Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment (review)

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Abstract
Magic and its relation to Western modernity has been a flourishing subject of late. Among those interested in this topic have been anthropologists studying indigenous cultures in Africa, South Asia, and the Americas, and also, in the case of the Americas, forcibly imported non-European (i.e., slave) cultures. Scholarly focus has fallen on the interaction of such cultures with Western modernity in a colonial and postcolonial context. Also exploring this topic have been historians of modern Europe, who have begun to articulate how the explosion of interest in spiritualism and occultism among middle-[End Page 217] class Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries grew out of complex reactions to modernity. This volume serves as a fine introduction to work in the former area; it might have benefited (if one may put one's quibbles about a book at the beginning of a review rather than in their more traditional place at the end) from more inclusion of the latter area as well.

Disciplines
Comparative Methodologies and Theories | Cultural History | History of Religion | Other History

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Michael D. Bailey


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petitors for its lucidity. The end of the book is enhanced by two engaging new pieces. The first is a twenty-two-page "epilogue" on the survival of pagan magic; the second is a fourteen-page "appendix" on "psychoactive substances in religion and magic." Also new is a glossary of terms relating to ancient magic.

Despite the changes, the original character of Luck’s work is intact. The book remains overwhelmingly a collection of ancient writings about magic and allied phenomena by the great poets and intelligent essayists of antiquity. One appreciates that Luck’s first love was theology. He has not developed very much more of an interest in the documents of practical magic: we can point only to the new pair of amuletic texts and the revised selection of extracts from PGM. Strikingly, we are left with the same single curse tablet. This may, I fear, limit the take-up of the book as a core text for “Ancient Magic 101” courses. But for all that the 1985 book originated in handouts for Luck’s own undergraduate course, I suspect that it may always have sold rather more healthily to interested scholars.

No one currently at work in ancient magic or related fields can remotely compare with Luck for the breadth and profundity of his knowledge of the literary texts, for the humanity and sympathy of his exegeses of them, or for the humility and lightness of touch with which he conveys his scholarship. For this reason his work, in first edition or second, will retain currency long after the oblivion of the vain posturings of those who, since the early nineties, have sought to usurp his subject.

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Magic and its relation to Western modernity has been a flourishing subject of late. Among those interested in this topic have been anthropologists studying indigenous cultures in Africa, South Asia, and the Americas, and also, in the case of the Americas, forcibly imported non-European (i.e., slave) cultures. Scholarly focus has fallen on the interaction of such cultures with Western modernity in a colonial and postcolonial context. Also exploring this topic have been historians of modern Europe, who have begun to articulate how the explosion of interest in spiritualism and occultism among middle-
class Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries grew out of complex reactions to modernity. This volume serves as a fine introduction to work in the former area; it might have benefited (if one may put one’s quibbles about a book at the beginning of a review rather than in their more traditional place at the end) from more inclusion of the latter area as well.

Peter Pels clearly articulates the purpose of the volume in his introduction—to demonstrate that magic not only endures in the modern era, but that modernity actually produces its own kinds of magic. While many scholars have recognized the existence of magic in nineteenth- and twentieth-century societies, such observations have rarely been “accompanied by theoretical statements that reflected on the ways in which magic belongs to modernity” (p. 3; the emphasis is Pels’s). Pels is an anthropologist, and he is writing primarily about anthropological scholarship here. He notes that early European anthropology cemented the view that magic was inherently primitive and premodern. Such thinking about native practices, and about native cultures in general, was an important aspect of European colonialism, but Pels also comments on the fact that the thinkers who developed such theories came from a European culture that was, in certain quarters, fascinated with the romantic “reenchantment” of the world (p. 9). Magic was a constant companion of modernity, a necessary other against which modern society could define itself, but also a ghost perpetually haunting modern thought.

While Pels’s observations might just as well have introduced a volume of essays that focused on Europe itself, eight of the eleven essays collected here deal exclusively with non-Western societies. These all engage effectively with the central issue of the volume, demonstrating how in all spheres of European colonialism, magical beliefs and practices did not simply survive into the modern era, but developed and grew in direct reaction to the colonial imposition of modernity. The relationship between magic and the forces of modernity can be relatively straightforward or profoundly complex. Alcinda Honwana, for example, describes how traditional beliefs in protective magic and spirit possession have been deployed in the context of postcolonial independence and then the ensuing rebel wars in Mozambique. Rosalind Shaw describes how Western journalists, covering the rebel war in Sierra Leone, often presented the use of magical techniques in modern warfare as evidence of Africa’s continued (and implied inherent) primitivism. She argues, however, that not only did the use of such techniques develop in the course of the war, but their supposedly primordial roots were largely a myth. The use of protective magic had in fact mainly developed in the context of West Africa’s first encounter with Europeans and the subsequent destabilizations brought about by the slave trade and then European-driven trade in natural
resources. Such practices were, therefore, never purely indigenous but always implicated in the interaction between Africa and the West.

The use of magic as an indicator of non-European primitivism can become enormously convoluted, as Laurent Dubois emphasizes in his essay on the Haitian slave revolution on 1791. This event could be regarded as entirely modern and fully equivalent to France’s own revolution. Yet European historians (who, of course, wrote the major accounts of the Haitian revolution) emphasized the supposed origin of the initial uprising in slave attendance at the religio-magical Bois Caïman ceremony. They did so in order to depict the revolution and all its consequences as rooted in African primitivism. Some scholars now question whether the Bois Caïman ceremony really took place, or, if it did, whether it really ignited the revolution. Their arguments are intended to restore the “modernity” of the Haitian revolution, yet they also serve to depict the revolution as a completely “Western” event. Complications do not end there, however, as these arguments, in turn, have been strongly challenged by yet other scholars who want to preserve both the magic and the indigenous modernity of this event.

Most basically, all of the authors in this volume argue that modernity never exists entirely free from the specter of the magical. Even more provocatively, many of them contend that magic never exists outside of modernity. That is, insofar as magic is a Western category to describe native primitivism, it can only be created by some reference to Western modernity. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in Gyan Prakash’s important lead essay to the volume, in which he explores how Indian groups, enamored with Western modernity, sought to “reform” Hinduism into a modern religion by identifying certain “rational” (mainly Vedic) aspects of Hindu belief and separating these from newly constructed categories of superstition and folk-magic.

While all these essays position magic in the context of modernity and demonstrate ways in which modernity actively feeds into the continued construction of magic, rather than merely tolerating its survival, they all present magic as the constructed opposite of modernity. To this extent, they do not escape the basic structures established by early anthropological theories, although they do analyze these critically. In his contribution to the volume, Peter Pels breaks out of this mold, examining how Victorian ideas of science and early anthropology themselves developed in the context of modern European fascination (both positive and negative) with spiritualism. Two other essays also try to link magic to modernity in terms of similarity rather than opposition. Peter Geschiere compares the role in politics of American spin doctors and modern African witch doctors, while Jojada Verrips explores the continuing magical aura that hangs over modern Western medicine. Each
makes interesting observations. Geschiere notes how both spin and witch
doctors perform essentially the same functions—protecting their politician
clients by revealing hidden knowledge, whether through polling or through
divination. He also notes how both spin and witch doctors strongly assert
their benevolence but are commonly perceived in their cultures as essentially
amoral, and that their operations are regarded as somewhat mysterious (al-
though spin doctors stress the “scientific” nature of their procedures). Verrips
notes not only that laypeople can describe medical practices in terms of
“magical–mythical notions,” but that physicians often describe themselves
and their work using these same metaphors—anthropomorphizing disease,
for example, and depicting themselves as locked in combat with a seemingly
sentient, evil foe.

Such comparisons are intriguing, but ultimately they function only on the
metaphoric level. As both Geschiere and Verrips are quick to point out,
Western spin doctors and physicians are not the same as witch doctors and
magicians, nor do they really engage in the same types of activities. Is the
fact, then, that they sometime strive for the same or similar goals, or depict
themselves by means of similar metaphors really that significant? In this at-
ttempt to link magic to modernity in terms other than opposition, the volume
might have benefited from more studies of modern European occultism, his-
torians of which are trying to discern whether it represents only a reaction
against the culture of scientific rationalism deriving from the Enlightenment,
or whether it was in more complex ways an integral aspect of that culture.

I have now included my quibble at both the outset and conclusion to my
review, and that is certainly unfair to this fine volume. The location of magic
in modernity is a vast topic, and this collection of essays is an important
introduction and contribution to the anthropological side of this field.

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NIKLAS SCHATZMANN. Verdorrrende Bäume und Brote wie Kuhfladen: Hexen- 
prozesse in der Leventina 1431–1459 und die Anfänge der Hexenverfolgung auf 

Schatzmann’s doctoral dissertation Verdorrrende Bäume is an important con-
tribution to the literature on early witch trials. Building especially on excel-
lent recent Swiss scholarship on the development of witchcraft persecutions
in the fifteenth century, Schatzmann has masterfully woven together the gen-