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Robert W. Scribner

The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the “Disenchantment of the World”

For most college-educated people, one of the two or three things they commonly know about the Reformation is that it contributed, alongside the Enlightenment, to a process of secularization, often understood as the rationalization of modern thought-modes by the “disenchantment of the world,” the elimination of magic from human action and behavior. This did not mean the repudiation of religious belief, but a separation of “magic” from “religion” in early modern Europe. The distinction between religion and magic had been blurred in the pre-Reformation church; indeed, for convinced Protestants the central act of medieval Christian worship, the Mass, with its doctrine of the transubstantiated Eucharist, had at its heart a form of magic. The Reformation removed this ambiguity by taking the “magical” elements out of Christian religion, eliminating the ideas that religious rituals had any automatic efficacy, that material objects could be endowed with any sort of sacred power, and that human actions could have any supernatural effect.¹ Religion was thus freed of “superstitious” notions about the workings of the world and became a matter of internal conviction, enabling the rational human action characteristic of modernity.

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1 Richard van Dülmen, *Religion und Gesellschaft. Beiträge zu einer Religionsgeschichte der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), 10-35, 204-214. The term “Entzauberung der Welt” is derived from Max Weber, who saw it as a “great historic process in the development of religions . . . which . . . came here to its logical conclusion,” Weber (trans. Talcott Parsons), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958), 105.

The best summary of the argument about the Reformation taking the “magical” out of Christian religion is Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 27-89. Weber (trans. Ephraim Fischhoff), *The Sociology of Religion* (London, 1965), 151-152, also held the Mass to be a form of magic.

The focus of this article is popular magic, which may certainly be used as a touchstone for judging the extent and manner in which the Reformation redefined the nature of religion. However, the problem is complicated because our modern view of the Reformation rests essentially on the ways in which it was constructed in the nineteenth century out of the characteristic intellectual concerns of that age (nationalism, scientific rationalism, and a preoccupation with evolutionary models of development). The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought first positioned the Reformation as part of a long-term process of rationalization and secularization, whereas post-Enlightenment thought-modes failed to understand the essential characteristics of medieval Christianity, especially the medieval notion of the sacramental. The view that the Reformation was a logical stage on the road to modernization is now seen as problematic, as is the conventional wisdom of how it changed the notion of the sacred. In order to understand the relationship of “religion” to “magic” both before and after the Reformation, a good deal of rethinking is required.² Thus, it is necessary to begin with the relationship of magic to pre-Reformation Christianity before we can go on to appreciate the problem magic posed for both Protestantism and Catholicism alike.

Let us begin with a definition of magic, which can be understood in the words of Flint as “the exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they.” Religion, by contrast, is the recogni-

2 For the developing historiography of the Reformation, see A. Geoffrey Dickens and John M. Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Oxford, 1985). This impressive pioneering work is very sketchy on the interpretative currents in nineteenth-century Germany, but adequately reveals how the Enlightenment changed historical understanding of the Reformation.

A rethinking of the problem of the relationship of “religion” to “magic” is indicated in Scribner, “The Impact of the Reformation on Daily Life,” in *Mensch und Objekt im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit: Leben-Alltag-Kultur* (Vienna, 1990), 316–343, [Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, DLXVIII]. See also Scribner, “Symbolising Boundaries: Defining Social Space in the Daily Life of Early Modern Germany,” in Gertrud Blaschitz, Helmut Hundsichler, Gerhard Jaritz, Elisabeth Vavra (eds.), *Symbole des Alltags. Alltag der Symbole. Festschrift für Harry Kühnel zum 65. Geburtstag* (Graz, 1992), 821–841. It is worth noting that this rethinking process began with Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, a work which might have led to a reconceptualization of the Reformation’s understanding of religion had less attention been devoted on his discussion of witchcraft.

tion by human beings of a supernatural power on whom they are dependent, to whom they show deference and are obligated. On the face of it we have a clear-cut distinction between religion and magic: on the one hand, human dependence on, and deference toward, the divine; on the other, human attempts to appropriate divine power and apply it instrumentally. Yet the contrast is not so simple when the reality of religion as a historical phenomenon is considered. Late-medieval European religion was complex and varied, and to grasp its totality we must be aware of its multidimensionality. There are at least seven major features of medieval European religion to consider. It was simultaneously soteriological, functional, pastoral, and concerned with piety, as well as having irreducible social, political, and economic dimensions. Only the first four will be mentioned here as most relevant to our theme.³

Medieval European religion was “soteriological” in that it offered an understanding of, and a means toward, human salvation focused on the saving death and resurrection of Christ as revealed in the Bible, and, in particular, redemption from sin and its consequences for humans both individually and collectively. It was “functional” in that it gave meaning to daily life by marking out religiously the key stages in the human life cycle and in the cyclical rhythms of the seasons, thus providing a form of cosmic order for human existence. Its “pastoral” role was to offer consolation amid the anxieties of daily life and to provide a means of reconciliation for human frailty. The concern with “piety” refers to a consistent state or attitude about the religious meaning of life, expressed in actions symbolizing dependence upon and preoccupation with the divine, perhaps better signified by the word “godliness.”

It was in the functional aspect of medieval religion that the line between religion and magic could become blurred. Religion functioned as a means of order in daily life because it was predi-

3 Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1991), 3. Adapted from the definition of religion in Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge, 1990), 4, although Tambiah’s own favored definition might do as well: “a special awareness of the transcendent, and the acts of symbolic communication that attempt to realize that awareness and live by its promptings,” 6. For the ways in which religion is socially stratified and its political and economic features, see Scribner, “The Reformation and the Religion of the Common People,” in a *Beiheft* to the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, forthcoming.

cated on the assumption that all creation depended for its well-being on the sustaining power of the divine. Irregularities and discontinuities in the material world were understood either as a form of breakdown of this cosmic order or as a result of sacred power operating upon the world. Sacred power could entail the operation of either beneficent or malign supernatural forces, the divine and the angelic or the demonic. All manifestations of the sacred—whether in persons, places, or events—also entailed manifestations of sacred power and therefore the possibility of access to it. Saints, their bodies, their relics, and the places in which they were active; other holy places and charismatic centers; and moments of intense ritual significance all offered possibilities of sacred power manifesting itself. It was a power to which all persons sought access in their attempts to deal with the exigencies of the human condition—sickness, dearth, climatic variation, threats to human and animal reproduction, fear and anxiety, and the breakdown of human relationships.⁴

The medieval church, as the institutionalized form of the organized community of believers, found itself under a twofold pressure. Its sacramental system, slowly developed over the course of several centuries of Christian practice, was primarily soteriological. Sacraments involved ritual actions which effected in the supernatural sphere that which they symbolized by their signifying performances in the natural: thus, the cleansing and purifying symbolic action of water in baptism brought about the purification of the soul from sin. But sacraments were also targeted on the whole person—body, soul and spirit—so that they were seen as offering consolation, succor, and nourishment for the body as well as the soul. Sacramental action thus had inner-worldly as well as transcendental efficacy. This was one field in which any firm lines between religion and magic could become blurred, but we can only appreciate the full complexity of the problem if we highlight another feature of sacramental action, the way in which it dealt with the demonic and the diabolical.

Christianity's view of the human need for salvation stressed the action of a perverted form of the supernatural in bringing

4 I outlined some of these ideas in a preliminary way in *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), 1–17, relying on concepts drawn from Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958), 1–3.

about sin and human corruption from a preternatural state, personified in the shape of the Devil. The Devil represented and occasioned spiritual, moral, social, and material disorder in the natural world, and the sacramental system was primarily (soteriologically) directed at reversing the effects of his actions and offering future protection against them. Sacraments thus had a multiple efficacy—providing a means to salvation, offering succor for body, soul and spirit, and serving as protection against the temptations of the Devil. The Devil could, of course, work effects in the natural world, albeit only on divine sufferance, although theological opinion throughout the medieval and early modern period was divided as to whether these effects were real or imaginary. Be that as it may, the blurring of boundaries between religion and magic also extended along a second axis, the means through which one dealt with the this-worldly effects of the diabolical. The twofold problem for the church was, first, how to balance the soteriological with the functional and pastoral aspects of its sacraments; second, how to define the ways in which they could be employed to combat the wiles of the Devil. The problem was made the more complex by the medieval understanding that the sacraments' soteriological efficacy was automatic (*ex opere operata*); extending this notion to the other features of a sacrament would have brought it perilously close to a form of "magic."

The difficulty became yet more intricate with the development of the practices known as "sacramentals." In part, sacramentals were no more than ritual blessings of certain elements or objects used in liturgical action, a means of consecrating them to sacred use; for example, the water and salt used in the baptismal ceremony or the altar on which the Mass was performed. But they also involved an act of exorcism by means of which harmful spirits were expelled from these elements or objects. This aspect may have arisen from a Christianizing attempt to incorporate pagan amulets as non-Christian peoples were converted: the demonic beings from which they were believed to gain their efficacy were ordered to depart in the name of God as Creator, the Trinity, and Christ as Lord of the world, and they were then blessed so that Christians could use them without harm. Indeed, many of the blessed items used as expressions of piety by medieval Christians had this character. However, by the later middle ages, sac-

ramentals involved the exorcism and blessing of a wide range of objects, the efficacy of which was held to be analogous to that of the sacraments. The differences in efficacy were nonetheless crucial. Sacraments were primarily soteriological and only secondarily pastoral and consolatory, whereas the pastoral and consolatory aspects predominated in the sacramentals, which *could* be an aid to salvation insofar as they were used in the right way and with the right frame of mind (*ex opere operantis*).

There were three ways in which sacramentals could slide over into the field of magic: the element of exorcism could be taken to impart apotropaic significance to them, the blessing or consecration could be seen to impart a sacred power, and their primarily this-worldly orientation could lead to their instrumental application. Moreover, the official distinction between efficacy *ex opere operata* and *ex opere operandis* was commonly ignored, and sacramentals in popular practice were regarded as though they were automatically effective. Finally, these items fell more easily than the sacraments outside the control of the institutional church, since they became a matter of daily use by laypeople, rather than being (as the sacraments were) under the control of the institutional church in the person of the clergy. Sacramentals were enormously popular and it was widespread demand which led to the mushrooming of such blessed objects throughout the later middle ages and into the post-Reformation period (indeed, up to the present day). They, above all else, have earned the designation of “the magic of the late-medieval church” and attracted the scorn and hostility of the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century.⁵

One further matter must be considered before we can claim to have mapped, even in crude outline, the problem magic posed for religion in pre-Reformation Christianity. Throughout the European middle ages there also existed a range of beliefs and cultural practices that could more properly be labeled “magic” to which the institutionalized church was, in theory at least, unambiguously hostile. These included divination, astrology, magical medicine, love magic, the invocation of demons and the dead, and other

5 The classic (and still unsurpassed) work on sacramentals is Adolf Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im deutschen Mittelalter*, (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1909), 2 v. For their widespread importance, see the references in Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 361. For their designation as the magic of the medieval church, Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 27–57.

forms of the “magical arts.” Many of these beliefs and practices predated Christianity, some may have been dressed in Christian garb—possibly the result of attempts at Christianization—such as certain types of binding and loosing spells and a whole complex of spells and charms in the form of magical blessings. All involved the instrumental application of sacred power in ways the church regarded as “superstitious,” that is, as a form of false belief. As Flint has recently shown, the dialogue between the church and the magical arts in the early middle ages was as much a matter of creative assimilation and acculturation as it was of unremitting rejection, and it may be that this two-pronged strategy continued throughout the high and later middle ages as well. One strategy of rejection that had worked well in combatting non-Christian religion was that of demonization, accusing pagan gods of being no more than servants of the Devil, that great begetter of disorder in the world. From the fifth century it was applied to magic by John Cassian in attributing the effects and efficacy of magic to demons, identified from Old Testament sources as those who fell with Lucifer. The choice presented to Christians was between sanctity and magic, the former enabling them to subdue demonic malice, the latter to invoke it, in which case one was consorting with demons.⁶ Thus, any distinction between beneficent and malefic sorcery disappeared, and all magic involved subordination to the Devil.

A consistent policy of demonization would have done much to keep a firm boundary between religion and magic, but this was not always possible in practice, since it would have ruled out Christianizing strategies. The most important area of the latter strategy was that of curing and healing charms. The persistence of non-Christian magical healing practices led monks, as exemplars of sanctity and so as wielders of sacred power, to adopt Christianized forms of healing charms in which the names of Christ or other Christian figures replaced those of pagan gods. Healing thus became a result of Christian prayer which, if not merely dependent on the power of the cross as the most potent

6 Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 21, 393–407. We still lack a thorough modern investigation of popular magic in the later middle ages, but see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1990), 56–94, for a useful sketch. He stresses patterns of prohibition, condemnation, and prosecution without considering the question of acculturation and assimilation, 176–200.

Christian symbol, could be accompanied by magico-medical healing techniques, the success of which could be made dependent on the invocation of Christian forms of sacred power. The ambiguity between prayer and the magical use of a spell or charm remained built into such Christianized forms, especially when they escaped the control of the monastic milieu and became the stock in trade of popular healers, cunning folk, sorcerers, and ultimately, of lay people. Thus, a third axis of ambiguity was created between religion and magic, along which ranged acceptable Christian practices based on notions like the healing power of prayer; mistaken or misguided “superstitious” invocation of Christ, the Trinity, and other Christian sacred persons; and being deceived into collaborating with the Devil.

This very crude sketch enables us to see why those approaching pre-Reformation religion through post-Enlightenment thought-modes failed to understand essential characteristics of medieval Christianity and popular magic or the troubled relationship between the two. What difference did the Reformation make to this complex and subtle structure of sacrality? The radical point of departure associated with Martin Luther and (even more radically) Ulrich Zwingli resided in their understanding of the absolute sovereignty and otherness of God, so that it was impossible for human beings to gain any knowledge of the divine by merely created means. This viewpoint destroyed the basis for sacraments and sacramentals, indeed for any kind of ritual by means of which this-worldly symbolic action could have any transcendental efficacy. All sacred action flowed one-way, from the divine to the human, and even salvation was but a recognition in the human heart of a grace apparently arbitrarily given by God. Even pastoral-pedagogical means, such as devotional images, were held by the most extreme exponents of this position (such as Zwingli and Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt), to so distract Christians from this relationship of faith that they were condemned as idolatry.⁷

The consequence was in no sense, however, a desacralization of the world; quite the contrary. Luther had a powerful belief in the presence and activity of the Devil in the world, and believed

7 See the discussion on this point by Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge, 1986), 54–104, 197–233.

that his age had finally unmasked the Devil's main agent, the Antichrist, the diabolical antithesis of Christ as Savior. He held his age to be the one in which the last great confrontation between Christ and Antichrist, between God and the Devil, was to be fought. It was an age witnessing a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, guiding the world toward its providential culmination in the Last Days. Luther's thought was thus apocalyptic and eschatological, rather than desacralizing. Indeed, it can be said that the Word of God became for him the overwhelming sacramental experience, the sole means through which created humanity could come to knowledge of the divine. The world of Luther and the Reformation was a world of highly charged sacrality, in which all secular events, social, political, and economic, could have cosmic significance. The same was true of the second generation of reform, associated with Calvin and the followers of the "reformed religion," whose characteristic belief above all else was that Lutherans and Lutheranism had made too many compromises with the Antichrist by accepting that some matters were indifferent in the great cosmic struggle. Far from further desacralizing the world, Calvin and the reformed religion intensified to an even higher degree the cosmic struggle between the divine and the diabolical.

It is also incorrect to argue that the Reformation created an antiritual form of religion which dispensed with sacred time, places, persons, or things. After initial attempts to abolish or reform life cycle rituals, many, such as churching and confirmation, reappeared in modified form, even within the Reformed tradition. The attempt of the first generation of reformers to dispense with consecration or blessing as a means of setting sacred objects aside from the profane world proved futile. Throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth, evangelical forms of consecration reemerged and multiplied, and were applied to a wide variety of objects: church foundation stones, new or restored churches, pulpits, fonts, organs, altars, bells, cemeteries, and even, in Saxony in 1719, a confessional box. Care was always taken to insist that such consecrations in no way imparted any form of sacred power, as under Catholicism. Nonetheless, popular belief insisted in treating such objects as if they were as sacralized as their Catholic equivalent, for example, church bells which were held to protect against storms and lightning. Memory

of the power of Catholic sacramentals was long and proved difficult to eradicate, not least those practices associated with the power of the Eucharist, such as blessed bread, used like St. Agatha's bread to repel fire. Where Protestant pastors refused to accommodate lay demands for such sacrally potent objects, their parishioners were quite willing to go to Catholic priests for them. Pilgrimage sites, and the healing water sometimes associated with them, persisted in many Protestant territories into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸

This was no matter of mere survivalism, the ignorant response of half-protestanized people incapable of understanding that sacred power no longer existed in a profane world. Protestant belief did not hold that the sacred did not intrude into the secular world, simply that it did not do so at human behest and could not automatically be commanded. Thus, there was no contradiction in regarding the Word of God as the most potent manifestation of the sacred in the world and so regarding the Bible as an especially sacred and potent object. By extension, this was also held of hymnals, prayerbooks, and catechisms, for they too embodied and expressed God's sacred Word. We can certainly speak of a distinctive Protestant form of sacramentalism, albeit one far weaker than its Catholic counterpart.

Nonetheless, the Reformation, both in its first and second generations, could be said to have drawn a firmer line between magic and religion by its changed understanding of the sacraments, and its repudiation of Catholic sacramentals. The profusion of blessed objects (salt, water, palms, herbs, and so forth) that so often gave sacred meaning to the daily life of pre-Reformation Christians did largely disappear from the lives of those of evangelical belief. Yet this did not remove the popular desire for some kind of instrumental application of sacred power to deal with the exigencies of daily life, and Protestants often turned to distinctively "Protestant" remedies, using Bibles, hymnals, and prayer books for their healing and protective power. Indeed, their sacred character was even attested to by the belief that they were incombustible, a quality associated with the sacred power of sainthood in Catholic belief (and which was transferred to Luther as the quintessential Protestant saint). Some Protestants may have

8 See the discussion in Scribner, "Impact of the Reformation," 323–340.

drawn the line at accepting the apotropaic power of blessed weather bells, but the no less apotropaic form of the “hail-sermon” grew up as a Protestant custom, replacing the former eucharist procession through the fields to invoke divine protection over ripening crops.⁹

A further consequence of Protestant belief to which we must call attention before we can fully appreciate the problem posed for it by popular magic concerns what I have called the “moralized universe.” Alongside belief in a sacramental world, pre-Reformation religion also believed that certain human actions could provoke supernatural intervention in the natural world, either as a sign or a punishment. For example, the birth of deformed children or animals was often understood in this way, either as punishment for human sin (for example, a monk fornicating with a nun) or as a warning of impending divine wrath. Moral deviance, both individual and collective, was reflected in natural deformity, perhaps through belief in the links of microcosm and macrocosm, but more likely through a perception of a natural order influenced, via the supernatural, by the quality of human moral action. A stock late-medieval version of this causal nexus involved the belief that lepers had incurred the disease because of some sin committed by their parents, or that whole communities were at risk because of heresy in their midst. In summer 1523 the flooding of the Elbe and the destruction of crops was blamed by Saxon farmers on the activities of Luther and his cronies: God had afflicted the land because they had eaten meat in Lent.¹⁰

Protestant belief in a sacralized but weakly, rather than strongly, sacramental universe enabled this causal nexus to come more forcefully to the fore, especially since it accorded with belief in the sovereignty of God over the world. Indeed, the early evangelical movements had made ready polemical use of the notion by highlighting the way in which opponents of the Gospel

9 See Regine Grube-Verhoeven, *Zauberei und Frömmigkeit*, *Volksleben* 13 (Tübingen, 1966), 11–57, on incombustibility, 48; also Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 323–353, on incombustible bibles, 330–331. Heinze-Dieter Kittsteiner, “Das Gewissen im Gewitter,” *Jahrbuch für Volkskunde* (1987), 7–26, discusses the “Hagelpredigt” as a form of Protestant protective magic.

10 Report of the Polish diplomat Johannes Dantiscus, traveling to Wittenberg in August 1523, in Inge B. Müller-Blessing, “Johannes Dantiscus von Hofen. Ein Diplomat und Bischof zwischen Humanismus und Reformation,” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands*, XXXI/XXXII (1967/68), 149–150.

sometimes appeared to be struck down by divine intervention, doubtless a reply to Catholic readiness to claim divine intervention in support of their own cause. It was applied with less polemical intent in the argument that those who used prohibited magical conjurations would become poor in consequence of divine punishment. However, Protestants significantly broadened the notion by insisting that the material consequences of moral failures were not simply confined to deviants and marginal groups, but were applicable to the failings of the population at large. It was summed up as early as 1530 by Johann Oldendorp, the Rostock city syndic who argued that if God's Word were ignored, it would lead to hunger, confusion, and ruin, but if it were observed, all streets and houses would be full of grain and money. This moral nexus became a constituent part of Protestant disciplinary ordinances aimed at moral improvement: failure to observe God's (and the prince's) laws would lead to dearth, hunger, crop failure, war, plague, pestilence, and other punishments which God would visit on the earth and its people.¹¹

The Protestant elaboration of the moralized universe had the effect of increasing anxiety among those it affected. Deprived of the protective means inherent in the Catholic sacramental system, Protestants found themselves prey to anxiety that was hardly allayed by invoking the Protestant doctrine of providence. Indeed, anxiety may even have been increased by awareness of the omnipresence of a sacred order in and among the secular. I do not mean just the activity of God, his Word and his Spirit, or of the Devil. Protestant belief allowed for a whole range of supernatural beings to be active in the world, especially angels, demons, and various kinds of spirits, such as those of the revenant dead. Their activity was accepted as possible not so much because it was experienced but because such beings were mentioned in the Bible,

11 A typical Catholic tale of divine retribution concerned a pregnant weaver's wife in Magdeburg who demanded to be given communion under both kinds in 1524 and subsequently suffered a stillbirth. See "Die Historia des Möllenvogtes Sebastian Langhans, 1524-25," *Chroniken der duetschen Städten* (Leipzig, 1899), XXXVII, 157. See Rudolf Gwerb, *Bericht von dem aberglaubigen und verbotenen Leuth-und Vych besegenen* (Zurich, 1646), 199-207; for the claims "Segner sind arm," 203, and "Segner erhalten schmale Vieh," 207. Johann Oldendorp, *Von Rathschlagen. Wie man gute Policy und Ordnung in Städten und Landen erhalten möge* (Rostock 1597, facsimile ed., Glashütten im Taunus, 1971), the High German translation of the Low German original edition of 1530, 55-56. See, e.g., Duke Ulrich of Württemberg's mandate of 1547, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart A38, Bü. 12.

although there was a tendency to trace many such phenomena back to the “tricks of the Devil.” Indeed, it seemed to many observers as though the Devil and demonic spirits had become wilder and more incalculable, attested by the remarkable efflorescence of Protestant demonology, which by the second half of the sixteenth century attained the level of an obsession.¹² However, Protestants found themselves deprived of ritual and sacramental ways of dealing with the activities of such beings, and official Protestantism was never quite sure what to make of ghosts, poltergeists, visions, prophecies, miracles, and, above all, demonic possession. The traffic between the supernatural and the natural worlds had perhaps become one-way, but the boundaries between sacred and secular remained highly porous and the seepage of the one into the other was highly unpredictable, incalculable, and even dangerous. It was for this reason that Protestants were tempted to turn to Catholic means of protection and also to forms of popular magic.

Protestantism thus experienced problems along two of the axes of ambiguity we have identified for pre-Reformation belief: inner-worldly efficacy of sacred action, and the activities of the diabolical/demonic. The same was also true along the third axis—the “magical” power of prayer. As we might expect, practitioners of magic continued to ply their trade despite the implementation of religious reformation in any given territory. Indeed, we might well surmise that they received a double boost: the competition provided by the “magic of the medieval church” was in great part removed, while the anxiety about how to deal with the exigencies of daily life was often intensified rather than lessened. In the absence of a Protestant rite of exorcism, practitioners of magic who were able to deal with demonic possession or with poltergeists found themselves virtually in a position to monopolize the market.¹³ Indeed, they were able not only to survive under a

12 See the discussion of the *Teufelsbücher* by Rainer Alsheimer, “Katalog protestantischer Teufelserzählungen,” in Wolfgang Brückner (ed.), *Volkerzählung und Reformation. Ein Handbuch zur Tradierung und Funktion von Erzählstoffen und Erzählliteratur im Protestantismus* (Berlin, 1974), 415–519; also H. C. Erik Midelfort, “The Devil and the German People: Reflections on the Popularity of Demon Possession in Sixteenth-Century Germany,” in Steven Ozment (ed.), *Religion and Culture in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Kirksville, Mo., 1989), 99–119.

13 It was probably coincidental and at best opportunistic that in 1529, at the point where the Elector of Saxony was actively reforming Catholic cult and doctrine in his territories,

Protestant dispensation but even to prosper, and they defied all attempts to eradicate them from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century and beyond. Practitioners of magic covered a wide range in early modern Germany, from purveyors of spells and charms (*Segner, Segenssprecher*), soothsayers and diviners (*Wahrsager, Wahrsagerinnen*), cunning men and women (*weise Männer, weise Frauen*), shepherds and herdsmen, specialists such as swine and cattle doctors (*Schwein und Viehartzet*), and those who practiced occasional sorcery based on acquired or inherited knowledge. Such persons, men and women, were approached for a variety of reasons: to perform counter-magic against bewitchment, to divine lost or stolen objects, to discover the cause of human and animal illness, to heal, to protect, and to cast spells of various kinds, whether against human or demonic ill will, or simply to guard against disaster.

In the 1540s it was clear to Protestant commentators that popular magic of this kind was a different phenomenon from Catholic sacramental magic and posed a quite different problem. Johann Spreter, a Württemberg pastor, in 1543 distinguished between two kinds of magic, that “on the right side” and that “on the left side.” The first was that practiced by the papist church in the traditional form of the sacramentals; the second involved the use of “good or evil words” together with characters or objects through which the users believed “creatures might be protected or changed.” The distinction was adopted in 1566 by Conrad Platz, a preacher in Biberach, in attacking the activities of a local exorcist (*Teufelsbanner*), although it was clear by then that “magic on the left side” was causing far more trouble than that “on the right side.” By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, popular magic was being discussed wholly within the framework of Protestant belief, but as false Protestant belief.¹⁴

a woman exorcist approached him with the request that she be allowed to practice her art professionally, i.e. as a recognized trade, Carl A. H. Burckhardt, *Geschichte der sächsischen Kirchen- und Schulvisitationen 1524–49* (Leipzig, 1879), 87.

14 Johann Spreter, *Ein kurtzer Bericht, was von den abgötterischen Sāgen [und] Beschwerden zuhalten . . .* (Basel, 1543), Aiii; Conrad Wolfgang Platz, *Kurtzer, nottwendiger und Wollgegründter bericht, auch Christentliche vermanung, von der Grewlichen, in aller Welt gebreuchlichen Zauberey, Sünd dem zauberischen Beschouren und Segenssprechen, Predigtweys gethon* (n.p., 1566). See the more detailed discussion in Scribner, “Magic and the Formation of Protestant Popular Culture in Germany,” forthcoming.

Recourse to blessings, spells and charms caused the most difficulty for the attempts of official Protestantism, usually in the person of concerned pastors such as Spreter or Platz, to deal with forms of popular magic. If we recount the arguments offered by Platz in 1566, we can appreciate the nature of the problem. He called attention to the important role that words played in conjurations, spells and charms. These words were of three kinds: good, bad, and neutral. The “bad” involved invoking the Devil; the “neutral” consisted of saying words, harmless enough in themselves, in conjunction with certain “superstitious practices” which turned them to misuse. Platz gave as examples the saying of words at certain times when it was hoped they would be especially efficacious such as reciting the names of the Trinity and making the sign of the cross in certain ritual contexts; and narrative spells said over wounds to effect healing. The “good” words were words found in Scripture but which were misused for magical spells. Platz specifically mentioned the names of God, the Trinity, and Christ’s five wounds, the inscription INRI above the cross of Christ, the first chapter of John, the Pater Noster, and the Ave Maria. These were used magically as spoken or written words, sometimes in conjunction with herbs and sometimes as amulets. Whatever their form, Platz asserted, they all involve “magic” because the users put their trust in the power of words and ignore God as our only helper. As such they infringed the first and second commandments.¹⁵

It is worthy of note that Platz cited formulas and practices that were common in Catholic magical usage, and many of the forms of charms or spells used by Protestants certainly were adaptations of older Catholic versions. However, they seem to have been “reformed” for evangelical use by removing references to Mary and the saints, and retaining the names of God, Christ, or the Trinity; or else they used prayers found in Scripture such as the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria. Indeed, the Pater Noster, along with the sign of the cross and its invocation of the Trinity, were held by Catholic and Protestant alike to be formulas of great magical potency which found continual usage throughout the medieval and early modern period.¹⁶ Platz listed, in order to refute

15 Platz, *Kurtzer, nottwendiger . . . bericht*, B6^r-C4^r.

16 On the Pater Noster, Ludwig Strackerjan, *Aberglauben und Sagen aus dem Herzogtum*

them, various arguments advanced by those who used such spells and charms, but in so doing revealed how far such “scripturally-based” spells and charms had come to constitute what was, in effect, a Protestant form of magic.

These are nothing but good words, their defenders claimed, which speak only of God, and what is done in God’s name must surely be proper and good; one should use the means provided by God, who has blessed all things on earth; one prays and calls upon God with such words, so why should one not use them for blessings and incantations? It cannot be wrong to invoke the name of the Trinity when this is done by the words of the sacraments, for example, baptizing in the name of the Trinity or using the words of consecration in the communion. Moreover, the words spoken from the pulpit during a sermon have their efficacy and such words should also be efficacious in blessings; God expelled the Devil and worked miracles through the spoken word, and this same practice was allowed to the Apostles.

All of these arguments conformed to a typically evangelical understanding of the importance of God’s Word as the most potent form of sacrality, and were not easy to refute, although Platz did his best to dispose of them. He insisted that such things must be founded in the Word of God and should be commanded by God: thus, the words used in the sacraments are done only at God’s command. The preacher speaking God’s Word does so as his instrument and the efficacy of the Word in this case is not that of the spoken word but of the Word working in the heart, nor is it worked by the preacher of his own power but as a tool of God. Spells and charms even using such good words are not means provided by God; there is no command to do so in the Bible and magic is expressly prohibited there in several places. Moreover, the words used in such spells are mere human words of the spellcaster and these do not constitute a form of blessing, but rather an impious incantation.¹⁷

Platz may have had the better theological argument, but continued recourse not only to spells and charms but also to much the same “evangelical” arguments over many subsequent gener-

Oldenburg (Oldenburg, 1909), I, 2, 77, 120, 290; Carl Seyfarth, *Aberglauben und Zauberei in der Volksmedizin Sachsens* (Leipzig, 1913), 138.

17 Platz, *Kurtzer, nottwendiger . . . bericht*, C6^v-G7^v.

ations shows that his refutations were held to be unconvincing. During the seventeenth century similar and somewhat more refined justifications of popular magic as wholly consistent with Protestant belief were still to be found, one of which involved a creative adaptation of the Protestant doctrine of *adiaphora*.¹⁸ What may have counted more was the argument that experience showed that the spells actually worked. The retort of Platz and other pastors confronted with this claim was that this apparent success was a deception and was only possible through the work of the Devil. Thus, for Protestantism there was also a penumbra of ambiguity between religion and magic along the third axis, and when faced with the most intractable challenge thrown up by this ambiguity, that of the apparent efficacy of “magical prayer,” one resorted to the same strategy of demonization used in the pre-Reformation church.

If we were to lay a Protestant template on that formed by our three axes of Catholic belief, we would find one nestling inside the other like a pair of angle brackets. The relationship of Protestant to Catholic was a matter of degree, since the same axes were involved for both confessions in the three-dimensional relationship between religion and magic. Indeed, if individuals were positioned in the religio-magical space thus formed, many Protestants would be found at points not too far removed from Catholics. Protestantism was as caught up as Catholicism in the same dilemmas about the instrumental application of sacred power to secular life because it was positioned in the same force-field of sacrality. For this reason, Protestants experienced the same difficulties as Catholics when accusations of maleficent magic (and sometimes even of “white” magic) were laid in ways that turned them into accusations of witchcraft. The possibility of consorting with, and becoming implicated in, demonic activity was as real for Protestants as for Catholics. Thus, the puzzle of how a massive witchcraze could apparently arise in a period said to usher in the dawn of “modern rationality,” a puzzle which Trevor-Roper saw as an “intellectual challenge” and which caused Tambiah to raise

18 Gwerb, *Bericht von dem abergläubigen . . . besegnen*, 265–266, had to repudiate the argument that the use of magical blessings was not expressly forbidden in the Bible, and that this was therefore permissible. At the end of the seventeenth century, Georg Christoph Zimmermann, a Franconian pastor, was also confronted with similar justifications, see the discussion in Scribner, “Magic and the Formation of Protestant Popular Culture.”

a quizzical eyebrow, rests on a false dilemma.¹⁹ There was no inconsistency between Protestant thought-modes and a mentality that accepted diabolical efficacy in the world.

This is not to say that we could not find in Protestantism elements pointing in the direction mapped by those who see the Reformation as the first stage in the “disenchantment of the world,” as the first step on the road to modernity. The question of the typicality of such elements remains a major point on which the thesis could be criticized, although this is too large a subject to pursue here. The explanation for the apparent plausibility of the thesis resides less in the nature of the Reformation of the sixteenth century and more in its historiography. Historical understanding of exactly what “the Reformation” had been about and what it produced developed through many stages and phases, although the view of the subsequent two centuries emphasized its potently sacred character: the Reformation was part of a great divine intervention in the world, part of God’s ultimate plan for creation and humanity. It was the Enlightenment that first interpreted the Reformation as part of a long-term process of rationalization and secularization, an interpretation further reworked by the historiography of the nineteenth century until it constructed our modern view of the Reformation.²⁰

The paradigm of a secularizing and rationalizing Reformation has influenced many overarching interpretations of the ways in which the religion of Protestants contributed to long-term historical development, foremost among them that of Max Weber, who injected the notion of the “disenchantment of the world” into historical discussion. We may take Weber as a prime example of the ways in which nineteenth-century concerns were projected onto historical understanding of religion in the Reformation. Weber wrote from a background of nineteenth-century liberalism, claiming that he was himself “religiously unmusical.” Many of the concepts he applied to the Reformation were arbitrary, if creative, adaptations of terms used in other, rather different contexts. The concept of “charisma” was rationalized from the strictly theological usage of the church historian Rudolf Sohm, that of the “disenchantment of the world” from Schiller’s poetic usage.

19 Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 47.

20 Dickens and Tonkin, *Reformation in Historical Thought*, 7–89, 119–49; E. W. Zeeden, *Martin Luther und die Reformation im Urteil des deutschen Luthertums* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1950, 1952), 2 v.

The notion of the “Protestant ethic” was an insight Weber arrived at less from historical research and more from observations of nineteenth-century Protestant behavior, which he then projected backwards in time in a classic example of the “regressive method.” The further assumption that an adequate understanding of “Protestantism” was achieved by focusing primarily on the theology of the main reformers, was a crucial next step, so that he did not have to confront the problem of the actual historicity of Protestantism, or the untidiness of the phenomenon as it was put into practice. It was sufficient to find examples to illustrate his ideal typical construction, drawn (as has often been remarked) rather indiscriminately from several way stations along the road from Luther to Weber’s own day.²¹

Whatever we may think of the sociological status of Weber’s insights about the Reformation—and I must concede that I have always found them heuristically rewarding—I do not think that the thesis about the “disenchantment of the world” will any longer pass muster as a historically accurate description. It has certainly inspired many contemporary treatments of how the Reformation relates to the process of “modernization,” not least the current interest among historians of the sixteenth century in social processes such as “confessionalization,” social discipline and the “civilizing process” (alongside Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, both of whom worked with the classic nineteenth-century paradigm of the Reformation). None of these interpretations, however, deal with, or show any understanding of, the nature of popular Protestantism.

I do not think it possible at this stage to offer an alternative vision of how the “decline of magic” and associated developments

21 H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology* (London, 1974), 25, 51–52. This projection is apparent from the opening pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, 35–46, where Weber ponders on contemporary religious affiliation and social stratification, the more so when we realize that this question had been “very much in the air” around 1900, along with theorizing on the role of Protestantism in the industrial revolution, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy: Perspectives on the Political Sociology of Max Weber* (New York, 1974), 100. Weber then embarked, according to Mommsen, 102, on his research on the sociology of world religions in order to corroborate *ex negativo* his findings on the “Protestant ethic.” For the “regressive method,” Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), 77–87. Curiously, the very rich footnotes to the final version of *The Protestant Ethic* often reflect a more highly developed awareness of historical complexity than the main text. One is reminded by them how far the “final” work was the product of almost two decades of thought on the problem in which some of Weber’s later insights, for example those on the importance of Protestant sects, were more rewarding than his initial thoughts on the subject.

came about (in many ways, they involve processes still in train). Thomas offered a number of useful conjectures over two decades ago, but his suggestions have yet to be properly explored in the English context, much less in that of Germany. Moreover, the discussion has yet to take cognizance of the possibility that processes of secularization and desacralization may not be as closely tied to the development of Protestantism as has been assumed. It is interesting that Acquaviva, writing from a Catholic tradition, is able to provide a nuanced and perceptive analysis of such religious and social phenomena without, at any point, mentioning Protestantism or the Reformation.²²

To explore the role of Protestantism in such processes, it is first necessary to construct a new understanding of the Reformation of the sixteenth century which takes account of those dissonant elements which falsify the paradigm that has been hitherto accepted, and then to write a new history of Protestantism which includes the religious experience and practice of ordinary believers, with all of their contradictions and misunderstandings. From the progress made so far on this task, I suspect that we would discover that Protestantism was a much a part of the problem as the self-evident solution to it; not a prime mover, but as subject as any other confession to secularization and desacralization, whatever set these processes in motion and whatever forms, stages, and modes of development they passed through.²³ Some aspects of Protestantism doubtless encouraged some Protestants to recognize a world purged of magic, whereas other militated against it. It may also turn out that the “disenchantment of the world” played a marginal role in both the developing history of Protestantism and in advance toward “the modern world.” This, however, is a story which still awaits its careful analyst.

22 Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 767–800; Sabino S. Acquaviva (trans. Patricia Lipscombe), *The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society* (1966; rev. ed., Oxford, 1979).

23 Exemplary for the kind of sensitive and nuanced study needed is C. Scott Dixon, “The Reformation in the Parishes: Attempts to Implement the Reformation in Brandenburg-Ansbach 1528–1603,” Ph.D. diss. (Univ. of Cambridge, 1992). It is illuminating that Protestantism and the Reformation feature only marginally in the reflections offered on such processes by Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984). Tilly presents a cogent argument for purging historical discourse of the “pernicious postulates” of the nineteenth century before we can begin to understand the nature of long-term historical change.