonian science. This meant, quite literally, that in Jung’s perspective, avant-garde physics and depth psychology had joined forces to unmask positivism as “superstition” and announce the return of magic as science!

It bears repeating that the series of seven categories briefly summarized here makes no claim of completeness and might well be expanded further or arranged differently. The point of this discussion is that the term “magic” has continuously been acquiring new meanings and connotations through its long history from antiquity to the present. To the question “what is magic?” one will therefore receive very different answers depending on the historical period in question and the personal agendas of whoever is being asked. There is no convincing way of subsuming all these meanings under one general heading without making arbitrary judgments along the following lines: “Although X is known by the term ‘magic,’ it is not *really* magic, but although Y is not known by the term ‘magic,’ it really *is* magic.” According to whom, and on what basis? The answer must be obvious by now: according to whoever happens to be speaking, and on the basis of whatever arguments he or she happens to like.

Although there is no such thing as a history of magic, then, it is possible to write a history of the discourse on magic. The only solid foundation for such a history is the detailed analysis of terms and concepts as used in their own context, and a precise investigation of their continuous transformations under the impact of changing historical circumstances.<sup>22</sup> Such a contextual historical analysis is not just possible, but highly important, for the obvious reason that few other terms have been so effective and influential as polemical and apologetic instruments in the formation of Western identities. As such, concepts of “magic” are inextricably entwined not only with the history of modernity but also with the history of how and why Western esotericism has come to be perceived as a distinct field of study.<sup>23</sup> To what extent all the historical concepts of magic are part of the history of esotericism, and to what extent they fall beyond its boundaries, is a tricky question that cannot be answered in general terms. Few scholars would deny that magic as “ancient wisdom” and as “occult philosophy” are proper objects of research in the study of Western esotericism; but when it comes to some other terms,

<sup>22</sup> For a pioneering attempt along these lines, see Otto, *Magie*.

<sup>23</sup> For this general argument, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

especially those that are based on what Bernd-Christian Otto calls an “other-referential discourse,”<sup>24</sup> there is bound to be more hesitation.

Whatever one’s position in this respect, one thing seems clear: Magic is something to beware of. It is such a powerful concept that most scholars and intellectuals who have come into contact with it have fallen under its spell. Even its strongest enemies appear to have been unable to resist the enchantment and the illusions it produced: It literally caused them to see things that were not there. Had these illusions been no more than empty chimeras, then the problem might not have been too serious. But unfortunately, illusions that are widely believed to be true become potent factors in the real world, as one can see from the limitless literature on magic as a concept *sui generis* and its enormous impact in such domains as religious rhetoric or colonialist politics. Ironically, then, it is appropriate to end this short essay with a warning that will sound uncannily familiar to scholars of magic: Beware of the power of words!

<sup>24</sup> Otto, *Magie*, 18–19 and *passim*: *Selbstbezeichnung* (referring to oneself) versus *Fremdbezeichnung* (referring to others), leading to a positive self-referential discourse (“I am practicing magic”) versus a negative other-referential one (*fremdreferentiell* in German; “they are practicing magic”). Cf. Hanegraaff, “Review of Bernd-Christian Otto,” *Aries* 14:1 (2014), 114–120.