

## “Blurred boundaries – Magicians in New Testament and Patristic Christianity”

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CSPS/CSBS Joint Seminar in honour of Harold Remus – May 2023  
*Draft version – not for citation*

### **Introduction**

I am happy to offer this paper as part of the tribute to Harold Remus. He was erudite yet humble, and a kind and helpful friend to new scholars.

In this paper, I take a particular and I hope innovative approach to the topic of magic in early Christianities. Previous scholarship often examined magic and magic accusations by others (e.g., Jews, polytheist GrecoRomans) against Christians. These are cases of inter-group conflict. I focus on intra-group conflict over magic, that among Christians and within Christian groups.

The second innovative approach is the time span under study. It is intentionally broad! I consider both pre- and post-Constantinian Christianity. There is an advantage to this breadth of scope. Namely, while the significant role of magic in Christianity could be explained in pre-Constantinian Christianity as simply or primarily due to a lack of a centralized authority; the same cannot be said for post-Constantinian. There, the persistence of the phenomenon despite Church laws demonstrates a strong tendency which must have had compelling reasons in order to persist.

Third, I offer a closer and at times at times more nuanced reading of primary sources, than has been done before. I read between the lines and visualize the other side of the coin – not only what is said in a text but what the underlying situation may have been or what the opponents of the author may have thought and done. At a few points (e.g., Peregrinus, Cyprian the magician) I have found new material or a new insight into possibilities. In one case (Justin Martyr) I wonder why his own participation in magic has not been considered by many scholars.

This is still an early foray into the topic.<sup>1</sup> I have limited my examination to two bodies of data. The first is the literature which became associated with the mainstream stream of Christianity, or episcopal/ catholic/ orthodox [ECO]<sup>2</sup> branches of Christianity. These texts were almost certainly written by educated males, and many give voice to what we can call mainstream Establishment perspectives. The second type of data is from the popular level, namely the material realia of magic spells and amulets. This street-level data paints a different and at times opposite picture than that of the official pronouncements.

This paper explores the issue of group boundaries. The broad thesis is that group boundaries existed more in the minds and intent of ECO leaders and writers than at the popular level. The evidence demonstrates that many people engaged in a syncretistic blend of magical practice with or alongside conventional ECO Christianity, despite the disapproval and prohibitions of those in

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<sup>1</sup> Although I presented discussion of some of this material at the 2009 International SBL in Rome.

<sup>2</sup> My own acronym.

power. At this point of my research, I focused on assembling a considerable, though not exhaustive, databank of material. Theoretical frameworks, such as Social Identity Theory (in-group and out-group) or Mary Douglas’s social body concept, or Deviance and Labeling Theory, would add to the discussion. Perhaps this is a paper in search of a theory. I welcome comments in that regard.

I do bring in Conversion vs. Affiliation model, inspired by Nock and others, as that issue is central to my findings in the data.

Table 1 Conversion and affiliations

Conversion	Affiliations
Exclusive: membership in one group at a time	Inclusive: multiple simultaneous memberships
Identity in one group	Composite and or syncretistic identity
Strong social boundaries (in-group vs. out-group)	Porous boundaries or no boundaries
Dramatic before and after scenario, renunciation	Little drama and conflict, perhaps change is muted or extended over a period of time.
An ideal – advocated by religious authorities	The reality – as practiced at the popular level

The above summarizes how I see the issue. It draws upon Nock but is not limited to him.<sup>3</sup> Nock used “adhesion” rather than affiliation. Nock saw the issue as how strongly one was attached to a group. My preference is for “affiliation” since that term can handle multiple membership or identity roles.<sup>4</sup>

Further, to nuance my thesis– I estimate that two sorts of people engaged in magic within Christian circles. The first were relatively upper-class males, who saw magic as a branch of philosophical inquiry and used such studies and practice to enhance their status. The second was at the popular level, where a variety of people would consult magicians and astrologers and at times use magic themselves for day-to-day practical matters. What I found interesting here was the idea that ECO Christianity was felt to be deficient in meeting the mundane needs of some of its members.

In support of this thesis, we see the issue outlined by Philo. It is worth viewing in its entirety:

Now the true magic (*alēthē magikēn*), the scientific vision (*optikēn epistēmēn*)<sup>5</sup> by which the facts of nature are presented in a clearer light, is felt to be a fit object for reverence and ambition and is carefully studied not only by ordinary people but by kings and the greatest kings, and particularly those of the Persians, so much so that it is said that no one in that country is admitted to the throne unless he has first been admitted into the caste of the

<sup>3</sup> See Nock 1933, and discussion/ critique of Nock by Shepherd 1979 and Bøgh 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hopkins 1998:186-87.

<sup>5</sup> Liddell-Scott 660 *epistēmōs* “knowing, wise, prudent, scientific.” All positive terms.

Magi. But there is a counterfeit (*parakomma*)<sup>6</sup> of this, most properly called a perversion of art (*kakotechnia*)<sup>7</sup>, pursued by charlatan mendicants and parasites and the basest of the women and slave population, who make it their profession to deal in purifications and disenchantments and promise with some sort of charms and incantations to turn men's love into deadly enmity and their hatred into profound affection. The simplest and most innocent natures are deceived by the bait... Philo, *The Special Laws* III.100-101<sup>8</sup>

Philo contrasts a 'high' or noble inquiry into esoteric studies worthy of philosopher-kings, with a 'low' or mercenary practice of magic by the lower classes. Philo admits that the low magic had an attractive quality for some – probably because it purported to deal with mundane problems. The Roman writer Apuleius makes the same point, in his defense of studying magic, *Apologia* 25-27. We may therefore assume that this was a common view among some in the Roman empire.<sup>9</sup>

### **Primary Evidence: Pre-Constantine (first century)**

In this early period, Jesus-movement or Christian assemblies were experimental and lacked a centralized authority. The transition out of Judaism was nascent, and levels of persecution by Roman authorities were sporadic and local.

The account of the Magi in Matthew 2 receives only a brief mention here. I want to establish the place of these figures within later Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup> There are two points. One, in the gospel of Matthew, the magi are portrayed positively as distinguished and erudite visitors from the East, probably Persia.<sup>11</sup> The same positive view of Persian or Eastern magi is seen in the Jewish writer Philo *On the Special Laws* III.100-101 and the Roman writer Apuleius *Apologia* 26-28 (see above). Two, the same word (magi) in Matthew is used in the book of Acts as a term of approbation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, even in 80's CE we see contrasting perspectives between groups (Matthean, Lukan).

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<sup>6</sup> Liddell-Scott 1314 *parakomma* "money with a false stamp, metaphorically counterfeit." Something seeming to be of value but in fact deceitful and worthless.

<sup>7</sup> Liddell-Scott 863 *kakotechnia* "base artifice, fraudulent practice, bad art."

<sup>8</sup> A remarkable insight into class and gender bias in the ancient Greco-Roman world!

<sup>9</sup> See Reimer 2002 and Edmonds 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Magi are mentioned in a defense of astrology we see in Tertullian (below).

<sup>11</sup> Sources for this story include Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:10-11 speak of kings bringing gifts. Also, see Luz 1989:131.

<sup>12</sup> To be fair, both Philo and Apuleius distinguish between 'high' (philosophical) and 'low' (trickery) magic. Still, the difference is significant.

Table 2 Contrasting views of group membership

The Twelve (Mk 6:6b // Matt 10; Lk 9) The Seventy (Luke 10:17, cf, Mk 16:17)	Free-Lance exorcist (Mk 9:38-39; Lk 9:49-50)	'False' disciples (Mt 7:22-23)
Authorized by Jesus (group members)	Not a member of Jesus' group	They think they have been in the group; Jesus disagrees.
No conflict	No criticism – “the person who is not against us is for us.”	Jesus rejects them – “Depart from me, I never knew you.”
		Cf. Matt 12:30 // Luke 11:23 – “the person who is not with me is against me.”

In this table, there is a striking range of views on group membership and those practicing acts of power which to our eyes seem similar to magic. In the accounts of the Twelve and the Seventy, the exorcist-healers are group members (disciples) and thus there is no controversy. In the account of the Free-lance exorcist, a controversy arises because the exorcist is not a group member. Jesus is shown offering an inclusive and generous interpretation of group membership. We are not told how the free-lance person viewed his membership, only that he used Jesus's name (Mk 9:38-39). But in the account of the False Disciples, Jesus is shown displaying an exclusivist and harsh attitude. Here, we hear competing claims of membership: those who claim it (they call Jesus “Lord” and exorcise in his name), and Jesus who rejects their membership in his group (Mt 8:22-23). The saying in Lk 11:23 // Matt 12:30 may be from Q and is part of a series of sayings about exorcism. Thus, we see a variety of opinions in the communities of Q, Mark and Matthew as to group membership and exorcism.<sup>13</sup>

In the book of Acts, we see several episodes which present a blurred boundary between magic and so-called Christian groups.<sup>14</sup> The author of Acts clearly is writing an apologetic on behalf of his Christianity to Roman authorities (among other purposes). Given that, it is surprising the close intersection he portrays between magic and Christianity. In Acts 11:26, we see the first mention that Christianity is a group distinct from Judaism, and one which later became noticed with some suspicion by Roman authorities.

Acts 8:4-25 is the account of Simon Magus.<sup>15</sup> Simon was practicing sorcery [μαγεύω] in Samaria and attracting a considerable following who were astonished at his magic arts [μαγείαι]. There are several interesting features in the account. The link between practice of magic and people being amazed (ἐξίστημι 8:9, 11) is similar to Simon being amazed by Philip's signs and miracles (σημεῖα καὶ δυνάμεις 8:13) – suggesting that acts of power by Christians are similar to

<sup>13</sup> We see the same controversy in Acts / Sons of Sceva, below. And Justin Martyr tells of exorcisms in Jesus's name in 2nd cent., below.

<sup>14</sup> Conflict over magic is a recurring motif in the Book of Acts, see Garret 1989.

<sup>15</sup> See Conzelmann 1987:62-64.

acts of power done by magicians. Simon's magic results in status for him (8:9,10).<sup>16</sup> Simon was baptized and "continued with" (as disciple of?) Philip, yet he evidently retained a magic-oriented or syncretic mindset when he offered Peter and John money to acquire the power of laying-on of hands. Simon's story is a case study (perhaps a cautionary tale) of members of Christian groups who, despite becoming baptized members of the assembly still retained ties to magic.

The account of Elymas/Bar-Jesus in Acts 13:6-12 has intriguing features. In Acts, the character of Elymas is presented as a rival to Paul as they compete to persuade the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus. Elymas has a Jewish name (Bar-Jesus), and it is no accident that this Greek/Hebrew nomenclature for Elymas (13:7-8) is in the same episode as the first mention of Saul's Greek name, Paul (13:9). They are parallel figures in Acts. Elymas is characterized as a magician (μάγος 13:6) and false prophet (ψευδοπροφήτης 13:6). It is interesting that the author Acts is at pains to portray Elymas as a 'false' prophet – we can assume that such a character would have used his magical and prophetic abilities to gain influence at the government arena. Elymas is described as a Jewish magician, and his role in this account may simply be another example of the book of Acts' motif of Jewish opposition to Paul's preaching initiatives (e.g., 13:45; 14:2). But the name Bar-Jesus is too intriguing to leave unquestioned. While Jesus (Yeshua) is a common enough Jewish name, the appearance here surely raises some question as to the social position of the character. A claim to be the "son of Jesus" brings to mind the tradition voiced in Matthew 7 of false disciples, or of those who use Jesus's name yet have an ambiguous relation to the group (e.g., the Sons of Sceva below). Whether or not there was an actual person behind this account in Acts, we are entitled to see him as representing a type, and one of concern to the author of Acts.

The account of Jewish exorcists in Acts 19:13-16 is a fascinating story. According to the account, "some" (many?) traveling Jewish exorcists were commanding evil spirits to depart from their victims, using "the name of Jesus who Paul preaches" (19:13). Here we have people whose membership in a Jesus-movement group is ambiguous – they are portrayed as outsiders, yet they have familiarity with Jesus and Paul. Perhaps the author of Acts would have us understand that they were simply outsiders seeking to cash in on the fame of Jesus and Paul, yet as with Bar-Jesus we may question what type this group represents and their social position. Perhaps they were claiming group membership or considered they had some degree of affiliation with Paul's group. Again, we think of the false disciple tradition recorded in Matthew 7. Evidently some of these people were well known enough to have their family name presented in the account ("sons of Sceva," 19:14).

It is interesting to plug in the odd little episode of the prophetic slave girl (Acts 16:16-18) at this point in the discussion. Paul, the paradigmatic leader, confronted a high-class rival in Bar-Jesus. Now Paul encounters a rival in the lowest class, a slave girl. The episode is unlikely – what slave owners would let their slave unprofitably follow someone around for many days? And, the proclamation of the girl is ironically accurate, "these men are servants of the most high God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation" (16:17). Paul was fortunate to have such good PR, so we wonder why he squanders it by exorcizing the girl. Doubtless the anti-magic stance of the author

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<sup>16</sup> Simon claims to be someone great, and people call him "The Great Power of God," Οὗτός ἐστιν ἡ Δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ καλουμένη Μεγάλη 8:9-10.

of Acts is at work, yet we have the intriguing issue of someone seemingly ‘outside’ the group who is in fact functioning as a member of the group.

Acts 19:18-20 is the episode of book-burning Christians, and it closely follows the story of the Sons of Sceva. The account notes that many of those who had come to belief (*pepisteukowtōn*) then came confessing and telling (*ērchonto exomologeisthai kai anaggellontes*)<sup>17</sup> their practices (*praxeis*).<sup>18</sup> “A number of those who ‘did curious things’ (*tōn tas peri erga praxantōn*, presumably practicing magic)<sup>19</sup> collected their books and burned them publicly. When the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to 50,000 silver coins.” At first read, this seems to be a scene showing Christians as former magicians, dramatically renouncing their past in a before-and-after schema.<sup>20</sup> But close attention to the timing of events shows some ambiguity in the narrative. It is not clear if the newly-minted believers immediately quit their curious practices, or if they kept on doing them for a while. And certainly, the value of the books (even if exaggerated) indicates a view that such types were wealthy, perhaps of the philosopher-practitioner type.

### **Primary Evidence: Pre-Constantine (second and third centuries)**

Here we see a heightened period of persecution by Roman authorities, and we might therefore suspect a greater concern among Christians over group boundaries.

The *Didache* is an early Christian manual of church life. Dates and provenance are debated, but many scholars estimate it has portions from the late first century.<sup>21</sup> Chapters 1-6 set out what has come to be called the “Two Ways” schema. Likely drawing on Wisdom traditions and also the pure highway motif set out in Isaiah 35, the *Didache* describes the path of the righteous in contrast to that of the unrighteous person.

*Didache* 2.2 decrees, “You will not murder, commit adultery, corrupt boys, have illicit sex, steal, practice magic [*mageuseis*], make potions [*pharmakeuseis*],<sup>22</sup> murder offspring by means of abortion, kill, or desire the things of your neighbor.” Jefford 1989:56 notes that the material in 2.2-5 has been adapted from the LXX Decalogue (Exodus 20:13-16 and Deut 5:17-20) and expanded “...to include specific prohibitions against contemporary threats to the ethical perspective of the community.” He does not comment further on this point, but since magic and potions are not specifically mentioned in the Decalogue, we might suppose this is a current issue for the Didachist writer.

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<sup>17</sup> ‘To confess’ is used of making confession of sins in worship. Conzelmann 1987:164 citing *Didache*, 2 Clement, Barnabas. Suggests a liturgical understanding which we see developed in later literature.

<sup>18</sup> Unspecified practices at this point in the narrative.

<sup>19</sup> Literally, “those doing curious, superstitious things.” Liddell Scott 1373 *periergos*, “elaborate, inquisitive, curious, superstitious.” Conzelmann 1987:161, 164 translates as ‘magic arts’ and this is a common interpretation. One wonders at this Lukan circumlocution. Perhaps stating directly that these Christians had practiced – or were practicing – magic was distasteful to the writer.

<sup>20</sup> Justin Martyr’s 1 Apology suggests such a scenario.

<sup>21</sup> Holmes :159-160, Milavec 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> On *pharmakeuseis*, Holmes xx:164 translates as engage in sorcery. ANF translates as witchcraft 377. Ehrman 419 ‘use enchanted potions’, Niederwimmer 88-89, ‘mix poison’ see n13.

*Didache* 3.4 urges, “My child, do not become a diviner [*oiōnoskopos*]<sup>23</sup> since this is the path leading to idolatry, nor an enchanter [*epaoidos*]<sup>24</sup>, nor an astrologer [*mathēmatikos*], nor a purifier [*perikathairōn*]<sup>25</sup>, nor even wish to see these things, For, from all of these, idolatry is begotten.” These are all nouns, and a good variety of occupations is named. What in view is not only consulting a diviner, etc.; but more importantly being one and also that the young person under instruction not even think about becoming such a person. It may be the case that anti-magic injunctions from the Hebrew scriptures are being reworked in light of a current situation.<sup>26</sup>

*Didache* 5.1 reiterates the two ways, speaking now of the evil path: “The way of death, on the other hand, is this: first of all, it is evil and full of accursedness: murders, adulteries, lusts, illicit sexual acts, thefts, idolatries, magic [*mageiai*], potions [*pharmakiai*],<sup>27</sup> sorceries [*arpagai*]<sup>28</sup>, perjuries, hypocrisies, double-heartedness, trickery, arrogance, malice, self-pleasing, greed, foul speech, jealousy, audacity, haughtiness, false pretension.<sup>29</sup>

The next two portions of the *Didache* reveal a concern over divisions which may happen within the community. Perhaps not all within the assembly have faithfully followed the correct path, or they may be tempted to stray from it! While these texts relate to teaching and prophecy rather than magic *per se*, we can certainly imagine connections between magic, teaching, and prophecy.<sup>30</sup> *Didache* 11.2 speaks of the teacher who turns away and teaches another doctrine.<sup>31</sup> *Didache* 16.1 describes false prophets and corrupters: sheep will turn into wolves.<sup>32</sup> *Didache* 16.4 predicts the appearance of one who leads the world astray and will appear as a “son of God,” working signs and wonders. This seems to echo the Simon Magus type and also the performance of magic<sup>33</sup>, although I have not seen any commentary making this observation.

We next turn to the writings of Justin Martyr, the mid-second century apologist. In *1 Apology* 14 he makes a bold statement,

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<sup>23</sup> Holmes xx:164 translates as an augur. ANF 378 translates as ‘observer of omens’. Ehrman 421 ‘practice divination’. Niederwimmer 94 ‘practice augury’.

<sup>24</sup> Ehrman 421 ‘use incantations’.

<sup>25</sup> Homes xx:164 translates as magician. Ehrman 421 ‘rites of purification’ Niederwimmer 94 ‘person who practices purificatory rituals’.

<sup>26</sup> Niederwimmer 119 suggests parallels/source texts to 3.4. are Lev 19:26, 31, Deut 18:10-11, *T. 12. Patr.* 4.19 (but I find this is a tenuous connection to magic, the text deals with dream-possession by evil spirits), *Sib. Or.* 3.22f. (here too the connection to magic is weak, the text deals simply with idolatry).

<sup>27</sup> ANF 379 witchcrafts. Niederwimmer 115 ‘mixing potions’

<sup>28</sup> ANF 379 rapines Niederwimmer 115 ‘robbery’.

<sup>29</sup> Reflected in *Ap Trad* and *Ap Const*.

<sup>30</sup> As Elymas in Acts illustrates.

<sup>31</sup> Draper 1995:285.

<sup>32</sup> Draper 1995:284.

<sup>33</sup> A possible connection to the realm of magic is noted by Pardee, who in discussing use of the word *katathema* (curse) in *Didache* 16.5 notes the word’s relation to *anathema* and its connection to Jewish magical terminology (Pardee 1995:159-161).

[Demons]... ensnare, now by apparitions in dreams, now by tricks of magic (*dia magikōn*),<sup>34</sup> all those who do not labor with all their strength for their own salvation – even as we also, after our conversion by the Word have separated ourselves from those demons and have attached ourselves to the only unbegotten God through His Son. We who once reveled in impurities now cling to purity; we who once devoted ourselves to the arts of magic (*magikais technais chrōmenoi*) now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God...<sup>35</sup>

There are some remarkable features in this statement. What I find fascinating is that few if any scholars of Justin have raised the question of whether Justin is speaking from personal experience in magic. The usual line of Justin’s biography is traced as a steady path through the various philosophical schools, as Justin recounts in *Dial. Trypho* 2.<sup>36</sup> But as we have seen or will see, some who called themselves philosophers dabbled in magic (e.g., Apuleius) or defended ‘high’ magic as a noble study (e.g., Philo). Justin has knowledge of magical practices: he speaks of dream-spirits and familiars (1 Apol. 14, 15; and magical writings 2 Apol. 5). Even if Justin is using the rhetorical ‘we,’ he is still portraying current Christians as former magicians – and he admits that the allure of magic is strong (“... those who do not labour with all their strength” to resist it.) If Justin is indeed speaking of actual situations in which Christians were once magicians, then we have a rather remarkable admission in an apology – one might say it is counter-productive or at least would raise suspicions! Justin sets out in apologetic form the two-way schema of the *Didache*. We may wonder if all Christians of the time saw things as Justin did, and if they did entirely renounce their magical practices.

We revisit the figure of Simon Magus to briefly consider accounts from the second and third centuries. Why does a first-century figure see a growing reputation in later centuries? Because the phenomenon of heterodox/prax groups continues and grows. Simon is now portrayed as the originator of Christian Gnosticism and the fountainhead of many so-called heresies. Perhaps some heterodox groups claimed him as their founder – indicating the strength of the tradition about him and its popularity.<sup>37</sup> Simon is mentioned at length by Origen, Justin Martyr, 1 Apol 26.1-3, 56; Irenaeus Haer. I.23.1-4; Eusebius H.E. 2.13ff; Acts of Peter (NTA 2) and Ps. Clement *Recognitions* Book 2.5 — 3:49 (a very extended account).

I now examine in detail two accounts by Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons and prolific heresiologist of the second century (ca. 115-202 CE). Although he takes pains to describe the doctrines and interpretations of scripture by teachers and groups he views as heretical (e.g., Valentinus Book I.1-11), there are instances where Irenaeus throws magic accusations into the mix. The first figure is Carpocrates of Alexandria, who evidently was a contemporary of Irenaeus.

[Carpocrates and his followers] ... practice also magical arts and incantations; philters, also, and love-potions, and have recourse to familiar spirits, dream-sending demons, and

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<sup>34</sup> Osborn 1973:59 notes, “For Justin, the demons work also through magic. They use magical incantations and magical writings. All the practices of the occult are theirs.” Cf. 2 *Apology* 5.4 which states that demons are responsible for magical writings.

<sup>35</sup> Justin goes on to list other moral sins which have been renounced.

<sup>36</sup> Barnard 1967: 6-7 10-11; cf. Osborn 1973: 54-65.

<sup>37</sup> See discussion in Tuzlak, “The Magician and the Heretic”.



other abominations, declaring that they possess power to rule over, even now, the princes and formers of this world. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* XXV.3<sup>38</sup>

Carpocrates has been labeled a Gnostic (Christian), but his movement was part of the larger Christian circle.<sup>39</sup> In Irenaeus, do we see baseless magic accusation or a somewhat accurate description? Irenaeus leads with a discussion of Carpocrates' teachings (XXV.1-2) before bringing in the topic of magical practice. The accusation of concocting 'love potions' is part of the standard repertoire of the practical magician – and love spells play out in real world scenarios of divided love/allegiance in the case of Marcus (below). We have seen dream-demons and familiars mentioned by Justin Martyr. The claim to have power in this world – now – over forces of evil is intriguing. We will see this later in Augustine's lament over consulting kathartic astrology.

We next examine Irenaeus's account of Marcus and the Marcosians. Here, Irenaeus leads with a magic accusation (XIII) before delving into the doctrines of Marcus (XIV-XXII). Perhaps Marcus was notorious for his magic practices – and Irenaeus goes into some detail in describing them. The first passage suggests that Marcus synthesized the philosopher mode of magician with that of the practitioner and illustrates the influence such a seemingly accomplished person could exert in a group.

He is a perfect adept in magical impostures,<sup>40</sup> and by this means drawing away a great number of men, and not a few women, he has induced them to join themselves to him, as to one who is possessed of the greatest knowledge and perfection, and who has received the highest power from the invisible and ineffable regions above.... For in joining the buffooneries of Anaxilus<sup>41</sup> to the craftiness of the *magi* as they are called, he is regarded by his senseless and crack-brain followers as working miracles by these means. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* XIII.1<sup>42</sup>

Chapter XIII.2 has an interesting account of how Marcus manipulated the cup of eucharist so as to produce miraculous effects. Perhaps this is the work of a charlatan, or perhaps we see the sleight of hand of a shaman who seeks to produce a special effect as a teaching point.<sup>43</sup> Regardless, the use of an ECO Christian ritual element surely places Marcus with some orbit of Christianity, regardless of his alleged Gnostic doctrines. In other words, he and ECO Christians

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<sup>38</sup> Later writers such as Hippolytus Refutation of all Heresies XX repeat this account almost verbatim.

<sup>39</sup> Understandings of "Gnosticism" as a useful label for analysis have been debated in recent scholarship, but I will not go into detail on this issue here. Cf. Williams 1996 and the Seminar report of the Westar Institute Fall 2014.

<sup>40</sup> *Magicae imposturae peritissimus*, "a master of magic tricks." *Adv. Haer.* XIII.4 has *Marco mago* – "Marcus the magician."

<sup>41</sup> Anaxilaus was a first century BCE physician who seems to have combined science and magic and was banished from Rome by Augustus in 28 BCE. See Taran, L. (1970). "Anaxilaus of Larissa". *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. Vol. 1. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. p. 150.

<sup>42</sup> Hippolytus largely follows the account of Irenaeus, but add an interesting phrase: "A certain teacher among them, Marcus, an adept in sorcery, carrying on operations **partly by sleight of hand** and partly by demons, deceived many from time to time..." Hippolytus, *Ref. Haer.* XXXIV. Emphasis mine.

<sup>43</sup> See the interesting and nuanced discussion by Denzey Lewis 2017, who calls the Marcosians 'Gnostic hieratic specialists.'

share a common ritual, though they differ on its use and interpretation. This is typical of sectarian practice.<sup>44</sup>

Marcus seems to have targeted women for special attention, promising to grant them special powers in return for working closely with him (XIII.3-5). While this pattern can often be seen in the abuses of male charismatic leaders throughout the ages, Goehring<sup>45</sup> suggests that women may have found avenues for power in such heterodox groups which were lacking in mainstream groups and were thus not the victims Irenaeus portrays. In the next passage, we see a remarkably detailed account of breached boundaries at both the group and family/home level!

... Marcus compounds philters and love-potions in order to insult the persons of some of these women, if not of all, those of them who have returned to the Church of God – a thing which frequently occurs – have acknowledged, confessing too, that they have been defiled by him, and that they were filled with a burning passion towards him. A sad example of this occurred in the case of an Asiatic, one of our deacons ... who has received him (Marcus) into his house. His wife, a woman of remarkable beauty, fell a victim both in mind and body to this magician, and, for a long time, travelled about with him. At last, when, with no small difficulty, the brethren had converted her, she spent her whole time in the exercise of public confession, weeping and lamenting the defilement which she had received from this magician. *Adv. Haer XIII.5*

Irenaeus goes on to note that some of Marcus' disciples engaged in similar practices, producing a sizable quantity of compromised women. He concludes, "Such are the words and deeds by which, in our own district of the Rhone, they have deluded many women..." *Adv. Haer XIII.7*. We see here that Irenaeus has relatively first-hand knowledge of at least some of these events.

We will let Irenaeus have the last word on Marcus. Irenaeus quotes a poem by an "anonymous elder and preacher of the truth" who spoke against Marcus. Whether this was by Pothinus,<sup>46</sup> someone else, or a composition by Irenaeus himself, it is a marvelous diatribe and it shows the powerful fascination of a darkly charismatic figure such as Marcus.

Marcus, thou former of idols, inspector of portents,  
Skill'd in consulting the stars, and [*deep in the black*] arts of magic,<sup>47</sup>  
Ever by tricks such as these confirming the doctrines of error,  
Furnishing signs unto those involved by thee in deception,  
Wonders of power that is utterly severed from God and apostate,  
Which Satan, thy true father, enables thee still to accomplish,  
By means of Azazel, that fallen and yet mighty angel, --  
Thus making thee the precursor of his own impious actions. *Adv. Haer. XV.6, ANF*

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<sup>44</sup> Marcus also quotes and interprets OT and NT texts and symbols, *Adv. Haer. XIV.6-8*.

<sup>45</sup> Goehring 1988:329-344.

<sup>46</sup> Pothinus (ca 87-177 CE) was the first bishop of Lyon. So Coxe, in ANF I.340 fn 5. See "Pothinus" ODCS 1313.

<sup>47</sup> The italicized phrase may be a colourful gloss by the ANF translator. The extant Latin version of the phrase is *Astrologiae cognitor et magicae artis* – a more neutral sounding "skilled in astrology and magic arts."

Up until now, I have examined intra-group conflict through the evidence of various ECO texts. Here, I bring in a Roman polytheist writer. His account of Peregrinus gives us an outsider's perspective into that sort of boundary challenge. In Lucian's account of Peregrinus we see an interesting case study of someone who became a member of a Christian group, rose to the rank of leader, and then was expelled over some food controversy. I have found subtle points which suggest that magic practices may have played a role in Peregrinus's expulsion. In *Death of Peregrinus*, the character is portrayed by Lucian as an opportunist and wandering philosopher. He affiliates with a Christian group in Roman Palestine. Lucian says that he acted as "prophet and cult-leader" (*prophētēs kai thiasarchēs*) to the group.<sup>48</sup> He interpreted and wrote books for the group, acting as a teacher and author. Lucian says that the group "revered him as a god" (*ōs theon auton ekeinoi ēidounto*).<sup>49</sup> Despite his lofty position, the group expelled him for "eating some food forbidden to them" (section 16). The nature of the controversy is unknown. While some scholars<sup>50</sup> speculate it may have been the dietary prohibition mentioned in Acts 15:29, or a Mosaic food law, Harmon offers an interesting speculation: "Peregrinus may have signaled his relapse to Cynicism by sampling a 'dinner of Hecate' at the crossroads."<sup>51</sup>

I estimate that the above is a reasonable assumption. Hecate was a well-known Greco-Roman goddess, associated with liminality and magic, ghosts and spirits. People left food offerings to her at cross-roads for good fortune.<sup>52</sup> There was a literary trope that the poor scavenged that food (out of necessity) and that Cynic philosophers deliberately sampled the fare to signal their disdain for convention.<sup>53</sup> Since Peregrinus resumed and intensified his identify as a Cynic at this point, we may be seeing expulsion from a Christian group due to multiple affiliations, in particular with magic. Perhaps Peregrinus engaged in what Johnson calls an exploitation of the magical liminal nature of Hecate and the crossroads to facilitate his transition into a full-blown Cynic philosopher.<sup>54</sup> Also, whatever Lucian meant by *thiasarches*, we know that there was at least one thiasos to Hecate in the Roman world.<sup>55</sup> This line of thought could be explored more.

Here is another fascinating and rarely discussed case: the legend of Cyprian the magician. The consensus is that this is purely a legend – there is no evidence of any bishop of Antioch named Cyprian. For that reason, this account has received little scholarly attention.<sup>56</sup> The matter is complex – this Cyprian seems to have been known to Gregory Nazianzus and Prudentius (both 4<sup>th</sup> cent.). Since martyrdom under Diocletian is Cyprian's fate in the story, it clearly arose pre-Constantine. And for this paper, the issue is not whether Cyprian was a historical person but rather what features the story about him reveal. Here is the summary of some of the legend:

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<sup>48</sup> Liddell-Scott 801 *thiasarcheō* "to act as the leader of a religious group/ association / guild."

<sup>49</sup> We wonder what Lucian meant by this, and what may have been the historical reality. Perhaps we can cautiously say that the group accorded Peregrinus an exalted status, based on his abilities and evident charisma.

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Bremmer 2007: 743-44.

<sup>51</sup> Harmon 1936: 18-19 fn.2. Bremmer 2007:743-44 notes Harmon's idea but think it unlikely.

<sup>52</sup> On Hecate's suppers, see Smith 1992 and Von Rudloff 1999:113-117.

<sup>53</sup> Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead* 1.331, 425; *ibid*, *The Downward Journey* 7. Noted in Smith 1992:61

<sup>54</sup> A fascinating theory by Johnson 1991: 220-21. Johnson does not apply this to Peregrinus specifically, but I see it as a reasonable hypothesis.

<sup>55</sup> An inscription in IG XX.4.779. Kos, first century BCE.

<sup>56</sup> There is an entry in the 1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia* but it was dropped for later editions. See also *Butler's Lives of the Saints* III.652-653 and Baring-Gold *Lives of the Saints* vol 10: 386-389.

Cyprian was a heathen magician of Antioch who had dealing with demons. By their aid he sought to bring St. Justina, a Christian virgin, to ruin; but she foiled the threefold attacks of the devils by the sign of the cross. Brought to despair Cyprian made the sign of the cross himself and in this way was freed from the toils of Satan. He was received into the Church, was made pre-eminent by miraculous gifts, and became in succession deacon, priest, and finally bishop. Meier, *Catholic Encyc.* 1913 online.

We see here a familiar pattern: an adept magician becomes a member of the Church and rises through the ranks due to his “miraculous gifts.” As with other accounts, we wonder if this speaks to syncretism among church leaders. It seems unlikely that such a legend would arise and become popular if it had no basis in reality.

I next examine one tract of the early third century Latin writer of North Africa, Tertullian,<sup>57</sup> *De Idololatria* (On Idolatry). In *De Idol.* IX.1, Tertullian mentions a Christian who persists in pursuing astrology and hints at his rationale,

We observe among the arts (*artes*) some professions (*professiones*) liable to the charge of idolatry. Of astrologers (*de astrologis*) there should be no speaking even; but since one in these days has challenged us, defending on his own behalf perseverance in that profession, I will use a few words. I allege not that he honors idols, whose names he has inscribed on the heaven, to whom he has attributed all God’s power...

We see here a very understandable claim of the Christian astrologer, namely that since God created the stars, a study of the astral secrets is quite legitimate, perhaps even a form of worship. Imbedded in Tertullian’s next statement is such a claim, “Astrology now-a-days, treats of Christ – is the science of the stars of Christ; not of Saturn, or Mars...” Somewhere out of left field, Tertullian responds that although God had indeed created the stars, the lore of astrology was devised by the fallen angels.<sup>58</sup> Just as those angels were expelled from heaven, so should their disciples (astrologers) be expelled from the Christian community.

Also, in *De Idol.* IX, Tertullian reluctantly presents another argument in favor of magic and astrology: “But Magi (*magi*) and astrologers came from the east.” (*De Idol.* IX. 1) Tertullian’s interlocutor is citing the account of Matthew 2 to demonstrate the legitimacy of such studies. Perhaps Christian magicians and astrologers claimed to be inheritors of the traditions of those Magis who had honoured Christ.<sup>59</sup> To counter this claim, Tertullian pursues a rather weak ‘old dispensation’ argument; that while the Magi were appropriate to herald the birth of Christ, that event was the only time such activities could be sanctioned. In fact, such activities now must be prohibited to preserve the uniqueness of the event! He claims that:

After the Gospel, you will nowhere find either sophists, Chaldeans, enchanters, diviners, or magicians (*aut sophistas aut Chaldaeos aut incantatores aut coniectores aut magos*), except as clearly punished. (*De Idol.* IX.7)

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<sup>57</sup> See Dumerzier 1997:35-38, 59-60

<sup>58</sup> Tertullian is following the same tradition as Justin Martyr, 2 *Apol* 5.4.

<sup>59</sup> We have seen this in Philo and Apuleius.

To prove his point, Tertullian cites scriptural episodes after Christ's birth, in which magicians clearly were punished and removed from the group:

So too that other species of magic which operates by miracles (*quae miraculis operatur*)... for thenceforward Simon Magus, just turned believer, (since he was still thinking somewhat of his juggling sect (*de circulatoria secta*); to wit, that among the miracles of the his profession he might buy even the gift of the Holy Spirit through the imposition of hands) was cursed by the apostles, and ejected from the faith. (*De Idol.* IX.1)

### Primary evidence: post-Constantine (4<sup>th</sup> century and beyond)

In this section, I sketch out evidence of magicians within Christian circles during this later time period, effectively early 4<sup>th</sup> century (Edict of Milan, 313 CE) and beyond. It is interesting that magic practices persist, despite the growing centralization and institutionalization of Christianity. This persistence suggests the strong appeal of magic, its social benefit as a means not only access supernatural power but to claim social power, and its perceived utility in dealing with daily problems.

*Apostolic Tradition* was traditionally attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, an early 3<sup>rd</sup> century churchman. It may be a composite document, reflecting traditions of several communities from the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> to mid 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>60</sup> A later 4<sup>th</sup> century date for compilation seems most likely.

Chapter 16 of the *AT* presents a screening process in which candidates for the catechumenate and baptism are investigated. Certain crafts and professions (*epistēmē*) are proscribed. Of interest here are those relating to magic:

Nor shall a magician [*magos*] be considered for examination (*krisis*).  
The enchanter or the astrologer [*astrologos*] or the one who interprets dreams or the one who stirs up crowds,<sup>61</sup> or the one who ruins the hems of garments, those who are the stutterers [*psellistēs*]<sup>62</sup> or the one who makes phylacteries [*phulaktērion*]; either let them cease or be cast out.

I note that the list of magical occupations is extensive, and this leads me to suppose that each was a real possibility among those seeking admission to early Christian groups.

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<sup>60</sup> See discussion in Bradshaw 2002:1-17

<sup>61</sup> Presumably by promising miracles or acts of power. For example the messiah figures mentioned by Josephus, who attracted crowds with the promises of signs and wonders.

<sup>62</sup> See Bradshaw's 2002:92 discussion of *psellistēs* (stutterers) as a scribal error, and his proposal is that it should be read *psalistēs* (cutters) as modifying the phrase 'those who ruin/mutilate garments'. This despite though *psellistēs* is the *lectio difficilior* and perhaps on that basis should be taken seriously. My own proposal is that the word be retained. Henry Chadwick (cited in Bradshaw 2002:92) notes that "the overall context [of the section] is that of magic, and that fringes or tassels on clothing 'were often regarded in antiquity as a means of protecting the wearer against evil.'" What I propose is a kind of magician who wore dramatically-ruined clothes and spoke in glossolalia, chanted, uttered charms or otherwise engaged in odd language (stuttering).

We also look at the *Apostolic Constitutions*, text of ca. 380 CE and which follows *AT* closely. It has a screening list for candidates for adult baptism. They are to be interrogated as to their former lives (habits, and also means of employment).

Those singled out include: “a magician, an enchanter, an astrologer, a diviner, an user of magic verses, a juggler (sleight of hand magic) a mountebank (charlatan), one that makes amulets, a charmer, a soothsayer, a fortune-teller, an observer of palmistry; he that, when he meets you, observes defects in the eyes or feet of the birds or cats, or noises, or symbolic sounds. Let these be proved (tested) for a long time, for this sort of wickedness is hard to be washed away; and if they leave off those practices, let them be received, but if they will not agree to that, let them be rejected.” AC 8.32

No Patristic period discussion is complete without considering Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa (395-430 CE). In Chapter 7 of *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*, Augustine makes striking points.

We ought to equip and animate the weakness of man in withstanding temptations and offenses, whether these emerge without or rise within the church itself... these (adversaries) whose perverse multitudes fill the churches so far as bodily presence is concerned...

[*the candidate should be instructed so*] that he may neither allow himself to be easily lead astray... by any who are drunkards, covetous, fraudulent gamblers, adulterers, fornicators, lovers of public spectacles, **wearers of unholy charms, sorcerers, astrologers, or diviners practicing any sort of vain and wicked arts...** nor let himself fancy that any such course may be followed with impunity on his part, simply because he sees many who are called Christians loving these things and **defending them, and recommending them, and actually persuading others to their use.** Augustine, *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed* 7. <sup>63</sup>

In this litany of offenders, it is most likely that those who were defending their practices were practitioners of magic, rather than drunkards and fornicators. It appears that they have not accepted the prohibitions and group boundaries against magic and consider themselves to be valid members of what Augustine calls the catholic church.

The matter is not restricted to the laity, as we see in the next passage. Augustine laments at how common astrology in his congregation.

In our time so many evils have come into open usage that for such behavior we not only do not dare to excommunicate a lay person, we do not even demote a member of the clergy. *Enchiridion* 21.80

Augustine’s observation is borne out by a variety of church laws. Canon 36 of the Council of Laodicea (Asia Minor, ca. 340 CE) forbids clergy in both lower and higher orders from being magicians, charmers, soothsayers, or astrologers, or to make amulets. Wearers of such amulets

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<sup>63</sup> Emphasis mine. Augustine repeats the same message in chapter 48 of the same text.

were to be banned from the assembly.<sup>64</sup> The fourth Council of Toledo in 633 CE condemns clergy who consulted magi and astrologers. The Second Synod of Ephesus (499 CE) notes accusations against bishops of practicing divination and astrology.<sup>65</sup>

In another comment on astrology, Augustine reveals a rationale on why church members consulted that system. To my mind, this is an incredible admission, and relates to the two-tier magic practitioner hypothesis I offered at the beginning of this essay:

For many bad Christians, inspectors of calendars, and investigators and observers of times and days, when they began to be rebuked there by us, or by some good and better Christians, why they do these things, answer: “These things are necessary for the sake of this time; but we are Christians because of eternal life; therefore we believe in Christ, that he might give us eternal life; for this temporal life in which we are involved does not belong to his care. Augustine, *On the Psalms* 40.3

Hegedus 2007:184 notes: “It seems that some members of Augustine’s congregation were ‘hedging their bets’: they admitted to their bishop that they were Christians for the sake of eternity [salvation] but they adhered to astrology with regard to some aspects of life in the here and now.”<sup>66</sup>

With the perceived utility of magic and astrology in dealing with daily matters, the variety of syncretistic magic material makes sense. In order to balance the text-heavy and probably elite and ECO perspectives in the primary evidence above, we now examine some magic realia from this period, which deal with such practical matters.

The Greek Magic papyri has this interesting invocation:

Hail, God of Abraham; hail God of Isaac; Hail God of Jacob; Jesus Chrestos, the Holy Spirit, the Son of the Father who is above... and within... Bring Iao Sabaoth; may your power issue forth from him, until you drive away this unclean daimon Satan who is in him.<sup>67</sup>

There is a wealth of primary sources assembled in the anthology by Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, titled *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*. These texts range in date from the first through to the twelfth century.<sup>68</sup> I will cite two of these. Oxyrhynchus 1077 is a 6th century parchment which has the words of Matthew 4:23-24 (a summary of Jesus’ healing activities in Galilee), arranged in the shape of a cross, with a human figure drawn in the center. Evidently this object was used as a healing amulet. This is noteworthy in that it clearly

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<sup>64</sup> One wonders if they wore the amulets during worship! Maybe they placed them on the altar or immersed them in the font, to absorb spiritual power. One sees such practices in the Greek Orthodox tradition, with amulets for saints.

<sup>65</sup> All cited in Hegedus 2007:186.

<sup>66</sup> The problem of Christians consulting katarctic astrology (determining the most auspicious times to engage in activities, or refrain from them) was addressed by a variety of writers: Caesarius of Arles, Ambrose, Jerome. Hegedus 185ff. Tim’s book is highly recommended for its detailed analysis of astrology in early Christianity.

<sup>67</sup> Greek Magical Papyri PGM IV.1235f, 4th cent CE

<sup>68</sup> Amazingly, there is a love spell attributed to Cyprian the magician, and the text is dated in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. That is how I found out about the Cyprian legend, and this spell shows a lively and persistent interest in the story.

has magic connections (the amulet-acrostic format), it has an accurate quotation of the scripture text (evidencing knowledge), and it derives its power from an implicit faith in Jesus to heal. The second text is a 4th century curse. Like many *defixiones* it invokes the wrath of supernatural beings to strike down some person's opponent. These beings are the holy God, Gabriel, Michael, and Christ.

Finally, De Bruyn's erudite book (2017) on Christian amulets gives a wealth of information. He notes a variety of features in some amulets used for protection (ward off evil spirits) and healing. Amulets with a brief text from Gospels (e.g., titles and opening words [incipit], a healing account, Lord's prayer). These could be combined with an incantation. The text could be in cross shapes. Some also have a Trinitarian doxology (praise to Father – Son – Spirit).

## Conclusion

The review of evidence has proven interesting. Time and again, we have seen authors and leaders within the ECO side of early Christianities speak against magic, warn against Christians practicing magic, screen out potential candidates for admission, and pass laws against magic. However, the variety, sheer number, and time span of cases suggests that the leaders were not immediately successful in establishing the sort of solid boundaries they envisioned. Reading between the lines, we get a sense of syncretism between magic and Christianity, and peoples' rejection of the boundaries voiced by leaders. One wonders how solid the authority of the leaders was in some instances. Augustine (who does not mince words) deplores the inability of the Church to deal with clergy who have a foot in two camps. It appears that many people in Christian groups had philosophical and practical interests in magic. The boundaries between magic and Christianity were blurred, deliberately and often.

As I noted in the introduction, this has been an initial and yet ambitious investigation into intra-group issues around magic in early Christianities. I estimate that more can be done, and I look forward to the discussion at the conference.

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