

MEDIA, RELIGION and POPULAR CULTURE: from extraordinary to extra-ordinary

A touch of magic within on-line culture

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Abstract

This article focuses on how the realm of magic has extended within the internet and on the forms it has taken within the on-line world. After briefly presenting some of the theories of magic along the history, I take a closer look at some of the on-line practices that fit the description of magic, focusing on magic healing and alternative medicine. I use qualitative content analysis in order to analyse an article about how alternative therapy doctors receive their education, in the United States and people's comments on this article, and this has led to the finding of the fact that the major characteristics of the magic are preserved in the online media, while some minor aspects have undergone changes or transformations.

Keywords

Magic, therapy, education, alternative.

Résumé

Cet article envisage la modalité dont les éléments de magie sont de plus en plus présents dans la culture en ligne et sur ses manifestations dans le monde nouveau de l'Internet.

Après une courte présentation de l'histoire de la magie, je me dirige, dans ma démarche, vers quelques pratiques en ligne qui appartiennent à la culture de la magie et l'accent tombe sur les guérisons magiques et la médecine alternative.

J'utilise l'analyse de contenu qualitative de cet article pour trouver des conclusions concernant l'éducation des thérapeutes de médecine alternative aux Etats-Unis et, en plus les discussions, les commentaires, les opinions des gens sur cet aspect-là.

En conclusion, mon étude essaie de trouver les orientations d'une tendance dont la magie garde dans le domaine en ligne ses aspects majeurs et, en même temps, adapte les ses aspects mineurs aux transformations de la communication.

Mots clés

Magie, thérapie, éducation, alternatif.

Some of the theories of magic

The term magic can be defined in numerous ways and has and still is used in various studies. In some societies it constitutes part of the religious sphere, while in others, such as the ones that are highly industrialised, it is considered to be a superstition, or even a form of entertainment.¹ "From the perspective of etymology, magic means the science and religion of the magi (magi were the members of a tribe belonging to the larger confederation of the mezi people, and the priests of Zoroastru were recruited from here).² Aside from these members being fierce opponents of the evil, they could also set back demons' attacks or witches' spells, they would diminish the gods' anger, as they were considered to be their messengers on earth and last, but not least, they practiced magical medicine. "Magic encompasses agents, acts and representations: we can call a magician the person who performs magical acts, even though he might not be a professional. By the term magical representations one understands all the ideas and beliefs correspondent to magical acts. As to the acts according to which one can define all the other elements of magic, we can call them magical rites. These are traditional acts with sui generis efficiency."³ While practising magic, «man makes himself lord of the powers and employs them for his own purpose»⁴, because "magic knows no bounds to

its power; it deems itself able to make rain and to change the course of heavenly bodies. (...) In magic man is the master.”⁵

The definition of magi helps us better understand the practices they performed: ”The Greek word magos (Latin magus), borrowed from Old Persian magu-, has two distinct meanings. First, it refers to a Zoroastrian priest and usually has a neutral or positive meaning.

Second, it describes someone who engages in private types of ritual with the intent to influence the world or the course of history, for which most languages only have words with negative overtones (magician, wizard, and sorcerer)”.⁶ These Persian magi are referred to as magicians in many works from Greek and Latin literature: ”the Persian magi were thought to have special powers in visiting the realm of the dead, in guiding souls to the otherworld, or evoking the spirits of the dead. They excelled in magic, using herbs, stones, and spells for their purposes, and they developed a reputation for astrological knowledge and interests. It should be noted that in this context the word is not always used in a negative sense. Even Christian literature shows certain ambivalence in this respect. The despised figure of Simon Magus shows the negative use of the term, whereas the Magi who first recognized the newborn king of the Jews (Mt. 2:1–12) show the lasting impact of the positive reputation of these ”Persian” wise men in the realms of astrology and divination.”⁷

There have been numerous theories of the magic, which are disposed in two categories by J. Middleton, in ”The Encyclopaedia of Religions”, even at the risk of oversimplifying the concept, as mentioned in the text: the category of ”literalists” and the one of the ”symbolists”. The first suggest and support an instrumental function of magic, underlining that the impulse behind magical performances is similar to the one behind scientific experiments, and the second support the fact that, even if both magicians and scientists try or not to obtain the same result, the language used to do so is totally different-one is symbolic and the other is concrete, and by language we understand the means they use.⁸

Among the first to have described magical practices was James Frazer, who created an „evolutionist scheme” of thought which encompasses three stages: the most primitive one is the magical thought, then the religious one follows and the last of the stages is the one of scientific thought. He offered a definition of

magic that was in total agreement with his own personal belief that magical performances are sympathetic rites based on The Law of similarity and on The Law of contact. He named the first one Homeopathic Magic and the second one Contact Magic.⁹

Other important names when it comes to the theoretical framework of magic are: Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Marcel Mauss (1872-1939), and Max Weber (1864-1920). The first ones considered that religion, which in their opinion, included also magic, was a social fact which existed only due to collective action and which is autonomous. Durkheim underlined the fact that both religion and magic persisted even in those societies that are guided by the laws of science. At that point there is a clear distinction between magic and religion, in that religion is considered a collective act, while magic is a private matter, and also, the magician has clients and not a church. Max Weber viewed magicians as precedents of the prophets, and magic itself as precedent of technology, explaining this way the decline of the first at the same time as the latter flourishes.¹⁰

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) stated his theories of magic practices based on field research in Trobriand Island in Melanesia. For that island’s inhabitants, magic had several functions. First of all, it lowered the risks while building trust when people had to fulfil dangerous activities, such as ocean fishing, secondly, magic could expand people’s abilities into the realm of miraculous deeds (the magic of attracting the right partner) and thirdly, magic could help them go beyond morality and material things, and that was black magic. Furthermore, magic would help its adepts and practitioners build more confidence and in doing so it helped them to better organise their work.¹¹

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) studied the inhabitants of Andaman Island in Bengal Gulf. In his research he does not make a clear distinction between magic and religion. The inhabitants of the Island admit that some objects and substances have magical properties which can be of help for a magic practitioner to use in order to heal, to control the weather or for other similar uses. The power and the magic knowledge are offered to the magician through having contact with the spirits which possess this mystical power, this power being either good or bad, and the term used by the author to describe this special power is the Polynesian word *mana*.¹²

Claude Levi-Strauss reached the conclusion that magic and religion are complementary and they cannot be separated, neither being above or beneath the other one. Also, magic is a subjective concept, in his opinion, and therefore the same concept cannot be used when analysing and understanding several different cultures. Going further with this idea, Levi-Strauss reaches the conclusion that this concept of magic is empty of meaning, as it can be assigned any number of subjective meanings, so his suggestion would be that the category of magic be "dissolved".¹³ I have made a brief description of some of the theories of magic and their authors.

There are many magical practices used in healing a large variety of illnesses and I would like to only mention some of them. Over the years, men have used healing crystals to protect themselves and their loved ones against demons, bad luck or illnesses. These crystals are said to possess healing powers, and that is because of their energetic vibrations. In Romanian folklore and not only, one of the most accessible crystals within the close reach of man, but at the same time possessing great power of protection has been the salt crystal. "Salt is considered to be, together with metals, a weapon against bad spirits. In order to protect children from harmful spirits salt is added to their bath (...). At night, it is considered beneficial to add salt on the window, as this ensures good sleep and no evil can approach you."¹⁴

The healing power of affirmation is another good example for the purpose stated. They have been considered to be beneficial, an alternative healing when disease appears, for a long time, as we can read in Socrates' *Chamide*: "When he asked me whether I knew a cure for headache, I answered, not without hesitation, that I did. – Which is that cure? He asked me. I answered it was an herb, together with an incantation..."¹⁵ From here, one can assume a connection between incantations and the positive phrases used today as part of alternative therapies.

This article aims at describing a specific use of magic, and that is plant and natural healing, so the theories that back this purpose are the ones that describe magic as being an independent, social and still persisting in industrialised societies phenomena, and this is possible by using substances bearing spiritual power. The plants used in these therapies have been given various names: medicinal plants, herbs, healing mixtures, etc, but they all function according to the same principal, and that is the fact

that there are healing substances provided by nature and that we can procure and prepare them ourselves. "The magical properties of certain plants have been noticed for a very long time by the man in traditional societies. Life in nature has helped him to be more open and receptive towards anything that could become a support, a natural ally in the survival battle he kept carrying on ceaselessly."¹⁶ In the already mentioned paper numerous other beneficial plants are listed: basil, poppy, nut tree, elderberry, garlic, and their support have maximum effect if they are harvested at certain dates, such as during Midsummer's Eve.

Examples of on line magical practices

The realm of magic encompasses a great variety of manifestations: guessing the future, healing, witchcraft, domination of spirits or demons, influencing natural phenomena, controlling individuals' actions, etc.¹⁷ Considering the large variety of this universe and its practices, I will use in this paper the categories used by M. Coman in order to group the magical rituals according to their objectives: "healing rites, divination rites, witchcraft (influencing natural phenomena and human behaviour) and shamanism (a synthesis of all magical practices that concentrates on communicating with the occult world in trance)".¹⁸

Healing rites are the ones I will concentrate upon. These can be attained in different ways, using different techniques and approaches, as a „healer, medicine man or *curandero*"¹⁹ does not only face a biological dysfunction, placed exclusively within the patient's body, but also, he has to fight supernatural forces which have existed since the beginning of time. Therefore, healing becomes an act of re-creation, one that corrects, or a cosmic battle against a primary force, so myths are born, myths explaining both the cause of the illness and the healing techniques. In this way, the myths of how different healing plants came into being were born, myths which are repeated during the healing ritual.²⁰

In the book „Introduction to cultural anthropology – The myth and the rite", magic is described as having an active, individual, and efficient and present role²¹, thing which can refer, on the one hand, to anthropologists' "recent interest for magical practices in African or South-American countries, and to the space mass media offers to the subject, on the other." A concept, which encompasses the idea of magical power, could have been revealed at once everywhere."²²

This is what Hubert and Mauss stated, and in order to preserve the present role of the magic, considering the numerous sites and blogs that promote magical products, I could add that this concept can still be revealed everywhere.

A study from 2003, conducted by Chris Klassen, can be considered as supporting the previous statement I made. In her study, "Cybercoven: Being a Witch Online"²³, the author researched for one year a group he had created for magic practitioners who had accepted to take part in the discussions initiated on this group. The group was made up of 23 witches-that was the highest number of members it ever reached-and several magic related topics were discussed, such as divination, more specific tarot cards reading. One of the questions the author asked was related to the connection that a witch establishes with her cards in the physical world, by using direct contact, more precisely it was about how the witch can still obtain this same connection in the virtual world. But the discussions on the group cleared out this issue: the tarot cards can receive energy from a distance, by the witch sending out her energy, not only to the cards she uses, but also to the entire virtual space. It is the same procedure as when performing a spell, the energy is sent towards a specific object and with a specific purpose, and that is why the results appear. Virtual space is not perceived in opposition with the physical one, just as the mind is not seen in opposition with the body, so the energy flow is not restricted.²⁴

Another article²⁵ from „Journal of Health Communication” in 2013 focused upon the connection between health literacy and the use of alternative medical therapies. Alternative and complementary medicine is defined in this study as” a group of medical and health systems, of therapies and products which at present are not considered to be part of conventional medicine”.²⁶ The results of this research were that better health literacy is associated with a more frequent use of alternative medicine products.²⁷

There is another study²⁸ that focuses upon examples and scientific experiments which support and validate „the experience of the body-mind consciousness which the divination practitioners have been using for thousands of years”.²⁹ The author of the article underlines the idea that „the implications of the study of divination are huge”, and she mentions organisms physics studies which suggests that our entire body posses intelligence, especially those parts

that are connecting tissues, and the collagen fibres function as communication channels for electric impulses which are similar to the meridians used by the Chinese medicine and to the routes that „the light fascicule” follow in the divinatory system used by the Maya people.³⁰

Jane Moning Atkinson’s research³¹ focuses on shamans today. She is interested in the comparisons between shamanism and psychotherapy, mentioning the fact that Jung himself showed great interest in shaman practices, then she mentions and discusses Levi-Strauss’s article where he compares the Cuna culture healing texts with psychoanalysis procedures and steps, placing this analysis within structural and functional paradigms.³² One of the conclusions she reaches is that shaman activities are not performed isolated, but they are always part of more complicated and important systems of thought and practice.³³

And that is how, just a click away, there are magical practices, which appear to be even closer now than before. In addition, if services offered on a certain site are not satisfying, one can always choose another.³⁴ These are just a few among the numerous sites which can be accessed and where the visitor can receive advice for a healthier life, can create his own treatment using Bach flower remedies, can discover the angel they are supposed to pray to in order to improve various aspects of his life, can learn numerous positive affirmations that have the power to improve those aspects of their lives that are unsatisfying, or they can even heal physical problems, or one can become a member of a witchcraft club, where one will become initiated using information from the sites that offer it and someone can use this information for self healing purpose. These internet sites together with their profiles from the social networks, such as Facebook, seem to be a closed club as al the visitors who comment are extremely content and grateful for using the recommended products and they only want to share the cases in which these products had the desired effect. There are no debates.³⁵

Magic and Science

Although at a first glance it may appear that magic and science have no common ground, scientific research has proven the contrary, as shown in the above mentioned articles and studies. Furthermore, as described in ”21st Century Anthropology:

A Reference Handbook: Magic and Science”³⁶, anthropological studies have struggled to set a clear limitation between these two, but in time this has changed, as discoveries and research have shown that there is a common ground of the two. Therefore, magic is used to explain the birth of the world or of other natural phenomena, it helps control crop yields or hunt, it helps people cope with their future by predicting it.

On the other hand, science has its own myths, such as Big Bang theory, which explains the creation of the world using mathematical and astronomical data. In this way, the two have the same purpose, to explain how something came into being, although they use different means.

Mathematics itself uses numbers, which were considered magical by the Pythagoreans, the same people who developed mathematics as science. Both magic and science have rules and steps to be followed in order for the result to be valid, also, they both use symbols as their main ingredients. In addition, both magic and science study natural phenomena, trying to explain them and to better understand and use in their favour. ”Each approach is logical within the realm of the culture that engenders it. Magic may be compared to science as a way of creating order and achieving success in human endeavours that promote health and well-being. Magical acts sometimes contributed to scientific ideas, yet the two can stay side-by-side, founded on entirely different views of the world.”³⁷

Even recent medical studies reinforce this idea of a common ground of the two practices. In this respect, the study of Rebecca Clarke, Fionnula T. Lundy and Lorcan Mcgarvey about herbal treatment for asthma and COPD reveals the way plants could offer benefits to patients and should be granted more attention and obviously more study. Their findings state the fact that classical treatments using drugs can have important negative side effects, especially when used for long terms, and that alternative treatments based on plants could be of more use for some patients, but that there is still little research when it comes to herbal remedies, mainly due to the fact that there is a rigid attitude regarding these holistic practices. Also, the mechanisms through which these plants work are still unknown and further research is needed.

The fact remains, that patients suffering from asthma or COPD have responded positively to herbal treatments, and that these treatments do not have the much feared side effects. Willingness for such

remedies is increasing, both in medical and patients world. Another sound advice the authors offer is that future research regarding plant medicine should and must be conducted with integrity, without any bias.³⁸

Another article³⁹ studied the effects of natural food provided pre-, pro- and synbiotics in human health, stating the importance of food diets in human health. When the author refers to food diet, he explains this term by the often used expression ”Mediterranean diet”, that is ”low in animal fat, low in refined carbohydrates and rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, and fish”⁴⁰. Together with the diet mentioned, the study has come up with findings regarding a healthy life style, defined by the author as: ”no use of tobacco, moderate use of alcohol, regular physical exercise”, and the two have a demonstrated positive effect on human health. Also, the author describes the role of vitamin D in treating auto-immune diseases, referring to Chron’s disease, and the negative impact of treatments carried on in hospitals, as the artificial environment leads to more stress on the patient, stress which leads to increasing inflammation, which he calls „the mother of disease”. His results show that the use of natural pre-, pro- and synbiotics would have a positive effect when it comes to inflammatory and autoimmune conditions.

The medical studies above mentioned bring this link between magic and science even closer in time, reinforcing it, making their common ground even more solid.

On Science Side

I have also focused on internet sites which are against magical practices, using scientific information and arguments, and the one that drew my attention,⁴¹ mainly due to the great number of comments it hosts, is also the one where I have selected an article regarding theoretical and practical education of the ones who desire to become alternative medicine doctors.⁴²

The method I used in order to analyse this article and people’s comments regarding it was qualitative content analysis. The article is divided into two themes: the education classical doctors receive and the one received by alternative medicine doctors. The alternative therapies described in the article are as follows: traditional Chinese and Japanese medicine therapies, plant medicine, crystal therapy, bio resonance therapy, osteopathy, energy flow therapy,

homeopathy, psychological counselling, nutrition, etc. These therapies are not described at length, no technical details are offered, but they are considered to be a whole, and that is because they are taught together in alternative medicine schools. The ones who train themselves to become doctors specialise in a certain physiologic area and not in a specific alternative technique. This means that a „naturopath doctor”, the term used in the article, specialised in endocrinology, for example, can recommend his future patients any of the above alternative therapies, used alone or in any combinations that he considers appropriate. Within these two major themes there are four sub categories: the education received prior to the superior school-Naturopathic School or classical medical school, the curricula the students of both schools follow, the number of hours dedicated to practice and the period of residency assigned to each of the schools. The article has three sub titles:”The applicants: What THEY do not want you to know”, „All sound and fury: The Curriculum”, „The big difference”. After analysing the terms used, I noticed a great difference between image and content, between what the alternative therapy doctors and the schools they attend claim to be and what the article’s author states they are. Analysing these sub themes brings into light the fact that the practitioners of alternative therapies are at a disadvantage, the starting point being that they can have a lower degree in order to be admitted to alternative medicine school, the curriculum they study by is inferior to the one used in classical medical school, they attend fewer practice hours, and there is no residency curriculum. All the above mentioned aspects are practiced in United States schools, country that the article refers to.

Even the tone of the article, as of the entire site, is one of obvious superiority, even if the reader chooses to only take a short glimpse at the titles, distrust and underestimation of the alternative medicine doctors and their therapies come to mind. The key words of the article are: pseudo medicine, naturopathic school, and naturopathic doctor.

Regarding the comments at the end of this article, namely 103, they too can be labelled in three categories, according to attitude expressed through language, to expressions used, to tone and explicit language used by the commentators.

Therefore, the ones which are in science corner, so totally and radically against alternative therapies, ere the most aggressive in language, express an attitude

which denies these therapies, use an offensive language- naturopathy is intellectually and scientifically bankrupt; waste their money and intellect; nonsense; the lack of education; the lack of science behind this woo; worthless nonsense; etc. Their tone is critical, it is one that trivialises this kind of therapies, and both explicit and implicit expressions are used. The category of the ones that support science is mainly made up from classical doctors and it is made up by a far greater number of members. Their tone is ironic, even mocking at the alternative therapists and even at their patients. The key words used are: quack, nonsense, woo.

Another category is made up by the ones who tested and were helped by alternative medicine techniques, that is why they use a favourable language, baring a positive attitude towards them, their tone is optimistic as they narrate their own successful experiences and healings with the help of alternative therapy, and the language they use is only an explicit one. The key terms of the second category are: help, healing, herbal medicine.

The third category is of the ones who try to build a bridge between the other two, therefore they use a neutral tone, polite expressions, related experiences, with a clear, explicit, non aggressive language.

I have noticed that in the same way as people who access internet sites containing alternative therapy products comment favourably to these products, on this page, the ones who read and comment at the end of the science articles share the same opinions as the authors of the articles and only use comments which support their opinions and the ideas of the article, or they make sarcastic remarks regarding the ones who use alternative therapies, criticising and even mocking at them. Therefore, opinions are polarised regarding common subjects and interests, and the conclusion that none of the two ”sides” is open to honest, helpful dialogue, none is open to take into account the other’s opinion and point of view, each wanting to win the online fight of the comments.

On this internet page there are articles with four hundred comments, but I decided to focus upon one with one hundred in order to only familiarise the readers with the phenomena discussed, without getting into too many details.

A third type of online products which show interest for alternative therapies and upon which I have focused are the forums⁴³ on medical topics. There, one can find special sections where people

share their experiences when using various alternative techniques, or people ask questions about different plant remedies or alternative doctors in order to cure various diseases for themselves or their loved ones.

Conclusions

From the material I have presented so far, I have reached the conclusion that the opinions of the people from the two sides above mentioned are not to be reconciled and those who support classical medicine and at science at the same time totally and sceptically reject other therapies or techniques. People read and take part in discussions on those sites which are of interest to them and, more importantly, where their opinions are shared.

Another matter which drew my attention and which I consider worth mentioning is that certain blogs⁴⁴ that used to offer both the topics and the place for debates (257 comments on the subject of healing with crystal therapy, both for and against) are not accessed anymore, in that even the author does not post on his own blog (last post was in 2015), but he has moved his activity on social networks such as Twitter or Facebook.

Even though, as I have already mentioned, there are numerous sites and blogs which offer access both to alternative remedies and to alternative doctors, the number of people who comment on the articles posted is low, and comments seem to relocate on social networks. Here access is limited, as an article can be shared by one person to a restricted group of friends or only to his personal profile, and here details concerning private space policies act, so there is limited access to the point of view of the public concerning the type of alternative products above discussed. A bigger picture can be obtained by taking into account a greater number of debates.

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Notes

1. (Middleton 1987, 82)
2. (Olteanu 1999, 9)
3. (Hubert-Mauss 1996, 25-26)
4. (Styers 2004)
5. Idem, 107
6. (Jong 2005, 5559)
7. Ibidem
8. (Middleton 1987, 82)
9. Idem p.(84)
10. Idem p.(85-86)
11. Idem p.(86)
12. Idem p.(87)
13. Idem p.(88)
14. (Olteanu 1999, 357)
15. (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/charmidest.html> 1994)
16. (Olteanu 1999, 187)
17. (Coman 2008, 67)
18. Idem P.(73)
19. (Russell 1987, 416)
20. (Sullivan 1987, 228)
21. (Coman 2008, 106-117)
22. (Hubert-Mauss 1996, 79)
23. (Klassen 2002)
24. Idem p.(59)
25. (Gardiner 2013)
26. Idem p.(44)
27. Ibidem
28. (Tedlock 2006)
29. Idem p.(63)
30. Idem p.(71)
31. (Atkinson 1992)
32. Idem p.(31-34)
33. Idem p.(35)
34. (louisehay.com); (Virtue); (Cabat); (bachcentre.com); (Anderson); (Black)
35. (http://www.terapie-florala.ro/testimoniale_terapie_florala.html); (<http://www.bachflower.com/bach-flower-rescue-remedy-success-stories/>)
36. (Flemming 2010)
37. Idem p.(19)
38. (Clarke- Fionnula-Mcgarvey 2015)
39. (Bengmark 2012)
40. Ibidem
41. (<https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/naturopathic-education-a-faq/>)
42. Ibidem
43. (<https://patient.info/forums/discuss/20-year-case-of-eczema-cured-with-st-john-s-wort-301784>); (<https://forum.softpedia.com/topic/1066918-stai-sa-mi-fac-un-ceai/>)
44. (<https://sciencebasedlife.wordpress.com/2011/09/05/crystal-healing-magic-cures-or-just-rocks/>)

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