

February 2024

Differentiating Magic: a Call for a Differential Approach

Weston L. Wright
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Wright, Weston L., "Differentiating Magic: a Call for a Differential Approach" (2024). *USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.
<https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/10264>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the USF Graduate Theses and Dissertations at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

Differentiating Magic
a Call for a Differential Approach

by

Weston L. Wright

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Religious Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Michael P. DeJonge, Ph.D.
Tori Lockler, Ph.D.
Garrett Potts, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
February 27, 2024

Keywords: Religion, Luhmann, Science, Sociology, Modernity

Copyright © 2024, Weston L. Wright

DEDICATION

To my loving grandfather, William G. Boice, who always believed in me; may he rest in peace.

In my moment of doubt, it was you and your kind words that helped me push forward and succeed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give a special thanks to my major professor, Dr. Michael DeJonge. No matter how many times I dropped by your office unexpectedly, or how many times I ran our meetings overtime with questions; you were always willing to help me grow and learn, and for that I am forever grateful.

I would also like to extend gratitude to Dr. Tori Lockler and Dr. Garret Potts. Dr. Lockler, words do not begin to express my gratitude to you and your mentorship. I have learned so much from you and will carry that knowledge with me for the rest of my career. Dr. Potts, it is rare to find a professor who is as caring and passionate about his students and their learning as you are. I owe much of my success in my undergraduate and graduate career to you both and your help.

Thank you to my loving and supporting parents, Richard and Sarah Wright. You both are the greatest parents someone could ever hope to have. To my twin sister, Erin-Shelby Wright-Vazquez, you are my best friend, and I could not have made it this far without you. To my whole family, I love you so very much.

Special thanks to my partner in crime, Alivia Quattrocki, for your love and support. Thank you for always being there for me. Thank you to my most cherished friends, Richard Mckeon and Fernando Vazquez, your friendship and laughter means the world to me. Faqiat Adeaga, I could not have survived graduate school without you.

Finally, I would like to give a thank you to my incredible grandmother and grandfather, Dale and Bill Boice. In the summer's Erin-Shelby and I would visit you are among my most cherished

memories. Grandma, your wicked sense of humor always brought a smile to my face. And to Papa, whom I miss dearly, no one sang a tune better than you did. Thank you both for teaching me the power of kindness, I love you both.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Chapter One: Magic and Its Scholars	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 The Four Horsemen	2
1.3 Religion and Magic.....	6
1.4 Science and Magic	9
1.5 Magic and the Magicians.....	13
1.6 the Role of Modernity.....	15
1.7 Conclusion	17
1.8 References.....	17
Chapter Two: Differentiated Modernity	19
2.1 Introduction.....	19
2.2 Communication.....	19
2.3 Modernity and Differentiated Systems	21
2.4 Binary Code and Programmes	26
2.5 Conclusion	27
2.6 References.....	27
Chapter Three: Differentiating Magic	29
3.1 Introduction.....	29
3.2 Magic as a System	30
3.3 Differentiating Magic from Science & Religion	31
3.4 Re-evaluation of History.....	34
3.5 Conclusion	40
3.6 References.....	41

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to propose an alternative approach for studying magic. It is often the case in academia, when studying magic, scholars use an understanding of modernity which favors a scientific perspective. When doing so, some scholars have concluded magic has become extinct in our modern society; despite recent research suggesting magical practice is thriving. Likewise, this scholarship promotes an idea of magic grounded in fear, ignorance, superstition, and fraudulence. The goal of this paper is two-fold. First, I seek to advocate for an approach to magic that allows for a plurality of perspectives to be acknowledged, not just a scientific one. To do this, I will be using an understanding of modernity developed by Niklas Luhmann. Second, for this to work, this paper will provide an account of magic as a function system independent from science and religion. Magic, in this way, is understood as communication revolving around participation; *participation* being the engagement with unobservable occult forces to achieve an observable result. By implementing this approach, an account of magic which arguably is more complementary of magical practice in our modern society. This paper concludes by offering a bright future for the academic study of magic that expands beyond the realm of science and religion.

CHAPTER ONE: MAGIC AND ITS SCHOLARS

1.1 Introduction

An enigmatic man, shrouded in black, wielding various occult relics begins to channel untold powers through recondite sigils. A collective of adolescents gather around in the dead of night to commune with spirits through the medium of a Ouija board. Gary races to put on his twenty-year-old Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle T-shirt; should he fail, the New York Giants will certainly lose this year's game. Sister Eunice attempts to perform a rite of transmutation from her maternally inherited grimoire. How do we in the modern context understand these four scenarios? Within the first scenario, one might consider the term *occult*. Regardless, such behavior might send a chill down your spine. The second provokes nostalgic memories or perhaps terrifying ones depending on your experience. Perhaps they did contact a spirit, perhaps it might be more *reasonable* to assume Alivia sought to pull a frightful prank. As for the third scenario, we might consider it to be harmless *superstition*. The final setting provides the narrative of chrysopoeia, the transformation of lead into gold. Primitive science perhaps? Or at least it depicts someone ignorant of common chemical processes. Fear, fraudulence, superstition, and ignorance.

Historically speaking, these four adjectives have loomed over these sorts of practices for centuries. Certainly, to some extent, it is inevitable for criticism of the esoteric to appear. You would be pressed to find any social phenomenon that has avoided any manifest critique. However, there appears to be something more at play in the attachment of these four adjectives

to these scenarios than the common critique. All too often these four adjectives have become a staple of defining such practices, even within the academy. Out of convenience I refer to these four stigmas as the *four horsemen* of magic. Perhaps a cheeky reference, but the title certainly encapsulates the threat these four stigmas contain in their association with magic. This association is not without a long and complex history, one which I cannot possibly present in its entirety here. However, a brief history is necessary for a proper evaluation and interrogation of magic in our modern world.

The following subsection titled *The Four Horsemen of Magic* will provide an overview of the history of the term *magic*. It will demonstrate the long history of associating magic with the pejorative ideas of fear, superstition, fraudulence, and ignorance.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that there is an approach to studying magic which has been revealed to be inaccurate. My aim is two-fold. First, I wish to express that the way in which we define modernity changes the way in which we understand magic within society. Enlightened modernity has proven to be popular amongst scholars, but ineffective in accurately representing the way magic exists in our modern society. Thus, I seek to present a differentiated understanding of modernity which I will argue enables us to derive a more comprehensive and accurate account of magic. Secondly, for my argument to be complete, magic must become understood as a social system independent of science and religion. Though my main concern for this paper is the first of these two claims, nonetheless, time will need to be given to the second in order for my first claim to be justified.

1.2 The Four Horsemen of Magic

The etymological roots of the term *magic* can be traced back to its Iranian counterpart, *maguš*. This term was used as a title for the advisors to the Persian royalty that practiced various rituals which appeared to be mysterious to the likes of Greeks¹. The social context of this term is highly relevant to understanding the way in which it was used by the ancient Greeks, and the evolution of the term as we use it today. The Greeks and Persians were locked in a substantial war in fifth century B.C.E. which led to anti-Persian propaganda. The *mágoi* and their unfamiliar rituals became easy targets in the effort of slander and fear mongering². The *mágoi* and their work became inseparable from fear, ignorance, fraudulence, and superstition; we see the four horsemen of *magic* take shape at the inception of the term.

I would like to address that these pre-modern definitions are restrictive and absolute and do not hold the same broad scope that a more modern understanding of *magic* has. This means, that these definitions are different from their modern counterparts. This section outlines a brief pre-Christian and then a pre-Protestant Reformation history of the etymological origins of *magic* and the evolution of how this word was used.

As with the many terms in our modern vocabulary, we can trace the evolution of the meaning of *magic* over time. *Magia*, the latinized version of the term, was used in a very legal sense within the context of the Roman Empire. The term was used to demarcate fraudulent ritual practices and was to be condemned³. For example, those who performed rituals that involved

¹ Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the academy: Rejected knowledge in Western culture*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pg. 169

² Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg. *Defining magic: A reader*. Routledge, 2014. Pg. 16.

³ Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg. *Defining magic: A reader*. Routledge, 2014. Pg. 16-17.

divination were punished. The reason being they are misguiding those around them to gain some form of profit. One could think of *magia* at this time as connoting *fraud*.

It is at this time something must be said about modern anachronistic use of pre-modern terminologies. It is obvious that we in the modern world are well accustomed to the social context in which we live. There is a tendency to project modern social understandings onto historical time periods. In other words, we must be careful of observing the societies of the past with the lens of our modern society. Otherwise, we create conclusions and narratives of our past which do not accurately reflect the true nature of how the people of that time understood their environment. Take for example when we in the modern day partake in pop culture such as the *Harry Potter* series and see the term *magic*. We understand *magic* to be some power that can be manipulated through participation with esoteric forces to exert our will or achieve certain outcomes. However, this understanding was not the case within first century Rome. We must detach our modern understandings to properly conceive the way in which past societies understood such a term. This is not to say that fragments of our understanding of *magic* cannot be found in its pre-modern usage. The four horsemen are still attached to common understandings of *magic* to this very day. However, though we might find commonality in our conceptions, do not let this deceive you as proof of a shared definition.

The term continues to evolve as it enters the context of Christianity which both perpetuates old interpretations while adding more demonic attributes to the term as well. Within first century Christendom we see *magic* become Christianized. The understanding of *magic* at this point begins to evolve from Latin Rome of fraudulent ritual practice to something far more malefic in nature. Augustine of Hippo perhaps best encapsulates the understanding of *magic* for the subsequent centuries. “[Devils] are attracted not by food like animals, but, like spirits, by

such symbols as suit their taste, various kinds of stones, woods, plants, animals, songs, rites. And that men may provide these attractions, the devils first of all cunningly seduce them, either by imbuing their hearts with secret poison, or by revealing themselves under a friendly guise, and thus make a few of them their disciples, who become the instructors of the multitude.”⁴ *Magic* in the framework of Christian theology, a powerful force in the early-to-late middle ages, becomes the illusion of power through the devil. In this context our understanding of *magic* becomes something more rooted in fear.

Fear of the demonic might have become a powerful influence on our understanding of *magic*, but we see that ignorance and superstition are also thriving in the Middle Ages in their attachment to *magic*. The idea that magic was a fraudulent practice certainly still existed, as we can see in the diary entries of people within the Middle Ages⁵. However, magic was also seen as an often feared yet useful part of society, as seen in the example of the *cunning folk*. *Cunning* men and women were people who practiced what one might call *practical magic*. Though the individual might practice astrology or necromancy, it was not necessarily their focus. Rather, their services centered around aiding people by locating items that were stolen from them, crafting protection amulets, and even healing for the local community.

Leading up to the Protestant Reformation we see that *magic* has seemingly always maintained a connection with the four horsemen. At times one of them might have been more prominent than the others. Nonetheless they are always closely associated with the term in one way or another.

⁴ Augustine of Hippo. *City of God* 21.6. found in: Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg. *Defining magic: A reader*. Routledge, 2014. Pg 35.

⁵ Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pg. 8-10.

It is around the time of the Protestant Reformation, as we see the early process of modernization taking place, that three distinct narratives of magic take shape. I will refer to these narratives as the *religious*, the *scientific*, and the *romantic*. In the following sections I will be providing an analysis of these three distinct histories.

1.3 Religion and Magic

As mentioned previously, the term *magic* within the context of first century Christianity was used to denote foreign and fraudulent ritualistic practice. This is important to keep in mind while discussing the development of religion's perspective of magic.

Within our contemporary context, it is rare to hear Christians being accused of magic and sorcery. However, such an accusation was common in early Christianity. The Roman's and other groups that we would call *pagan* were uneasy about early Christians. The major concern was that Christians worshipped a criminal, one who could perform impressive displays of supernatural power. Due to the condemning opinions of non-Christians, Christians often hid to avoid persecution. Their rituals and practices were seen as mysterious and foreign. By the standards of its time, early-Christians were labeled as magicians⁶. These accusations came from both directions, as the Christians labeled their accusers of fraudulent practice for not worshipping the *true God*.

This weaponization of the term *magic* as means to delegitimize a practice is learned by Christians at its inception. The significance of this is that this weaponizing of *magic* as a pejorative label becomes commonplace by later Christianity; and it is here that we can see the

⁶ Smith, Morton. *Jesus the Magician: A renowned historian reveals how Jesus was viewed by people of his time*. Hampton Roads Publishing, 2014. Pg. 96-97

origins of that practice. The religious realm does not seem to evolve too far past the utilization of *magic* in this way. However, until the processes of modernization begin to occur, this use of *magic* as a weapon is not exclusive to the religious dimension.

I have already spent time discussing how *magic* was used within the context of the Middle Ages, yet I would like to highlight that which is significant for this religious history. As mentioned, there began to be rhetoric of demonic attributes associated with *magic*. However, magical practice was seemingly tolerated so long as it remained practical, such as the work of the cunning folk⁷. However, skepticism over these practices was commonplace; perhaps their rituals were effective, but it is through God's power that these cunning men and women could do what they do.

This fragile tolerance quickly dissipates in the face of rising concerns about the manipulation of God's power. People began stealing communion bread for the efficacy it wielded. Others seeking to manifest their own power over nature was seen as distracting by the clergy. The mentality of the church was that people should be worshiping God, not conjuring and inflating their own egos with delusions of power⁸.

These distractions from church become a topic of major concern for the clergy, and whispers of the demonic origins of these practices begin to be taken more seriously. Those who had the most concern over these ritualistic practices were more often than not soon-to-be Protestant reformers. These theologians begin to consider the theology of magic and how it was possible for people to perform these practices, and why they were more desirable than

⁷ Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003. Ch. 8.

⁸ Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003. Ch. 3.

worshipping God. The conclusion was connected with the devil himself. He was, in a sense, testing the loyalty of humans to God and promising them power in exchange for their loyalty and rejection of God. Whether these people had realized it or not, they had entered into a pact with the devil⁹.

Magic as demonic ritualistic practice soon became the normative understanding of magical practice by the religious community during the Protestant Reformation. This became evident by the purging of any practice deemed to be *magic* or sometimes referred to by the names of *maleficum* or *witchcraft*. We see that genuine fear of the devil's infiltration in our society had become a major concern for the subsequent few hundred years following the Reformation. The famed Witch Trials serves as the perfect example for this development.

This development demonstrates a sociological shift, one in which religion and magic are drawing more defined borders between them as a form of differentiating. I've mentioned how for many years the difference between magic and religion was never a large concern outside of a few theologians. Within early modernization, the initiative to remove magic from the church necessitates a distinction is to be made between religion and magic. For the church, this distinction was clear and marked the culmination of religions long history with magic. Religion was worshipping God, while magic was any ritualistic practice that utilized some power source that was demonic in origin.

This understanding of magic as demonic or taboo practice remains a popular but ineffective definition. Though it does encapsulate how religion (Christianity to be specific) often views magic, it cannot be taken as an authoritative understanding. I will provide further

⁹ Cameron, Euan. *Enchanted Europe: superstition, reason, and religion 1250-1750*. OUP Oxford, 2010. Ch. 7.

reasoning for the problem by seeing this as the authoritative understanding of magic later. First, something must be said about the history of science's perception of magic.

1.4 Science and Magic

These sections seek to shift from discussing the history of the religious narrative of magic and now focus on the scientific narrative of magic. Under the influence of enlightenment ideals, groundbreaking scholars such as E.B. Tylor developed the idea of what I call a *magicless modernity*, a modern world in which magic is in the process of extinction. This section will provide a brief overview of the influencing movements and scholars which aided in constructing our scientific understanding of magic.

Just as there was little interest in differentiating religion and magic within antiquity and the Middle Ages, same can be said for interest in differentiating science and magic. Arguably this differentiation process occurred slightly slower than that of religion and magic. Like the previously shown history, this one can be distinctively traced.

In our contemporary society we are able to differentiate between magic and science. Alchemy and Chemistry are the perfect example of this modern ability. Chemistry is a well-respected school of science revolving around the elements and chemical nature of the world. Alchemy is viewed as the scientifically/intellectually inferior experimentation of magic and chemicals. This distinction was solidified within the 18th century, developed by the Academy of Science¹⁰; yet, before this moment, the practices were one and the same. *Chymistry* was what came before any sort of differentiation ever occurred, there was little care or necessity for there to be a separation of practices into two different systems. So, what changed?

¹⁰ Principe, Lawrence M. *The secrets of alchemy*. University of Chicago Press, 2012. Pg. 87

There is not a singular defined moment that this process began, but something is to be said for the time of rediscovering ancient Greek texts in medieval Europe. There was a rediscovered desire for philosophy and theories of trying to understand the world. Likewise, with a rediscovery of their ideas came a rediscovery of their vernacular. Figures such as Aristotle and Plato mention *magic* in their writings and their disdain for such practices. Though the Greeks were referring to the Persian Magi's practices, Christians used this as a means of justifying their demonization and delegitimization of magical practice.

This idea of magic as an intellectually inferior practice in society is solidified by the eighteenth century, during the beginning of the enlightenment. Around the middle of this century, there is a paradigm shift in the value of knowledge. Within this hierarchy of knowledge, scientific knowledge is what is deemed to be the most valuable and *accurate*. Meanwhile, knowledge that is obtained on the grounds of something such as magic is considered to be the most inferior and unreliable¹¹. This is reflected in the academic environment, in which the subject of magic is ignored or largely mocked.

For decades, magic was ostracized by academics until the 19th century when anthropologist E.B. Tylor began to write on the subject. Tylor is a major figure in the academic study of magic and can be argued to be the father of magical studies. His research often serves as the ground on which many famed scholars of magic build their theories and methods. Tylor himself was influenced by the Enlightenment and the hierarchy of knowledge forms. Tylor believed that magic was a result of erroneously attempting to understand cause and effect¹². For

¹¹ Frazer, James George. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922. Pg. 48

¹² Tylor, Edward B. "Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom, Vol. 1." 1924. Pg. 115-117

Taylor, societies of intellectual inferiority had strong associations of magic, while intellectually and scientifically superior civilizations had almost destroyed any form of belief or practice in magic.

Two of Taylor's conclusions carry on in post-Tylorian scholarship and persist even among contemporaries. The first is Taylor's implicit understanding of modernity as defined by enlightenment-based concepts, in which scientific rationality and knowledge are superior to alternative forms of knowledge. Second, magic is a dying species from our *primitive* past that is soon to become extinct. The three examples of which I will offer here are three highly influential scholars of magic: James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Keith Thomas. The following overview of these scholars is more concerned with their understanding of magic. Time will be dedicated to theory at a later date.

Frazer's work and overall approach to understanding social phenomena such as science, religion, and magic can be best described as intellectualistic. Meaning, he sees all humans to be rational beings, they construct various social tools to aid them in navigating an increasingly complex society. As society develops certain social tools become obsolete. For example, magic, religion, and science can be seen as an evolutionary line that demonstrates equal rationality but increasing intelligence. In Frazer's work, magic is the result of *primitive* men and women attempting to examine our world. Any observation or knowledge that is developed on the grounds of fallacy is what Frazer defines as magic¹³. Magic is the most *primitive* and intellectually inferior adolescent form of what in time becomes religion. When humans discover that their faulty rituals are not impacting the physical world and in fact the physical world is

¹³ Frazer, James George. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922. Pg. 48.

impacting them, it becomes logical that some force might be swaying nature. Thus, religion is born once humans realize that magic is false. The peak of this evolutionary line is the intellectually superior social tool, science¹⁴.

Frazer's work had significant influence in his time on the academic study of magic. One of his commentators, and at times critic, was Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski rejected this evolutionary line of magic to religion to science. He argues that the three have always been in existence from the time humans began communicating. However, he nonetheless continues with this implicit narrative regarding magic's intellectual inferiority in comparison to religion and science. For Malinowski, magic can only ever be found in times of uncertainty regarding *primitive* man's environment. Once science becomes complex enough to understand and accurately predict natural phenomena, then magic simply ceases to exist¹⁵. Though the way in which these social tools develop is distinguished from Frazer's theory, nonetheless magic continues to be intellectually inferior.

Another famed figure in the academic study of magic is Keith Thomas, who has been compared with Malinowski for his approach to magic. Thomas does make a distinction between magic, science, and religion in his book *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. However, as the title might suggest, his conclusion mirrors Frazer and Malinowski's. Once again, we continue to hear the narrative that, once science has advanced, magic becomes obsolete. And in Thomas's case,

¹⁴ Frazer, James George. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922. Pg. 48.

¹⁵ Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Found in: Olson, Carl. *Theory and method in the study of religion: A selection of critical readings*. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003. Pg 246-247.

he argues that magic has officially expired from society, and if not, it is because a corpse waiting to rot and decay¹⁶.

This scientific narrative of magic is perhaps the most popular and influential narrative, but just like the religious narrative, it is a faulty one. It is common for people who practice magical rituals to keep their practices hidden from outsiders due to fear of persecution. Given the times in which Frazer, Malinowski, and Thomas wrote, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the practitioners and their years of secrecy were able to hide from the academic scholars' view beyond modern tribal communities. However, in the time of social media, chat rooms, and pop culture we see that these practices are alive and well. In fact, the belief in and practice of these traditions seems to be rapidly increasing. Various studies have shown anywhere from 62%¹⁷ to 73%¹⁸ of U.S. Americans believe in and/or practice an esoteric/magical tradition between the years of 2005-2018.

Active scholarship on magic suggests that magic is a dying aspect of our society, despite evidence suggesting otherwise. The major reasoning for this is defining modernity on the basis of scientific rationality, resulting in the idea that magic is practiced on the basis of bad knowledge.

¹⁶ Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003. Pg. 800.

¹⁷ Gecewicz, Claire. "New Age' beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans." 2018.

¹⁸ Josephson-Storm, Jason A. *The myth of disenchantment: Magic, modernity, and the birth of the human sciences*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pg. 26-27.

There is a third narrative worth discussing, though more time will be given to it in the third chapter. Next, I will be discussing the romanticized narrative of magic, one which has a more positive outlook on magic as a whole.

1.5 Magic and the Magicians

We have observed the religious and scientific narratives of magic, but we have yet to discuss narrative told by practitioners of magic. With the former narratives understanding magic to be either demonic or unintellectual, it begs the question why anyone would practice magic at all. This section serves to briefly engage with the romanticized understanding of magic beginning with the time around the protestant reformation and the discourse on defining magic.

As I mentioned before, the rediscovery of ancient Greek texts inspired not just theologians but practitioners of magic as well. People such as Heinrich Agrippa became fascinated with the occult knowledge they began to read from these texts and sought to better understand them. It is at this time that a desire to better understand magic- for what it is outside of religion -began.

Though this desire to understand magic independent of religion is dwarfed by religious and eventually scientific narratives, this independent understanding plays an important role in the history of magic and its practice in the modern world. Folks such as Agrippa, Madame Blavatsky, and various other practitioners of magic define it in a very similar way. Magic is the manipulation of occult forces to extend one's own will to alter the course of events. There is no fear in this definition, nor accusations of fraudulence, superstition, or ignorance. This can be thought of as a romanticized narration of magic, or rather the magician's definition of magic.

This understanding is more attractive than the understanding of magic as presented by the religious or scientific narrative.

This romanticized understanding of magic is that which is often ignored by scholars, the origins of this neglect trace back to the time of the reformation. The reformation saw a purging of any form of *magic* from the church. For some, this meant the burning of accused witches. For the Puritans, it was a total cessation of any practice that was similar to magic, including prayer. For others, it was the rejection of certain sacraments. The reformation witnessed a war fought between magic and religion, with the latter being the undisputed victor.

Though magic was suppressed by religion and later devalued by science it nonetheless continued to persist. Scholars such as Thomas suggest the total eradication of magic, Scholars such as Randal Styers claim it to be the antithesis of modernity¹⁹. As I have shown with the data presented in the previous section, that is clearly not the case. Modern witches often reject the pejorative scientific and religious narrative. They insist that magic does in fact maintain rationality and is not inherently evil.

There are in fact some scholars who are beginning to advocate for this understanding as a means of deconstructing the stigma of magic²⁰, however, even this understanding should not be taken as authoritative. I have demonstrated within this paper three constructed understandings of magic, none of which have more *truth* than the other. Some are certainly more powerful than others, and, depending on your background, some of these understandings might be more

¹⁹ Styers, Randall. *Magic and the Play for Power*. Found in: Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg. *Defining magic: A reader*. Routledge, 2014. Pg. 255-262.

²⁰ Greenwood, Susan. *Magical Consciousness: A Legitimate Form of Knowledge*. Found in: ²⁰ Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg. *Defining magic: A reader*. Routledge, 2014. Pg. 197-210

desirable than others. But it would be erroneous to say that one narrative of magic is the definitive one.

1.6 The Role of Modernity

In this brief section, I wish to provide a more focused perspective on the role that concepts of modernity play in these three narrations of magic.

Early modernity saw the decline of religion as the overarching authoritative institution of society. We saw our society becoming more globalized and complex with shifts in ideals and our approaches. The most popular way of defining our modern society, as I have mentioned throughout this paper, was that it is defined by scientific rationality. In doing so it rejects a plurality of rationality in its most radical expression. However, even a more generous usage of this understanding of modernity sees that attempts to formulate alternative rationalities are not as adequate or are a threat to society.

Magic, as I have shown, demonstrated a larger deviance from scientific rationality than most other social constructs. Thus, when we define modernities defining feature as scientific rationality, it necessitates that magic is understood as an anti-intellectual and antithetical aspect of our modern society.

This understanding of modernity has become almost unanimous amongst most people; even the religious world has accepted its legitimacy. However, religion has seemingly found a way to benefit from this understanding, despite itself being under threat of suffering the same fate of magic. As I have shown, religion declared war on magic in the early modern period, with magic suffering a disastrous loss. In doing so, religion is able to claim greater legitimacy over magic in the scientific hierarchy. This is demonstrated by scientific scholars, such as Thomas,

Malinowski, Frazer, and Tylor who all proclaim (some explicitly, some implicitly) religion is the intellectual superior of magic.

The romanticized narrative demonstrates a rejection of this understanding of modernity, without actually proposing an alternative account. This movement is seemingly countercultural to the dominant understanding of modernity. However, as I have expressed in the previous section. This comes by necessitating a rejection of the religious and scientific narratives of magic. You are trading one authoritative narrative for another.

1.7 Conclusion

Scholars of magic have demonstrated a three-sided battle for understanding magic. Some seem to favor religious or scientific narratives while others favor a more romanticized narrative of magic. But as I have shown choosing one narrative is problematic, as all three narratives are legitimate realities.

We are able to gather two following issues of the academic study of magic grounded in an enlightened-based understanding of modernity: First, Scholarship largely favors understanding modernity as one based on scientific rationality. In doing so an inadequate understanding of magic is necessitated. Second, Scholarship of magic has found itself trapped in a fallacy of a false trichotomy. Because of the way we define modernity we are subjected to choosing one of these narratives to follow. By choosing to side with the religious or romanticized narratives you find yourself ostracized by selecting a counter-cultural perspective.

This begs the question of whether or not there is a means of defining modernity which might better allow for a more encompassing narration of magic. In doing so, we would be able to acknowledge all three narratives without alienating ourselves or others.

The following section will provide an alternative definition of modernity, one developed by Niklas Luhmann. This understanding of modernity is one that is grounded in the defining process of differentiation. Before we can apply Luhmann's modernity onto magic, time must be spent understanding Luhmann's definition and certain key concepts.

1.8 References

- Cameron, Euan. *Enchanted Europe: superstition, reason, and religion 1250-1750*. OUP Oxford, 2010.
- Frazer, James George. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922.
- Gecewicz, Claire. "'New Age' beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans." 2018.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the academy: Rejected knowledge in Western culture*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Hutton, Ronald. "The Meaning of the Word" Witch". *Magic, ritual, and witchcraft* 13, no.1. 2018.
- Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. Yale University Press, 2013.
- Olson, Carl. *Theory and method in the study of religion: A selection of critical readings*. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003.
- Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg. *Defining magic: A reader*. Routledge, 2014.
- Principe, Lawrence M. *The secrets of alchemy*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Smith, Morton. *Jesus the Magician: A renowned historian reveals how Jesus was viewed by people of his time*. Hampton Roads Publishing, 2014.
- Styers, Randall. *Making magic: Religion, magic, and science in the modern world*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2004.

Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003.

Tylor, Edward B. "Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom, Vol. 1." 1924.

Wilson, Stephen. *The magical universe: Everyday ritual and magic in pre-modern Europe*. Hambledon and London, 2000.

CHAPTER TWO: DIFFERENTIATED MODERNITY

2.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as an overview of Luhmann's understanding of modernity as well as need-to-know aspects of his theory. Luhmann's systems theory is complex and covers a wide range of topics. Though to fully appreciate Luhmann's work it is worth researching his vast list of works. However, for the sake of this paper we will only be concerned with some of the more fundamental aspects of his theory. This chapter will outline Luhmann's understanding of communication, modernization and differentiation, systems, and binary codes and programmes. In doing so, we will be able to see how the understanding of a differentiated modernity affects the way in which magic is understood.

2.2 Communication

Communication and its importance to systems theory cannot be overstated. Having a firm grasp on Luhmann's understanding of communication is paramount to being able to understand the rest of his theory. However, despite this, the nuances and importance of communication can be easily misunderstood or overlooked. The following will serve as the grounds on which the rest of his theory is built from.

For Luhmann, the basic unit of analysis for social life is communication. This is unlike other social theories which might have the individual or action as the most basic unit²¹. Through

²¹ Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 1*. Stanford University Press, 2012. Pg. 1-6.

analyzing the social in terms of communication, it will allow us to understand functional differentiation in modern society, which in turn will allow us to understand magic.

For Luhmann, *society is nothing but communication*, meaning that communication is the most fundamental element of society. Communication can be verbal, but it could also be non-verbal, such as a yawn from a child while being lectured by a parent. Communication is what communicates, people are merely prerequisites to organize the communication occurring. To put it simply, the process of communication can be broken down into three parts. There is the moment in which alter utters information which ego receives. As mentioned, utterance need not be verbal, it might be in the form of a letter to ego. Communication can only be achieved when ego is able to observe the information and identify it in various selections and interpret it. In more abstract terms, the communication process is a result of information being uttered to a receiver who then processes it to understanding²². Due to this three-part synthesis, communication is irreducible to individual action. As the basic unit of society, communication is the building block of the social.

Some aspects of this communication process might also be misunderstood, and some time should provide additional clarity. First, the language of a receiver is not indicative of a guaranteed fulfiller of this role for every utterance. For example, suppose someone is caught beneath a heavy stone and begins calling out for help. Despite an utterance of information being produced by alter, so long as no one is around to observe it then there is no communication occurring. Secondly, there are times in which communication might be involuntary. For example, if someone is walking along a hiking trail and hears someone crying for help. They

²² Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 1*. Stanford University Press, 2012. Pg. 42-49, 113-120.

heard a noise and were able to identify it as having a form of meaning separate from other noises around them. The ego then interprets this noise as meaning someone needs help. Likewise, alter might become bored while being lectured as their eyes glaze over and begin to wonder off. Ego would be able to see this facial expression and interpret it as boredom. In other words, *people* do not *communicate*, *communication communicates*²³. This idea is imperative to keep in mind, especially in chapter 3.

Communication occurs within three contexts: Interactions, which are social systems that entail two physically present participants that engage in a minimum form of communication²⁴. Organizations, which are social systems bound by rules of admission. The number of participants in an organization are limited²⁵. Finally, Society, which is the social system that encompasses all social systems, no communication can occur outside of society for this reason²⁶. For the sake of this paper, we will only provide substantial focus on the final form of communication, society.

2.3 Modernity and Differentiated Systems

This section seeks to elaborate on systems, or to be more specific: social systems. In Luhmann's work, a system is its difference from its environment²⁷, meaning they are differentiated. Luhmann identifies three major forms of systems: living systems, psychic systems, and social systems. The former two have important connections with the ladder system, but they are not relevant in the context of this paper. Social systems are systems whose

²³ Borch, Christian. *Niklas Luhmann*. Taylor & Francis, 2011. Pg. 36.

²⁴ Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021. Pg. 111-113.

²⁵ Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021. Pg. 163-165.

²⁶ Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021. Pg. 223-224.

²⁷ Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 1*. Stanford University Press, 2012. Pg. 28-40.

fundamental unit is communication. There are many social systems and the one I will be primarily detailing is society.

Before progressing, something should be said about societal differentiation. According to Luhmann, communication gets routed in diverse ways so that patterns of communication, or systems, get differentiated from each other. Luhmann names four basic ways that society, the overarching communication system, gets differentiated.

The first of these four are segmentary societies, which are not as complex as others and operate with a focus on a small collective. They are differentiated based on that which is familiar to them and that which is unfamiliar. These societies are concerned with making their observations familiar. However, these typically archaic/tribal societies are under threat of collapse when other segmentary societies contact them. Inevitably a power struggle can occur which might lead to alliance, conquering, or total societal collapse. Regardless, the society transitions to a center-periphery society²⁸.

Center-periphery societies are differentiated by the parts of society at its center (those society deems civilized) and the periphery (those deemed uncivilized). This society features the center as the dominant sector. Examples of these societies are famed empires that rose from the conquering of smaller segmentary villages/societies. However, a central flaw in these societies is the isolation of the center from the periphery. It becomes taxing to maintain authority over the peripheral sector of society due to the self-alienization of the center. Segmentary societies

²⁸ Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 2*. Stanford University Press, 2013. Pg. 27-41.

continue to exist within the periphery, while at the center a new form of society must be created to maintain order²⁹.

The center of society becomes differentiated by the upper and lower strata in the form of stratification. Stratified societies are like those of Middle Ages Europe with an asymmetric distribution of power and equality. These social systems can become more complex due to the regulation that the upper stratum provides for the lower stratum. Those in power are the ones who dictate acceptable forms of communication. A rejection of this power can lead to banishment or execution to maintain order³⁰. However, as we enter what we refer to as the early modern period, stratified societies begin to globalize, increasing societal complexities, beyond the control of stratification.

This leads us to our modern society, which is defined by functional differentiation. Rather than a singular upper stratum of society maintaining order, society differentiates into autopoietic sub-systems that each perform a necessary function within our society. To put it in more intuitive terms, society is differentiated into function systems that we can identify with names such as economy, religion, politics, and so on.

To gain a better understanding of functional differentiation, we will look to the transitional period of the stratified Middle Ages to an Early Modern functionally differentiated global society. After the time of the Thirty Years War and the progressive demotion of the church as a dominant institution and the increasing global relations of various societies, Society witnessed an increase in newfound problems it had never seen before. To name a few emerging problems, maintaining power became a major concern, as well as deciding who had the authority

²⁹ Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 2*. Stanford University Press, 2013. Pg. 42-49.

³⁰ Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 2*. Stanford University Press, 2013 Pg. 50-64.

to produce policies. Likewise, with increase in trading and populations and with technology vastly evolving, society needed a new means of regulating the world of ownership and commerce. With such an advancement of complexity, new forms of enforcement and regulation of the people taking on these responsibilities was necessitated. Not to mention, with such an ever-increasing society and such substantial problems, people would need to become educated to properly perform such high demand jobs³¹.

Each of these problems is beyond the regulatory ability of a singular institution, thus sub-systems are constructed to rectify these social issues. A political system is created to maintain power and make policies; an economic system is made to deal with the complexities of ownership; a legal system arises to preserve order through law enforcement, and an education system is crafted to ensure better performance. Luhmann provides an extensive list of function systems beyond the ones mentioned here, some of which are religion, science, art, and the medical system. This list is not exhaustive, as Luhmann claims, because there are a plurality of various issues within society.

Though earlier societies had some differentiation, that was controlled by the nobility, it soon grew beyond the control of the upper-class and became autopoietic. Autopoiesis is process of a system self-maintaining by means of self-production and reproduction³². In the context of a social function system, each function system is producing and reproducing is a specialized form of communication. Meaning, the function system of politics can maintain itself by producing political communication in order to continue to perpetuate political communication. For some

³¹ Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 2*. Stanford University Press, 2013. Pg. 60-87.

³² Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021. Pg. 37-40.

systems this process of autopoiesis is easier than it is for others. Some forms of communication are necessitated by society to participate in, such as politics, legal, economic, and educational forms of communication. By rejecting participation in any of these communications, you are ostracized or punished in our modern society. Thus, these systems have managed to make themselves necessary to participate in and have an easier time to maintain themselves. However, someone can claim to be non-religious and avidly reject participating in the religious system without ostracization from society. Certainly, those who are religious might outcast them, but they are not detrimentally punished compared to the consequences of rejecting, say, the legal system. These systems must do what they can to maintain autopoiesis. This might require tactics like adapting or evolving to make itself more necessitated or develop couplings with other systems.

Though many of these systems share a semantic counterpart within pre-modernity, they are nonetheless modern born systems. For example, what one refers to as religion within medieval stratified Europe refers to practices accepted by the upper stratum. Likewise other religions are not seen as a differentiated *other*. Rather, they are seen as an improper representation of the upper stratum's own religion³³. It is not until the process of modernization that we even develop the notion of *world religions* and the theoretical luggage that such a concept suggests. Likewise, the function of religion serves to solve a particular function in society to solve a necessitated issue produced from the globalization of society (more on that later). In other words, we can think of semantic as the vocabulary which is used for communication. Likewise, there is social structure that establishes a pattern in the way we

³³ Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. Yale University Press, 2013. Pg. 6-14.

implement our vocabulary. Sometimes our semantics or vocab can stay the same or lag, but the pattern may evolve overtime. Magic for example, is a semantic which at one point entailed the four horsemen in its usage. However, in the context of modernity, I argue it is now a new-in-modernity function system that maintains the semantic of *magic*.

2.4 Binary Code and Programmes

Within a functionally differentiated society, communication becomes differentiated and groups underneath specific function systems. These communications are organized by various codes that are utilized by the function systems. Codes can be understood as part of a binary, in which the pair express a positive and a negated partner³⁴. Codes are the way in which an observer or system can prescribe meaning to any given observation. These codes are a form of universal distinction which aid in their autopoietic process. For example, the legal system organizes its communication around the binary code of legal/illegal. Therefore, whenever a communication revolves around legality and illegality it is a part of the function system of law.

Like with any system, a code is useless unless it is guided by a programme to instruct how the code should be implemented. Some of the function systems and their codes include religion (transcendence/immanence), science (true/false), Law (legal/illegal). Take religion, for example, which operates through transcendence and immanence. There is no way to communicate transcendence without a preconceived transcendent meaning. Therefore, something like Christianity would be a programme that we could use to organize our communication around transcendence.

³⁴ Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021. Pg 41-44, 181-184.

2.5 Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I made the claim that Luhmann has a complex and wide ranging theory. However, this chapter has provided the necessary components of his theory for us to understand his definition of modernity. Likewise, we are equipped with the tools we need to see how this definition of modernity impacts magic.

The previous chapter spoke of the effects of understanding magic while utilizing a definition of modernity grounded in enlightenment ideals. This definition sees modernity's dominate trait as the superiority of scientific rationality, while all other forms are intellectually inferior. At the bottom of this hierarchy is magic, which was established by the earliest scholars of magic. Although attempts to reject this hierarchy are beginning to occur, these scholars are still working within the framework of an enlightened modernity. Thus, they are fighting an uphill battle, with the odds tipped heavily against them.

Meanwhile, Luhmann's functionally differentiated theory allows for a plurality of rationalities to co-exist, seeing none as the dominate function system. The following chapter will outline the ways in which Luhmann's theory impacts our understanding of magic. To do so, I will be arguing that magic is its own functionally differentiated system that is independent of other systems such as science and religion. It will conclude with discussing the impact such a move would have on previous scholarship on magic.

2.6 References

Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021.

Borch, Christian. *Niklas Luhmann*. Taylor & Francis, 2011.

Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 1*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

Luhmann, Niklas. *Theory of society, volume 2*. Stanford University Press, 2013.

Nongbri, Brent. *Before religion: A history of a modern concept*. Yale University Press, 2013.

CHAPTER THREE: DIFFERENTIATING MAGIC

3.1 Introduction

As demonstrated in the first chapter, the way in which we define modernity has a direct impact on the way in which we understand magic. The first chapter presented the way magic is understood under an enlightenment-grounded definition of modernity. Magic becomes understood as a counter to the dominant institution of science. In the process of defining modernity in this way, magic also becomes closely associated with the four horsemen of fear, superstition, fraudulence, and ignorance. Scholars influenced by this definition, such as Keith Thomas, interpret the process of modernization to be an extermination and cessation of magic within society. However, statistics show that this is not an accurate depiction of magic.

In order for us to obtain a more comprehensive and accurately reflective account of magic within modern society, our approach to studying magic must adapt by altering the way we define modernity. Last chapter, I presented an alternative account of modernity which is defined by functional differentiation rather than enlightenment. By taking this approach to study magic in modernity it suggests that magic itself is an independent functionally differentiated system.

This chapter will propose a plausible account of magic as a differentiated function system. Once I have achieved this, I will attempt to recontextualize the relationship held between magic, science, and religion. Finally, I will further demonstrate what sets this approach apart from previous scholars by presenting case studies from Thomas, Malinowski, and Frazer; I will

present their analysis followed by a reinterpretation of these historical events using my proposed approach of utilizing a functionally differentiated modernity as my understanding of modernity.

3.2 Magic as a System

As mentioned in the previous chapter, systems utilize a binary code to organize their communication. It is this code which aids in the process of autopoiesis for the system. In the case of the legal system its code would be legal/illegal. For religion and science their codes, as claimed by Luhmann, are transcendence/immanence and true/false, respectively. In the case of magic, I believe a plausible account of magic's code would be participation/non-participation. This is not the same semantic as the typical use of the word *participation* which means to actively engage in an event. More time needs to be spent elaborating on what this concept of *participation* in the context of magic means.

My use of the word *participation* is nuanced and inspired by the work of Lévy-Bruhl and its interpretation by Susan Greenwood³⁵. For Lévy-Bruhl this understanding of *participation* was a means to aid in his psychoanalysis of magic. I would like to make it clear that my use of *participation* has no ties with explaining the psychological reasons for why humans engage in magic. My usage of this term is sociological not psychological. For my usage of *participation*, it can be understood as a ritualized practice with the understanding of engaging with an unobservable occult power for some immanent goal.

My reasoning for suggesting the code of magic to be participation/non-participation is due to my proposed function of magic. However, once more I would like to reiterate that my proposed function for magic in society is sociological, not psychological. For example, a

³⁵ Greenwood, Susan. *The anthropology of magic*. Routledge, 2020. Pg. 29-31

psychological account of magic's function in society would be like Malinowski's account: Magic serves as a means to relax our stress and fears of the unpredictable world around us as our knowledge of science improves; and as the world becomes more predictable magic practice declines³⁶.

My proposed function of magic in society is formulated from the following criteria: First, I am taking into consideration what active participants in the system say and understand about the system itself. Second, through a functional analysis, I am seeing what differentiates this system from others- what makes it unique. With this approach, I believe that the system of magic enables members of society to engage in a sociological *participation* with the unobservable world. Therefore, if the system of magic is built around the function of providing members of society the ability to *participate*, then I believe it plausible that the binary code in which magic structures its communication is participation/non-participation.

Therefore, in the context of my approach, participation is a ritualized practice with the understanding of engaging with an unobservable occult power for some immanent goal; and *magic* should be understood as any communication centered around participation.

3.3 Differentiating Magic from Science and Religion

In this section, I will be presenting the codes of religion and Science and how they are differentiated from the proposed code of magic. I will also discuss how we can address any overlap involved in communication.

³⁶ Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Found in: Olson, Carl. *Theory and method in the study of religion: A selection of critical readings*. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003. Pg. 246-247.

If we are using a Luhmannian understanding of religion, then religious communication is funneled through the binary code of immanence/transcendence. This idea of transcendence and immanence is twofold: transcendence transcends any immanent observation and transcends the immanent scenario in its entirety³⁷. In other words, religious communication is more concerned with communicating the transcendent meaning behind immanent observations. Magic's code of participation/non-participation is in a sense the opposite of religion's code. Magic does not need, nor does it necessarily care, to have a transcendent meaning behind its observable rituals. Magic is when a participatory act is held with the understanding that an unobservable reaction will bring about an observable result.

An example of a religious communication would be a priest giving a sermon. The sermon speaks about a story from the holy text and the transcendent meaning behind this sacred myth. The congregation hears the pastor and understands the unobservable higher meaning of this observable text.

An example of a magical communication would be an alchemist performing a ritual. The alchemist demonstrates certain ingredients and actions in order to change a dull metal into a purer one. Those who observe or read his text understand that this ritual caused an unobservable reaction with occult powers and resulted in the observable change of the substance.

Some questions might arise in the example of the turning of water into wine. All systems have their own perspective and can interpret things in their own way. The alchemist would say they just witnessed the alchemical transformation of water into wine as a result to an observable participation with the water. The pastor would explain the transcendent meaning behind the

³⁷ DeJonge, Michael P. "Transcendence: A Defensible and Fruitful Concept for Religious Studies." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 1, no. aop (2023). Pg. 8-9.

transformation they just witnessed, God has perhaps sent us a message. As for whether or not we should categorize the subject of water into wine as magical or religious requires an observation of society. If we see a pattern of more members of society identifying the example from the perspective of religion, then it would be fair to call the subject a religious one. But even then, it does not mean magic can no longer perceive the subject of water into wine. There have been plenty of examples of people calling such a thing magic and not religion (more on that later).

As for Science, its binary code is understood by Luhmann to be True/False³⁸ with the function of the scientific system to acquire new truth. Therefore, as Luhmann says, the retrieving, recording, and preserving of knowledge falls into the realm of science. *Truth* in this case is symbolic, in the sense that new truths can be discovered which trump any contradictory or outdated truths. Likewise, the symbolic nature of truth also means it might deviate from our day-to-day understanding of what we might think. Science is autopoietic and thus seeks to further its communication; therefore, science does not seek to solve problems, but actually to multiply them³⁹ as a form of self-reproduction. Religion is programmed by religions; Science is programmed by theories and methods which govern how we apply truth hood/falsehood. These programmes are what allow something to be included in the system of science. Theories are concepts, whereas methods seek to understand what conditions make the concepts true. It is in this way that only something which has been acquired through “methodological correctness” can

³⁸ Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021. Pg. 205-207.

³⁹ Luhmann, Niklas. *Ecological communication*. University of Chicago Press, 1989. Pg. 78.

be included in science⁴⁰. In other words, that which the scientific community understands to be *acceptable* methodology is considered science.

An example of scientific communication would be a chemist lecturing on chemical synthesis. They are preserving the knowledge of this chemical process by teaching it to students who understand this process as a scientific truth. This knowledge was tested utilizing theories and acceptable methodology.

Though magic has its own rationality supported by programmes which carry with them their own methodology, this does not mean that these methodologies are seen as acceptable by the scientific community. Supposing we use the same example of alchemy, it can be interpreted by both magic and science. We have already discussed how magic would understand this act. Science, however, would see it as a false chemical process- one that did not rely on proper methodologies and ignored popular theories.

It is also worth noting that the relationship held between science, magic, and religion is one of contingency. It could be the case that a transcendent meaning, such as the belief in Jesus, might influence the way a magician casts a spell. Likewise, a divination ritual might provide us with something that might influence the way we interpret a transcendent understanding of our world. A scientific theory might also influence how a practitioner might go about their ritual. Likewise, some scientific knowledge could be gained from observing, say, an alchemical ritual. They have a relationship grounded in contingency, not necessity. You do not require one system

⁴⁰ Verschraegen, Gert. "Epistemic sociology: Luhmann's theory of science and knowledge." In *Anthem companion to Niklas Luhmann/Rogowski*, Ralf. 2023. pp. 73-91.

to have the other, and although they are independent, it is clear that they share a close relationship.

3.4 Re-evaluation of History

I have previously demonstrated the way in which magic is often understood when fixed in the context of a modernity defined by enlightenment and scientific superiority. Magic is interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it is understood as the lowest and most ignorant form of science. On the other, it is viewed as something totally defiant and antithetical to modernity as a whole. The result of both these interpretations witnesses a pejorative understanding of magic that prioritizes the perspective of science alone.

Though not much time has been dedicated to the religious perspective of magic, it is nonetheless worth repeating. In the context of enlightened modernity religion seems to have *chosen a side*, so to speak, in this struggle between science and magic. Though religion is also subjected to a status of inferiority, it at least outranks magic in this hierarchy. As discussed earlier, this resulted from a purge of magic from the church, according to Keith Thomas. In this way religion may not be seen as on par with the power of science, but at least it too shares the same disdain for magic. In this sense, magic is viewed as a malignant tumor of religions past which it forcefully rejected. Magic is either the ancestor of science or religion, but either way, within the context of enlightened modernity, it is seen as something to be feared, something ignorant, something fraudulent, or something superstitious.

This understanding of magic changes when brought into the light of another understanding of modernity, one defined by functional differentiation. In this way, magic is not seen as some relic from the past or an outcasted ancestor of science or religion. Rather, magic is

understood as a born-in-modernity function system, which is independent of science and religion. In viewing magic this way, it enables us to better complete the picture of magic's role and function in society. There is no hierarchy or reigning rationality, as all systems have their own rationality. We are better equipped to expand beyond just the perspectives of science and religion. Instead, we can research the perspectives of economics, law, politics, art, sports, and other systems and how they view magic. We can even put focus on how magic understands itself. Likewise, it recontextualizes the history of the transitional period of early modernization.

Though more time and scholarship will need to be dedicated in order to create a more refined image of magic, I would like to at least provide a few examples of how we might go about reevaluating enlightened narratives of magic during early modernization. I will be using case studies from the works of Keith Thomas and James Frazer. The scholars that I will be addressing exhibit a common theme of understanding magic as a dying species in early modernity. They also tend to approach it from a psycho-analytic perspective. My approach differs in the way that I see the birth of systems, such as religion, science, and magic in modernity not their demise or rising to power. My approach is also avoiding any psychoanalysis of magic, and rather attempting to take a sociological approach with a broader approach than other sociological interpretations of magic. This broader approach enables me to acknowledge the complexities of societal development by observing various function systems.

In his book, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas focuses specifically on the Protestant Reformation in Europe and how this culminated in the death of magic in modern society. One of many critiques given by the protestants towards the Catholics was the heretical magic-like rituals they utilized. There were some Protestants, such as some Puritans and Lollards, who were more radical in rejecting any form of prayer for its similarity to witchcraft.

Protestants worked to remove magic from their practice, and the Catholic's heeded their critique. Catholics attempted to reshape their structure and dynamic similarly to purge *magic* from their worship⁴¹. Philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke believed that no theology could justify God allowing humans to use witchcraft, thus confirming the redundancy and heresy of magic⁴².

Thomas spends much time elaborating the complexities of this process, but he prioritizes the perspective of the Christians. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that he concludes that the Christians succeeded in their goal of vanquishing magic. However, this prioritization of religions perspective ignores an important sociological truth. Just because the Christians believed magic has been vanquished and no longer existed does not mean, sociologically speaking, that this is true. Likewise, in the stats I have shown previously, magic is still heavily practiced to this day despite what the early modern Christians and Thomas conclude. So, how might we reinterpret this moment in history utilizing a differential approach and bearing in mind the state of magic today?

It is in the context of a functionally differentiated modernity that one could interpret the tension between the church and magic during the Reformation as the construction of unique systems. Before this time frame, there were very few accounts that detail any concern for the difference between what we call magic and religion⁴³. It is at this time that society has reached a point in its complexity that there is a social demand for differentiation and construction of two systems, one of religion and one of magic. What Thomas is detailing is religion defining itself in

⁴¹ Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003. Ch. 2-3.

⁴² Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003. Pg. 683-684

⁴³ Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pg. 16-17 & 71-73.

part by defining magic as something in its environment. This requires distinctions between what constitutes magic and religion and how they are distinct from one another.

A concern in this analysis might be regarding the Catholic practices that Protestants considered magic. Many of these practices, such as the sacraments, are still practiced, yet the Catholic church would hardly consider these to be magic. This shows that the same thing can be understood in different ways depending on the function system perspective. This idea, what Luhmann calls polycontextuality, plays a large role in my critique of the enlightened modernity. In the enlightened approach, science's perspective on society is treated as the single true perspective on magic. But the same 'thing' can be considered valid from several perspectives. At the least, we should consider magic's perspective on itself rather than allow the scientific and religious perspective on magic to dominate. What religion might consider to be a *miracle* or a form of worship; magic might interpret as an esoteric ritual, in short, a form of participation.

This helps us better understand the relationship between religion and magic more broadly than Thomas's, which is a bit narrower in its scope and conclusion. From this, we get a representation of magic and religion that is arguably more complementary to our modern world.

To help demonstrate the recontextualization of science and magic, I would like to address the work of James Frazer. Frazer is an anthropologist rather than a historian like Thomas, but his work has a strong connection to Thomas's. I will first demonstrate Frazer's theory of magic and then show how this influences a historical approach like that of Thomas's.

Frazer understands magic to be a form of science, or to use his words, the “the next of kin to science.”⁴⁴ If science is the correct way of understanding the world around us, then magic is the ignorant and fallacious way of doing so. In regard to magic, Frazer has this to say “in short, magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art.”⁴⁵ Magic is not apart of modern society, rather it is an outsider that is attempting to impede progress of civilization⁴⁶. I believe it to be clear that this perspective and theory of magic is grounded in the enlightenment and scientific understanding of modernity. Although Frazer is not as well accepted today for his theories, his influence remains strong. I have already discussed scholars such as Styers labeling magic as the antithetical other of modernity. His ideas can also be found in historical analysis of magic and sciences relationship.

I return to Thomas, who shares an understanding of magic similar to that of Frazer and Malinowski. Malinowski believed that magic exists to sedate the anxieties brought about by the unpredictability of nature⁴⁷. One of the main reasoning behind Thomas’s conclusion for magic’s disappearance is the advancement of technology to predict and control our environment⁴⁸. However, once again this does not explain why we see an increase in practice. It does not explain

⁴⁴ Frazer, James George, and James George Frazer. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922. Pg. 49.

⁴⁵ Frazer, James George, and James George Frazer. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922. Pg. 14.

⁴⁶ Frazer, James George, and James George Frazer. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922. Pg. 47.

⁴⁷ Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Found in: Olson, Carl. *Theory and method in the study of religion: A selection of critical readings*. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003. Pg 246-247.

⁴⁸ Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003. Pg. 767-794.

why even people of science are fascinated and participate in magic⁴⁹. This image is not a complete picture, and its narrow scope continues to mislead us.

I interpret the relationship between science and magic very differently. What we are witnessing during modernization is the acknowledgement of two distinct social needs. These needs are brought about by the differentiation of religion and magic and the further development and progression of the system of science. In the process of science advancing, it too dictated what was and was not to be considered part of its environment. In doing so, it developed its own semantic of the term “magic”, meaning a false understanding of cause and effect. This semantic does not supersede the social function system of magic. Their uniqueness does not mean we must choose the superiority of one or the other. Both systems fulfill necessary social functions.

In short, Frazer and influenced scholars, when addressing magic, utilize a semantic that is developed in the environment of the scientific system. In a functionally differentiated modernity, both are able to coexist, and one does not hold superior rationality over the other. All systems have their own system of rationality and morality which aids in their autopoietic processes.

I would like to make it clear that by adopting the functionally differentiated approach we do not need to abandon the work of scholars like Frazer, Thomas, and Malinowski. This approach allows us to understand that they serve as a representation of the perspectives of science and religion, and that these are not the only two perspectives worth addressing. What I am offering is a look at a broader and more pluralistic image of magic and modernity. Their work helps understand the relationship of science-and-magic and of religion-and-magic from the perspective of science and religion respectively. This is perfectly acceptable in my approach;

⁴⁹ Josephson-Storm, Jason A. *The myth of disenchantment: Magic, modernity, and the birth of the human sciences*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pg. 1-11.

however, my approach would consider it erroneous as an all-encapsulating perspective of how modern society at large views and interprets magic.

3.5 Conclusion

Society is a complex system made up of a plurality of various forms of communication. If we are to better understand these complexities, we require an approach that is able to handle such advancements. I believe that the approach grounded in enlightenment and scientific superiority is too simplistic to be able to handle the complexity of modern society.

This paper serves as a starting point for an exciting and larger project. By utilizing this approach, we are better equipped to analyze magic on a much larger scale than ever before. Scholarship on magic has largely focused on the science-religion-magic dynamic. This is largely due to magic being seen as a subset of these powerful systems. But with a functionally differentiated approach, it begs further research to be done on the relationship magic holds as its own function system with other systems. It encourages reevaluations on the history of the witch trials of Europe, or the persecution of Obeah in the Caribbean through the lens of the legal system and magic. We could also look at the relationship between magic and the economy; after all magic, divination, and astrology are multi-million-dollar industries.

The account of magic as a function system presented in this paper is tentative and deserves more time and research to be fleshed out. If we are to have a fully comprehensive understanding of magic, then we must better understand the way in which it responds to and irritates other function systems. Magic is an influential and relevant aspect of our society and is deserving of scholarship which extends beyond the mere parameters of science and religion that

have been laid out for it until now. In doing so, I believe magic will be understood as something more than that which is to be feared, that which is superstitious, or fraudulent, or even ignorant.

3.6 References

- Baraldi, Claudio, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*. Bielefeld University Press, 2021.
- DeJonge, Michael P. "Transcendence: A Defensible and Fruitful Concept for Religious Studies." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 1, no. aop (2023).
- Frazer, James George, and James George Frazer. *The golden bough*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1922.
- Greenwood, Susan. *The anthropology of magic*. Routledge, 2020.
- Josephson-Storm, Jason A. *The myth of disenchantment: Magic, modernity, and the birth of the human sciences*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Kieckhefer, Richard. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Luhmann, Niklas. *Ecological communication*. University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Found in: Olson, Carl. *Theory and method in the study of religion: A selection of critical readings*. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003.
- Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England*. Penguin UK, 2003.
- Verschraegen, Gert. "Epistemic sociology: Luhmann's theory of science and knowledge." In *Anthem companion to Niklas Luhmann/Rogowski, Ralf [edit.]*, pp. 73-91. 2023.