

Magic and Religion: A Semiotic Analysis
Adria R. Haluszka (Ohio State University)

The question of whether “magic” can be separated from “religion” is old and often debated, although the focus of the debate seems to be “how” they are different rather than if in fact they really are so distinct (Graf [1991, 1997], Smith [1995], Versnel [1991]). In this paper I will shed some new light on the issue through an analysis of religion as a semiotic domain. Religion is a semiotic domain in that it recruits a specific set of practices (rituals) and beliefs that utilize several kinds of modalities - sacred cultic images or artifacts, sacred texts or myths about divinities, the specific prescribed rites themselves, and so forth - and in that each of these modalities can communicate distinctive types of meanings to anyone participating in that domain. Semiotic theorists have argued that participants in a semiotic domain can be “readers,” meaning that they participate in the domain through their ability to understand (read) the modalities that the domain recruits (the cultic images, sacred texts, and so forth), but that some participants can also be “writers” or “producers,” meaning that they do not merely “read” in the domain, but read in an active and critical way and thus are able to create new “content” within the domain.

Semiotic theorists find that active and critical awareness within a particular domain - that is, being a good and conscious “writer/producer” - can leverage a particular design grammar at a meta-level. This meta-level awareness of the domain can thus lead to critique, to novel meanings, or to transformation within the domain, although the domain itself remains intact so far as its essential identity (Gee 2003). This paper presents an analysis of religion as a semiotic domain, and more specifically looks at the ways in which the “writers/producers” within that domain can change its various modalities. One important participant in this process is what we are accustomed to calling the magician, who as an active designer and producer of new knowledge, new recipes or techniques, and new ways of interacting with the gods, creates new content within the domain of religion. This new content falls into a category that both ancient people and scholars label “magic,” but one that does not essentially exceed the parameters of practices normatively considered as “religious.”

I offer one case to exemplify my semiotic approach. Johnston (2008:154-5) discusses two divinatory spells from the Greek magical papyri that invoke the help and presence of Apollo, but that in addition call upon “Laurel” herself, as a divine being, to help out (*PGM* II.81–3 and III.251-4). Johnston points out that laurel as the sacred plant of Apollo has good cultic precedent, as the plant was used in public ceremonies connected with Apollo. However, it was only the magicians who thought of “turning the tree back into a nymph” (Daphne), so to speak, and invoking her aid as they would invoke the aid of other gods (Johnston 2008:154-5). I argue that this example suggests that the magician, as a “reader” in the religious domain, used and understood the same myths and rituals surrounding Apollo and laurel as did other people, but that additionally the magician, as a “writer” producing new content within the domain, created a new divinity from whom he could gain more (or new) powers. The magician is an active producer of new content, but he does so from a solid understanding of the various modalities already present within the domain—adapting what scholars have typically labeled more normal cultic practices. In defining religion in terms of semiotic domains and analyzing magic as the product of an active “writer/producer,” I will not only offer a new approach to considering the assumed differences between magic and normative cultic practices, but also will also emphasize the likelihood that such differences are more often matters of perception or degree than actual practice (cf. Johnston 2002).

Bibliography

- Betz, Hans Dieter. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation; including the Demotic Spells*. Chicago and London 1986
- Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. New York 2003.
- Graf, Fritz. 1991. "Prayer in Magical and Religious Ritual," in C. Faraone and D. Obbink, eds., *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*. 188-213.
----- *Magic in the Ancient World*. Cambridge and London 1997.
- Johnston, Sarah Iles. *Ancient Greek Divination*. Blackwell 2008.
- "Sacrifice in the Magical Papyri," in P. Mirecki and M. Meyer, eds., *Magic and Ritual Power in the Ancient World* (Leiden 2002) 344–58.
- Smith, J.Z. 1995 "Trading Places." P. Mirecki and M. Meyer, eds., *Magic and Ritual Power in the Ancient World* (Leiden 2002) 13-27
- Versnel, H. S. 1991 "Some Reflections of the Relationship Magic - Religion." *Numen XXXVIII* 177-197.