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‘A Christian Cannot Employ Magic’ – Rhetorical Self-fashioning of the Magicless Christianity of
Late Antiquity
Maijastina Kahlos

‘A Christian Cannot Employ Magic’

In the *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome tells us of the circus races in Gaza. There is a citizen called Italicus, *municeps Christianus*, who keeps horses for the races and competes with an unnamed *duumvir*, thus a man from the leading elite of the city. This *duumvir* is said to be a worshipper of Marnas, an important local deity.¹ With a few words Jerome outlines a highly competitive atmosphere in the urban life between the Christian and pagan² population. The account is in all probability fictive but reveals the attitudes and mental universe of the time as well as the tensions in society in Gaza.

According to Jerome, Italicus’ rival has commissioned a sorcerer (*maleficus*) to speed up his own horses and slow down the other horses using some demonic incantations (*daemoniacis quibusdam imprecationibus*). The Christian Italicus seeks help from the Christian holy man Hilarion, in Jerome’s words, ‘not so much for damaging his opponent as for protecting himself’ (*non tam adversarium laedi quam se defendi*).³ At first Hilarion is reluctant because one should not waste prayers on such trivialities. Italicus answers that this is his public duty (*functionem esse publicam*) and he is acting, not for his own benefit but out of duty. Thus, Italicus also belongs to the local elite and sponsoring races is part of his communal duties.

Two members of the local elite are in competition but Italicus makes his personal concern a public cause for Christianity. He struggles ‘against the enemies of God’ (*contra Gazenses adversarii Dei*) who were insulting, not so much Italicus but Christ’s church (*ecclesiae Christi insultantes*). Moreover, Italicus states, ‘a Christian cannot employ magic (*nec posse hominem Christianum uti magicis artibus*), but rather he can seek for help from the servant of Christ’ – hence the words in the title of my article.

Persuaded by this argument, Hilarion has his drinking cup filled with water and given to Italicus who then sprinkles the stable, horses, charioteers, carriage and the barriers of the course with the water. Jerome paints a lively image of the excitement at the races, the adherents of both circus parties in eager anticipation. The horses of one team almost fly to the finish line, the others are slowed down. Consequently, Italicus wins the race which raises a great clamour in the people of Gaza and even pagans themselves cry that the god Marnas has been overcome by Christ (*Marnas victus est a Christo*).

Italicus’ pagan rivals were furious at their downfall and urged that Hilarion should be executed as a Christian sorcerer (*Hilarionem maleficum Christianum ad supplicium poposcerunt*).⁴ In line with the

¹ Hier. Hilar. 20.

² Being terms formulated from outside, words such as pagans and heretics should be read with inverted commas throughout this article.

³ Hier. Hilar. 20. This kind of fear was not necessarily groundless. We have plenty of evidence that competitors in horse races sometimes attempted to harm each other by magical means: curse tablets with the aim of harming the horses and charioteers of rival circus teams have been found in ancient circus areas in Carthage and Beirut. Jordan 1988, 117-134; Jordan 1994, 325-335. *CTh* 9.16.11 (in 389) was issued against magic used in the circus; Amm. 26.3.3; 28.1.27; 29.3.5 report of charioteers who were punished for having used magic. In the sixth century, Cassiodorus (var. 3.51) writes about a victorious charioteer called Thomas who was blamed for using magic by his rivals. For competition curses, see Graf 2000, 54-55; Ogden 1999, 33.

⁴ Hier. Hilar. 20. Jerome also states that Italicus’ success made many people convert to Christianity. Miracles play a significant role in earlier Christian accounts of conversion; for conversion stories, see MacMullen 1981, 95-96 (who regards miracles as crucial for conversions) and Shumate 1996, 27 (who questions MacMullen’s view).

prevailing worldview, the Gazans understandably interpret Hilarion's activity as counter-magic. Jerome's narrative reveals that there always was a risk for a Christian ritual expert of being labelled a practitioner of magic. Jerome does not think so: for him, Hilarion is a holy man whereas the opponent's ritual expert is a sorcerer (*maleficus*) as Jerome clearly states. However, how could an ordinary person in Late Antiquity make a distinction between proper holy men and sorcerers?

Christian Self-fashioning in Rhetoric: A Magicless Self-image

Modern scholars have the same problem. I agree with Stephen D. Ricks who states, '... where religion ends and magic begins on the religion-magic continuum depends upon the stance of the person speaking or writing, since it is not possible to divide religion and magic on the basis of any objective set of criteria'.⁵ Therefore, I understand the concept 'magic' as a discursive category that is dependent on the perceiver – an ancient perceiver as well as a modern one. Consequently, 'magic' is a socially constructed object of knowledge whose content and formulations vary according to different social contexts and circumstances.⁶

How did people in Late Antiquity understand magic? Almost no one considered one's own rituals and beliefs as constituting magic. Magic was understood as, if not always illegal and illicit, something socially disapproved of and deviant. At its worst, magic was comprehended as surreptitious and harmful practices, detrimental to individuals and the whole community. Therefore, nearly every group and all ritual experts did all they could to keep away from the label of magic.⁷ In their avoidance of the label of magic, Christians did not differ from other religious groups.

In this article, I discuss the use of rhetoric in building and reinforcing Christian identity in which magic had no part to play. The image of magicless Christianity was enhanced in many contexts – apologetic treatises, tractates, sermons and especially in hagiography. I show that, in rivalry situations between ritual experts – holy men and/or magicians – it was imperative for Christians to refute accusations of magic and redirect the slander against their opponents. This applied to the pre-Constantinian period as well as to post-Constantinian circumstances. In these rivalry situations, Christian writers were at great pains to create a distinction between proper Christian holy men and those others (pagans, Jews, heretics) who were either practising injurious magic or just harmless tricks.

Making distinctions between the proper, authorized and approved behaviour (religion) and the improper, unsanctioned and deviant one (magic) is also an issue of authority. In analysing magic as a social discourse and discourse of alterity, we can observe the changes in power relations in late Roman society. To put it bluntly, the pattern usually follows the universal saying 'my religion, your magic', and this is how Christian writers and church leaders in their rhetoric also defined the relationship between beliefs and practices they accepted and those they condemned. Ecclesiastical leaders insisted upon the Christian self-image according to which *genuine* Christians neither practise magic nor employ extravagant equipment in their rituals. The words from the *Life of Hilarion* – 'a Christian cannot employ magic' – precisely represent this magicless self-image.

⁵ Ricks 1995, 143.

⁶ I follow the theoretical consideration of magic as a discursive formation, outlined by Stratton 2007, xi, 2-3, 14-17, 23; Stratton 2015, esp. 86 for magic as social discourse and discourse of alterity; Gordon and Marco Simón 2010, 5. According to Stratton 2007, 16, magic as a discourse provides 'an understanding of magic that bridges the gulf between those who reject the use of magic as a concept altogether and those who seek a universal heuristic definition'.

⁷ This applies to most of the groups and individuals in ancient sources. However, some ritual experts in the so-called Greek magical papyri and a few Babylonian rabbis styled themselves as magicians and their practices as magic, with a positive twist. A few ritual experts are known to have adopted a self-consciously subversive stance as magicians and deliberately transgressed the religious norms of the surrounding society. Smith 1995, 18; Stratton 2007, 15, 37; Janowitz 2002, xii; Ogden 1999, 84, 86.

This magicless Christianity was already stressed in the second and third centuries, often when facing slander coming from hostile outsiders. For example, in his defence against the literary assaults of the Platonist Celsus, Origen declares that Christians exorcise demons without any strange arts of magic or incantations, instead they use only prayers and simple adjurations. Christians did not cast spells but only used ‘the name of Jesus and other words from the sacred Scriptures’.⁸ In the early fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea replied to accusations that Jesus and his disciples were sorcerers and asserted that Christians did not resort to the usual magical techniques such as incantations, amulets and magical verse even to help the sick. No disciple of Jesus had yet been proved to be a magician. No Christian had ever admitted to being a sorcerer. Christians used ‘the mere name of Jesus and the purest prayers’ to exorcise demons.⁹ Eusebius also described Christians whose presence, glance, mere breath and voice were enough to expel wicked spirits.¹⁰ But no magic.

According to the magicless self-image, Christian charismatics did not need any sophisticated equipment for accomplishing their miracles. The mythicized figure of Moses, who eventually was added to the Christian assembly of holy men, was thought to show his superiority in using a wand as his *only* equipment; moreover, he resorted *only* to the power of words – verbal formulae. For instance, Origen defended Moses against suspicions of magic, stating that Moses did not do all his wonder-working with his wand (*rhabdos*) but also with his hands and by word (*logos*) in order to avoid the crowd accusing him of using magical tricks.¹¹

This idea is connected to late antique discussions on rituals in which a number of Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian writers stressed that tools and other materials were used in baser rituals while in more subtle rituals, there were only verbal formulae. Accordingly, the Greek writer Philostratus portrayed his hero, the miracle-worker Apollonius of Tyana as not relying on sacrifices, prayers and even words. The philosopher seems to have had the strictest view since he writes that only contemplation (*theoreia*) is untouched by magic.¹²

The ancient writers wanted to depict the rituals and ritual experts of their own inclination as superior in respect. Consequently, it was the rival groups that were depicted as employing all sorts of paraphernalia, incense, herbs, charms and devices. According to Justin, the apologist and the martyr, Christians used the name of God alone and this practice was better than the incantations and incense

⁸ Orig. c. Cels. 7.4; 1.6. Moreover, Origen stresses that these exorcisms are mainly performed by unlearned Christian folk. As Kofsky 2006, 200 points out, Origen himself was well-informed about those practices and beliefs that he deemed to be magic: c. Cels. 1.22; 1.24; 1.25; 4.33-34; 5.9; 5.46; 7.69; 8.58; 8.61. Another Christian writer, Tertullian, declared that Christians did not rely on astrology, divination or magic. Tertullian, apol. 35.12: *astrologos et haruspices et augures et magos ... Quas artes ... ne suis quidem causis adhibent Christiani*. Tertullian’s denial is connected with the idea that astrologers, diviners and magicians try to consult the fates for emperors and makes it clear that this is a condemnable practice.

⁹ Eus. dem. ev. 3.6. In his defence, Eusebius argues that Jesus forbade his disciples to take anything with them when sending them on their journeys. Moreover, Jesus, his disciples and Christians in general did not want to make money from their miracles as charlatans did. In addition to money-seeking, Eusebius also mentions the thirst for glory and (sexual) pleasure as characteristics of sorcerers and charlatans. These were the basic elements in the label of magicians; see Kahlos 2015, 152-153.

¹⁰ Dionysius of Alexandria in Eus. eccl. 7.10.4. See also Tertullian (apol. 23.15-16) on the power of the name of Christ as well as mere touch and breath and Minucius Felix (Oct. 27.5) on the power of Christians’ words and prayers.

¹¹ Orig. Selecta in Exodum (PG 12, 284B). Janowitz 2002, 14. Cf. a Jewish writer, Artapanus, who implied Moses’ superiority to Pharaoh’s magicians, depicting Moses as causing the Pharaoh to fall down mute only by a whisper in his ear: FGrH 726 F 3 (= Clem. strom. 1.154.2; Eus. praep. 9.27). Bremmer 2000, 221; Bremmer 2002, 65.

¹² Philostr. v. Apoll. 7.38. Plot. Enn. 4.4.44. Plotinus also despised prayers: Plot. Enn. 2.9.14; 4.4.26. Irenaeus of Lyons (Adv. haer. 1.21.4) refers to an early Christian group that opposed the use of water in Christian rites. For a discussion on the equipment and verbal formulae, see Janowitz 2002, 14-16.

of pagan and Jewish exorcists.¹³ In the early fourth century, again replying to slander against Christians, Arnobius assured his readers that Christ acted ‘without the power of incantations, without liquids from herbs and plants, without any scrupulous observation of rituals, libations and opportune moments’. Christ had no need of any *adminiculum*, auxiliary device, because he achieved all miracles in the power of his own name. This Arnobius contrasted with his opponents who resorted to magical devices for seeing the future, curing disease, opening locked doors, silencing people, holding back the competition in races and inciting love.¹⁴ Later, Augustine of Hippo declared that the Manichaeans used magic arts (*per magicas artes*) ‘to get unto wives of others’.¹⁵

Late antique inscriptions and papyri show that, very much in line with their contemporaries, Christians also made use of amulets, charms, spells and rituals that their bishops frequently condemned as magical. Ecclesiastical leaders stuck to the magicless self-image according to which good, genuine Christians did not resort to magic, not even to healing devices faced with the gravest illness of their children.¹⁶ It was the heretics who were involved in magical practices. Therefore, it is heretical Christians who practise magic, not proper Christians, Origen writes. His manoeuvre functions in a two-fold manner: first, he frees his own group of Christians from the accusations of magic and second, he undermines rival Christians by saddling them with the label of magic.¹⁷

The Sign of Christ or the Sign of the Devil

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, is one of the church leaders who fashioned the magicless self-image of Christians. In the *Tractate on the Gospel of John*, he blames his parishioners who run to (as he calls them) enchanters and diviners (*ad praecantatores, ad sortilegos*) to receive remedies for their illnesses. This blame is connected with Augustine’s complaints about Christians who take part in the pagan festivities of Magna Mater. Instead, he offers Christian festivals for Christians (*Ecce spectacula Christianorum*).¹⁸ Augustine dismisses other rituals and festivities as counterfeits of Christian ones: ‘For evil spirits forge certain shadows of honour to themselves so that they may deceive those who follow Christ.’¹⁹ He rebuffs a pagan priest who claimed that the deity called the ‘capped one’ (*Pilleatus*) was himself a Christian, too (*et ipse Pilleatus christianus est*).²⁰ While discussing this combination of *Pilleatus* deity and Christ, Augustine refers to ‘those who seduce, by means of amulets, by incantations, by the devices of the enemy, mingle the name of Christ with their incantations’. The reason is, Augustine states, that nowadays these people are not otherwise able to seduce Christians. He uses the metaphor of poison mixed with honey, common in ancient literature,²¹

¹³ Justin. Tryph. 85.3.

¹⁴ Arn. nat. 1.43: *Qui sine ulla vi carminum, sine herbarum et graminum sucis, sine ulla aliqua observatione sollicita sacrorum, libaminum, temporum?*; 1.44: *Atquin constitit Christum sine ullis adminiculis rerum, sine ullius ritus observatione vel lege, omnia illa quae fecit nominis sui possibilitate fecisse ...* The uses of spells that Arnobius lists are similar to those in the so-called magical papyri in Greek and in Coptic.

¹⁵ Aug. contin. 12.27. Graf 2002, 95. For Christian love spells, see Meyer – Smith 1999, nr. 73-84.

¹⁶ See Augustine’s argumentation below.

¹⁷ Orig. c. Cels. 1.57.

¹⁸ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.6-7.

¹⁹ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.6. The idea of falsification is old and already appears in second and third-century Christian apologetics: demons try to deceive people by imitating Christian rituals, even before the birth of Christ because demons could predict the establishment of Christianity.

²⁰ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.6. The deity referred as *Pilleatus* is probably Attis since Augustine also discusses the festivities in honour of Magna Mater. It is not clear what the priest of *Pilleatus* implied when stating that his god was Christian. Chadwick 1993, 29, n. 14 excludes the possibility that a temple of Magna Mater had been transformed into a Christian place. Sometimes pagan gods were said to be made Christian, e.g., when Jerome writes about the devastation of the Serapeum in 391 (ep. 107.2: *Iam et Aegyptius Serapis factus est Christianus*). A plausible explanation (also given by Boin 2014, 194) is that Augustine’s listeners did not feel that they compromised their Christian identity by participating in the festivities of Magna Mater.

²¹ Kahlos 2006, 53-67.

so that ‘by means of the sweet, the bitter may be concealed, and be drunk to ruin’.²² Augustine is strongly against any kind of mingling of what he regards as separate, Christian and non-Christian. At the same time, his rhetorical twist is to pile together everything he finds distasteful – festivities of Magna Mater, *Pilleatus*, amulets, incantations – into the one concoction of magic and idolatry.²³

Augustine insists that his parishioners not seek Christ elsewhere.²⁴ He forbids his listeners to go to the healers, in Augustine’s words, ‘sorcerers, diviners and remedies of vanity’ (*ad praecantatores, ad sortilegos et remedia vanitatis*) when their head is aching.²⁵ He complains: ‘Daily do I find such things; and what shall I do?’ He asks how many have died with remedies and how many have lived without remedies. ‘But if one dies with such a remedy, with what confidence will the soul go forth to God?’ Augustine argues that a person who has sought a cure from these healers has lost the sign of Christ (*signum Christi*) and has taken the sign of the devil (*signum diaboli*). Augustine also refers to possible objections that might arise among his parishioners: ‘One may claim that he has not lost the sign Christ’.²⁶ The voice of protest is fictive but is credible enough in this context.²⁷ Ordinary people from Augustine’s congregation did not necessarily see their visits to healers, soothsayers and other ritual experts in contradiction with their participation in Christian communal life. Nonetheless, Augustine did. He proclaims that they cannot have both signs. He exclaims: ‘Woe to the double-hearted (*vae duplici corde*), to those who in their hearts give part to God and part to the devil!’²⁸

As an alternative, Augustine advises his listeners to place the gospel as a phylactery on one’s head rather than an amulet (*ligatura*) of those unacceptable healers.²⁹ What does Augustine mean here? He probably refers to little copies of gospel texts that were used as amulets. Amulets with invocations to deities, angels, demons, saints and other mighty powers were a widespread everyday phenomenon all over the Mediterranean area. They were a kind of *koine* of prophylactic practices shared by Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian populations alike. Amulets were expected to provide their wearers protection against diseases such as fever, headache and colic as well as many other troubles. For example, John Chrysostom mentions several times the use of phylacteries in Antioch, women and small children wearing gospel texts around their necks, as ‘a powerful amulet’ (φυλακῆς μεγάλης εὐαγγέλια).³⁰

Augustine grumbles about the use of these gospel texts for disease prevention but still regards them as a better option than the devices provided by the rival ritual experts. He says that he rejoices when he sees a person in bed, wracked with fever and pains, placing hope on nothing other than the gospel placed on the head. Augustine reminds his listeners that he is pleased, not because the gospel was used for this healing purpose, but because the gospel is in any case preferable to amulets (*quia praelatum est evangelium ligaturis*).³¹ Thus, as we can see, Augustine was distressed about the use of amulets; furthermore, he was somewhat uncomfortable with the use of gospel texts as objects of

²² Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.6.

²³ For Augustine’s views on magic and paganism, see Markus 1996, 131-139; Graf 2002, 87-103; Kahlos 2015, 158-159.

²⁴ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.7.

²⁵ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.7.

²⁶ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.7.

²⁷ For similar fictive voices of protest in the sermons of bishops in Late Antiquity, see Kahlos 2016, 11-31.

²⁸ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.7.

²⁹ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.12.

³⁰ Ioh. Chrys. hom. de statuis 19.14; also hom. in Matth. 72.2. For Christian use of amulets, see Ogden 1999, 51; Janowitz 2001, 42, 56-57; Nieto 2010, 578; Gordon – Marco Simón 2010, 33, 37-38; Engemann 1975, 25, 41; Kotansky 2002, 45; Lambert 2010, 642; Magoulias 1967, 240-241.

³¹ Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.12.

ritual power. However, sacred objects used for purposes other than ecclesiastical purposes were far better than the options of the rivals which he deems magical and pagan. Placing the gospel on someone's forehead was the lesser evil – a compromise. Finally Augustine reminds his audience that the best alternative would be to use the gospel in the heart to heal the heart from sin.³²

In his catechetical teaching, John Chrysostom also takes a negative stance towards phylacteries and incantations, especially complaining about the invocations by 'drunken and half-witted old women' whom Christians bring to their houses. Similarly to Augustine's preaching, John Chrysostom mentions the protests that his parishioners make: they defend their practices as Christian, for the female enchanter 'is a Christian and pronounces nothing except the name of God'. This is a special abomination for John Chrysostom because the name of God is used in the wrong manner. He reminds his readers that even demons uttered the name of God and they were demons nonetheless.³³ John Chrysostom stresses that good Christians should resort to only words and the sign of the cross.³⁴

In a sermon commentary, John Chrysostom discusses phylacteries, with very similar expressions to those in the catechetical teaching. Wretched Christians resort to charms and old wives' fables, and 'Christ is cast out, and a drunken old woman is brought in'. People are again represented as defending themselves by arguing that their practices are Christian – saying, 'we call upon God, and do nothing extraordinary'. The old woman is said to be Christian and 'one of the faithful'. They claim that 'there is no idolatry, but simple incantation' (ἐνταῦθα δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν εἰδωλολατρεία, ἀλλ' ἀπλῶς ἐπωδή, φησὶν). This is, however, devil's deceit, John Chrysostom proclaims, using the same metaphor as Augustine, the deleterious drug in honey.³⁵

John Chrysostom insists that good Christians would rather die and let their children die than resort to phylacteries. He parallels a mother who did not use amulets for her child with martyrs: 'She chose rather to see her child dead than to fall into idolatry'.³⁶ Augustine takes a similar stand in one of his sermons when he states that it is better for a Christian to die of a disease than resort to amulets and spells. Such rites, he explains, 'are unlawful, diabolical, to be detested and cursed'. He denounces them as the work of sorcerers and wizards (*magi*).³⁷

Rivalry between Ritual Experts

As Jerome's narrative on Hilarion reveals, for ritual experts, including Christian ones, there was always a risk of being labelled a practitioner of magic. In competition situations between ritual experts, it was imperative for Christians to refute accusations of magic and redirect them against their opponents. Christian writers aimed at drawing a distinction between their holy men and the magicians of their rivals by appealing to unselfish motives, thus leaning on the idea shared in Roman society that charlatans seek their own glory and financial profit whereas the genuine holy men never take

³² Aug. tract. in Ioh. ev. 7.12. For the ritual power of the gospels and other sacred books, see Escribano Paño 2010, 129.

³³ Ioh. Chrys. catech. 2.5 (PG 49, 240). John also complains about Christians using golden coins of Alexander of Macedon as phylacteries, encircling their heads and feet with these coins. He contrasts this custom with wearing a cross that has undone the power of the devil and that is worth resorting to even for the health of the body.

³⁴ Ioh. Chrys. catech. 2.5 (PG 49, 240); hom. Col. 8.5 (PG 62, 357-359).

³⁵ Ioh. Chrys. hom. Col. 8.5 (PG 62, 357-359).

³⁶ Ioh. Chrys. hom. Col. 8.5 (PG 62, 357-359).

³⁷ Aug. sermo 306E. Augustine also complains about phylacteries in Aug. ep. 245.2: *superstitio ligaturarum*; enarr. in ps. 34.1.7.

rewards for their efforts. For example, the Apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* describes the Apostle Andrew and the Apostle Thomas as refusing money offered as a reward.³⁸

During the post-Constantinian period, as the many different versions of Christianity were slowly expanding in the Mediterranean area, the rivalry between ritual experts continued and perhaps even intensified.³⁹ In fourth- and fifth-century sermons, theological tractates and hagiography, magic and miracle were under vigorous discussion. Christian hagiographers in particular contrasted the two. For them, miracles were the monopoly of Christian holy men and women while opponents – pagans, Jews or rival Christians – were practitioners of magic.⁴⁰ Jerome's account of Hilarion illustrates the contest between religions and the roles of magic and miracle in it. The contest goes on not only on the everyday level of the circus races, but also between the worshippers of rival deities in the Gazan community and between the Christian God and demons on the cosmic level. Similar contests on various levels abound in late antique and early medieval hagiography.

For instance, a Christian holy man, Shenoute of Atripe, encountered resistance to his attempts to Christianize the Egyptian countryside. On his way to the village of Plewit to destroy local shrines, Shenoute is reported to have come across magical binding spells that the ritual experts among the villagers had buried on the way to prevent him coming into the village. Nonetheless, Shenoute finds them out and reverses the spells against his rivals.⁴¹

In these hagiographical accounts, the local experts are marked with the label of magician and thus distanced from the holy men whose ritual power is characterized as legitimate. Gregory of Tours contrasts the miracles of his saint, Martin of Tours, with the local healers whom he labels *sortilegi* (diviners) and *harioli* (soothsayers). Gregory contrasts their bandages and potions with the dust of Saint Martin's basilica that is more powerful than their 'witless remedies'.⁴² In these accounts, the power of Christian ritual experts is depicted as coming from the Christian God, the only acceptable source, whereas that of the experts of the competing side comes from unjustified supernatural sources. The power acts are also compared in strength and effect. The miracles of Christian holy men are seen as mightier than those of rival wonder-workers. For instance, even though Augustine argues for the legitimate source and noble motivation of Christian miracles in contrast to the malicious power and selfish intentions of magicians, he also makes a comparison between the powers of the Christian God and lesser supernatural powers: magicians perform their trickeries in the name of inferior deities.⁴³ The mythicized Moses, as mentioned above, was adopted to the gallery of Christian holy men and his figure functioned as an exemplar when the boundaries of religion and magic were discussed, especially by Augustine. Moses was used as proof of the supremacy of God's holy men in comparison

³⁸ Act. Andr. (Lat.) 7; 15-16; Act. Thom. 20. Other assurances: e.g., Tert. apol. 37. Similarly, Philostratus (v. Apollonii 4.45) represents the Greek philosopher-miracle worker Apollonius of Tyana as refusing the money offered to him as a reward. Stratton 2007, 114; Bremmer 2002, 55.

³⁹ Bremmer 2002, 70 places the competition between magic and miracle in the period between the birth of Christianity and the arrival of Constantine and the Christian Empire and states that after their rise to power, Christians eliminated the contest. However, I am inclined to see the competition between magic and miracle as continuing intensively in Late Antiquity, as the hagiographical material indicates.

⁴⁰ This idea was proverbially expressed by Grant 1966, 93: 'Your magic is my miracle, and vice versa', and has since been quoted in abundance, e.g., Remus 1999, 270. For the relative and perspectival nature of miracle and magic, see also Stratton 2007, 8, 114; Neusner 1989b, 61.

⁴¹ Besa, Vita Sinuthii 83-84. Trans. Bell 1983, 66 (CSS 73). Frankfurter 2008, 152-153; Frankfurter 1997, 125-126; Magoulias 1967, 235.

⁴² Greg. Tur. mirac. Mart. 26-27. According to Frankfurter 2005, 276-277 (see also Frankfurter 2002, 165), they are probably local healers whom Gregory associates with fortune-tellers traditionally held with suspicion in Roman society in order 'to mask a historical rivalry between the regional shrine of the deceased saint and ritual experts of the local milieu'. Trombley 1985, 336, 340 and Frankfurter 2005, 276-277 with a number of other examples.

⁴³ Aug. div. quaest. 79.2: *per sublimiorum nomina inferiores terrent*.

to any magician. The figure of Moses was, however, problematic since he was also regarded as one of greatest ritual experts in the Mediterranean tradition, Jewish, Graeco-Roman and Christian alike. His name was invoked in many of those incantations and spells that ecclesiastical leaders vociferously condemned.⁴⁴ How could an ordinary person make a distinction between the accepted Moses and the censured one?

Aporia and Authority

This leads us to the question of how an ordinary individual in Late Antiquity could make a distinction between proper holy men and sorcerers.⁴⁵ Here I refer to the distinction between what was permitted and legal versus what was prohibited and illegal – therefore, the difference was an issue of authority: who had the authority to define the limits of permitted practices? In distinguishing between legitimate religious activities and illegitimate ones, even the Christian clergy was not always informed enough to mark out border lines clearly enough. Or they simply were not willing to go along with the lines that the church councils and leading bishops had set. In many regions, for instance, in Gaul, Hispania, Syro-Palestine and Egypt, the boundaries between local charismatic monks and other ritual experts were blurred.⁴⁶ Bishops and ecclesiastical councils disapproved of sorcery among the clergy. For instance, the council of Laodicea (around 380) specifically prohibited priests to act as magicians, enchanters, ‘mathematicians’ and astrologers (*magoi, epaoidoi, mathematikoi, astrologoi*) and make amulets (*phylacteria*).⁴⁷

The problematic boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate use of supernatural powers were also pondered in the *erotapokriseis* (question-answer) literature. For example, a seventh-century writer, Anastasius of Sinai, is still dealing with the question of how to distinguish between the two ritual experts in his *Questions and Answers*. It is asked (with a reference to Matthew 7:22-23) what it means that the Lord does not recognize all miracle-workers even though they have cast out demons, prophesied and done many deeds of power (*dynameis*) in his name. In his reply, Anastasius explains that miraculous signs (*semeia*) turn out to be beneficial, even when performed by worthless persons. He gives the Biblical examples of Balaam (Num. 22-23) and the witch of En-Dor (1 Sam. 28). Anastasius stresses that the miracles achieved even by heretics and infidels (*apistoi*) happen by the will of God and hence, the orthodox faith should not be shaken because of these signs and miracles. Therefore, one should not make a great fuss when seeing some worthless person or infidel performing miracles.⁴⁸ One might wonder if this explanation was much help in distinguishing between permitted and forbidden activities. As H.J. Magoulias argued in his research on hagiography, it was only the involvement of a saint – thus, a person with appropriate authority – that determined the legitimacy of the actions.⁴⁹

Ecclesiastical writers such as Martin of Braga stressed that Christians should utter only prayers, in contrast to the spells that rival experts chant. He wrote that Christian prayers were a form of sacred incantation (*incantatio sancta*) and they were substitutes for the incantations (*incantationes*) of

⁴⁴ E.g., in Acts 7:22, Moses is said to have been ‘taught the whole wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful (*dynatos*) in words and in deeds’; also Phil. v. Moys. 1.5. Several spells and writings were attributed to Moses. In *PGM* 5, 109 a ritualist identifies himself as Moses. Gager 1972, 140-161; Wischmeyer 1998, 96; Luck 1999, 115.

⁴⁵ Cf. Breyfogle 1995, 450 who, when discussing the miracles of Martin of Tours, remarks ‘how difficult it is to distinguish between holy man and magician’ in Late Antiquity.

⁴⁶ For the blurred boundaries, see Frankfurter 1997, 127-130; Frankfurter 2002, 168, 172; Brakke 2008, 94; Wischmeyer 1998, 103; Velásquez Soriano 2010, 603, 618.

⁴⁷ The Council of Laodicea, can. 36. Klingshirn 2003, 80; Flint 1999, 345.

⁴⁸ Anastasius Sinaita, *Erotapokriseis*: Quaest. 62. *Anastasii Sinaitae Opera*, CCSG 59, eds. Marcel Richard & Joseph A. Munitiz, Turnhout: Brepols, 2006, 112-113. Stolte 2002, 110.

⁴⁹ Magoulias 1967, 228-269.

magicians and sorcerers.⁵⁰ Evagrius Ponticus compiled a collection of Biblical passages for monks who could fend off demons with suitable verses – appropriate and authorised weaponry for Christians.⁵¹ Ritual texts have been preserved in late antique papyri in Egypt and inscriptions in Hispania and Italy. There are curative and protective texts, texts with curses and love charms, and they cover various kinds of every day issues, childbirth, love, impotence, diseases, horse races, commerce and so on. In these texts, the Christian God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the Apostles are mentioned as well as angels, demons and saints.⁵² Archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel are the most powerful names. Biblical figures such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Solomon are often invoked. Many of these ritual texts were probably condemned by some church authorities but possibly approved by other ecclesiastical leaders if these texts had some authoritative backing.⁵³

As we saw above, Augustine was troubled about the Christian use of phylacteries, even if Christian objects were more commendable than the pagan options. For his part, Ambrose of Milan did not have that austere stance with regard to amulets as he tells us about Constantine's mother Helena who had sent her son a bridle and a diadem equipped with the nails of the holy cross. These gave the emperor 'the support of divine protection (*divini muneris ... auxilium*) so that he might take his place in battles unharmed and be without fear of danger'.⁵⁴ Similarly, the power of martyrs and other saints was recognised as appropriate and in most cases received the backing of local bishops. The relics of saints were the phylacteries that were used to protect fields, heal diseases and drive away demons.⁵⁵ Gregory of Tours illustrates the rivalry between ritual experts in Late Antiquity. On the one hand, he approves the phylactery equipped with relics that his father used for protection from 'the attacks of bandits, the dangers of floods, the threats of violent men and assaults from swords'. On the other hand, he stresses that a Christian must follow the codex of the Scriptures, not 'whispered incantations, cast lots, and amulets around the neck' but this implies the ritual protection from the false, unauthorised side.⁵⁶

The Importance of Being Magicless

Magic functioned as a boundary-making concept when Christian identity, orthodoxy and orthopraxy were negotiated and redefined. The canons of church councils produced lists of forbidden practices, thus making their definitions in the way of exclusion. For instance, *Apostolic Constitutions* (from the late fourth century) listed unsanctioned ritual experts such as a magician, enchanter, astrologer, diviner, wild beast charmer, mendicant, charlatan, maker of amulets, charmer and soothsayer (*magos, epaoidos, astrologos, mantis, thêrepôdos, lôtax, ochlagôgos, periammata poiôn, perikathairôn, oiônistês*).⁵⁷ The Council of Ancyra in 314 forbade Christians from performing divination and following the customs of pagans, as well as bringing people into their houses for sorcery or for lustrations. Here, as in many other regulations, divination, magic and 'pagan' customs were paralleled.⁵⁸ Similar lists were repeated in the records of succeeding councils – it is debated in present scholarship whether this may be result of a topos, the traditional manner of repeating these sorts of lists or the factual annoyance caused continuing practices.⁵⁹ The list is repeated in the accounts of the

⁵⁰ Martin. Brac. corr. 16. Klingshirn 2003, 81. For the difficulties of making distinctions between prayers and spells, Janowitz 2002, 95-96 and Velásquez Soriano 2010, 616. Already Irenaeus (haer. 2.32.5) wanted to draw a distinction between the pure, sincere prayers of genuine Christians and the spells of competitors.

⁵¹ For Evagrius Ponticus' *Antirrheticus* as an apotropaic weapon, see Clark 2004, 559.

⁵² Egypt: Meyer – Smith 1999; Hispania: Velásquez Soriano 2010, 620-625; Italy: Manganaro 1963, 57-74.

⁵³ The invocations of angels were regarded with mistrust by many Christian leaders (e.g., already Iren. haer. 2.32.5; Council of Laodicea: can. 35 around 380). Nieto 2010, 575-578.

⁵⁴ Ambr. obit. Theod. 41.47-51. Trans. Liebeschuetz 2005, 197-198.

⁵⁵ For power of relics, see Brown 1996, 198; Magoulias 1967, 252-256.

⁵⁶ His father's medallion: Greg. Tur. glor. mart. 83, 108; trans. Van Dam 1988, 108; the rival medallion: Greg. Tur. mir. Jul. 45. Van Dam 1993, 192; Brown 1996, 105-106.

⁵⁷ Const. Apost. 8.4.32.

⁵⁸ Council of Ancyra, can. 24 = cap. 71, in Barlow 1950, 140.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of lists of forbidden practices, see Hen 2015, 183-190.

Council of Braga in 572 which forbade people from bringing diviners (*divini*) and especially *sortilegi* into their houses in order to cast out evil (*malum*), detect witchcraft (*maleficia*) or perform pagan purifications (*lustrationes paganorum*).⁶⁰ Likewise the Council of Trullo (in 691) banned cloud-chasers, sorcerers, purveyors of amulets and diviners who were to be cast out from the church if they persisted in ‘these deadly pagan practices’.⁶¹

The label of magic was by no means innocuous, and it was in the interests of all religious groups to avoid the label of magic. During the Early Empire, religious groups acting on the margins, outside the public civic sphere, were already always at risk of being associated with magic or even charged with practising it. To be associated with magic was a matter of serious concern – for Christian groups from the first to the early fourth century – for other groups, pagans and heretics later on. Christian emperors outlawed *maleficium*, harmful magic that was performed to hurt other people.⁶² In late antique legislation, harmful magic was classified as the third gravest crime after high treason and murder.⁶³ What the specific forbidden rituals were varied from decree to decree and from emperor to emperor. The rulers of early medieval kingdoms continued the policies of western emperors as the words of King Theoderic ‘it is not allowed to be involved in magical arts in Christian times’ show.⁶⁴ In late antique power struggles, accusations of magic or paganism or the combination of both were used as an effective tool against political and ecclesiastical rivals.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The self-fashioning rhetoric of magicless Christianity has been persuasive enough to convince modern scholars. Consequently, Christians who do not fit into the boundaries of the magicless image have caused considerable headaches for researchers.⁶⁶ Are the ritual experts who have written the so-called magical papyri to be recognized as proper Christians or not? What about those people who resorted to phylacteries? Are those people, who use amulets equipped with relics and authorized by bishops, genuine Christians? Whose authorization is valid?

I have preferred using words such as rituals and ritual experts instead of magic – except when referring to how writers in Late Antiquity themselves applied the term ‘magic’ *from their own viewpoint* in their condemnations of certain beliefs and practices.⁶⁷ By using the word ‘magic’, we would bring with it all the condemnatory attitudes – the discourse of ritual censure – that have been associated with it by generations of Greco-Roman elite writers, then Christian ecclesiastical elite

⁶⁰ Council of Braga in Barlow 1950, 140. Klingshirn 2003, 68.

⁶¹ Council of Trullo, can. 61. Stolte 2002, 114.

⁶² E.g., CTh 9.16.9 (in 371); 9.16.10 (in 371); 9.38.4 (in 368). Escribano Paño 2010, 122; Fögen 1993, 38.

⁶³ CTh 9.38.7 (in 384); also 9.38.3 (in 367); 9.38.4 (in 368). Escribano Paño 2010, 123.

⁶⁴ Cassiod. var. 4.22: *Versari non licet magicis artibus temporibus Christianis*. Dumezil 2005, 595 n. 56.

⁶⁵ Denigrations sometimes led to official charges and criminal proceedings as in the case of the Neoplatonic philosopher Sopater whom Constantine had executed because he had allegedly prevented the corn supply from arriving on time in Constantinople by magical means (Eun. v. soph. 6.2.10, Wright 384) or in the case of the Roman senator Boethius who was charged with practising magic (Boeth. cons. 1.4.36-37). For the political instrumentalisation of magic accusations, see Escribano Paño 2010, 123-125; Graf 2000, 59; Trombley 1993, 65.

⁶⁶ One example is the second-century writer Julius Africanus whose encyclopaedic knowledge of healing devices, incantations and different rituals caused some modern scholars to cast doubts on his Christianity. For a reappraisal, see Wallraff 2009, 51 who parallels Julius Africanus’ *Kestoi* with *Stromateis* by Clemens of Alexandria, a writer whose Christianity is not challenged.

⁶⁷ I have adopted the term ‘ritual expert’ from Frankfurter 2005. In recent scholarship, the distinction between magic and religion has been challenged over and over again, e.g., J.Z. Smith 1995, 16: ‘substantive definitions of “magic” have proven empty in concrete instances and worthless when generalized to characterize entire peoples, whole systems of thought or world-views’; Gordon 1999, 168: ‘Magic may be a practice, but more than anything else it is a shared construction, a child of the imagination’, also Gordon – Marco Simón 2010; Meyer – Mirecki 1995; Neusner 1989a, 4-5; Ritner 1995, 43-44; Ricks 1995, 143; Remus 1999, 258-298; Meyer – Smith 1999, 1-5; Meltzer 1999, 13-14; Frankfurter 1997, 131; Frankfurter 2002, 159; Janowitz 2002, xiv-xviii.

writers, medieval elite writers, Reformation theologians, Counter-Reformation theologians, European colonial powers, and finally modern scholars.

In Greco-Roman and Christian Antiquity, making boundaries and defining what constituted proper religion and what constituted magic was a matter of authority. For example, Jerome asserted that Hilarion's miracles were not magic. Defining and making boundaries is also a matter of authority in scholarly discussions: who has the authority to define by which criteria we scholars make a distinction between religion and magic? It would be fair play to do justice to each individual and group in the past and speak of rituals and beliefs only. Thus, the question whether Christians were involved in magic or not is irrelevant. Instead, the issue of analysing rhetoric and self-image is important because it may also reveal ruptures in ancient texts and even in our modern prejudices.