

Augustine on magic : A neglected semiotic theory

I. — INTRODUCTION

Historians should take heed of the anthropologist's warning : « To try to understand magic as an idea in itself, what is the essence of it, as it were, is a hopeless task. It becomes more intelligible when it is viewed not only in relation to empirical activities but also in relation to other beliefs, as part of a system of thought...¹ » Especially in the case of magic in Antiquity : for as A.D. Nock once remarked, « In [the modern] sense it [magic] means the attempt to divert the course of nature by methods which to our science appear to be of a non-rational kind, or which to the user appear to rest on some peculiar wisdom : the charming of warts we call magic, birth-control we do not. We distinguish it from science which proceeds by rational methods, and from religion which if it seems to influence the course of events does so by asking some superior being or beings to do what is needed either by operating directly by some kind of sympathetic action or again compelling the superior being or beings. » But, Nock insisted, this modern use of ' magic ' « does not fit the ancient world... There is not, then, as with us, a sphere of magic in contrast to the sphere of religion² ».

It may be that ' magic ' occupied a different place in antiquity on the map of human activities than it does in modern times, especially in relation to ancient science — at least on the comparatively rare occasions when ancient science emerges into clarity from the mists of magic, as, for instance in the case of Hippocrates³ — and to ancient religion. Modern anthropological discussions have made such exercises in mapping very hazardous. The sharp distinction that used to be drawn between religion and magic has become increasingly untenable ; the two must be located on a continuous scale. The distinction between magic and religion has generally come to be seen not in terms of two different forms of

1. E.P. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Theories of primitive religion* (Oxford, 1965), 111.

2. A.D. NOCK, « Paul and the magus », *Essays on religion and the ancient world*, 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 308-30, at 313-4. Nock refers (215 n. 32) to F. Pfister's ' admirable article ' in *RE Supp.* iv. 323 ff. in this connection. Cf. also his n. 43.

3. *Ibid.*, 317.

activity, or two different kinds of relation to the supernatural, but rather as the distinction between socially approved and socially disapproved, deviant, forms of ritual behaviour. Magical activity takes place within the framework of a particular religious tradition, and is, so to speak, parasitic upon it, lives within it as its matrix⁴.

I shall be attempting to describe not ancient magic itself, but something much simpler, and also much rarer in antiquity: some of the attempts made by some ancient thinkers to understand the magic current in their own society. It will cause us no surprise that the ancients did not generally consider magic in the manner that sophisticated twentieth century anthropologists would prefer; but we must put up with that.

As a working definition we may start with one given in a recent discussion of early medieval magic: « Magic may be said to be the exercise of preternatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they⁵ ». This, while it begs many questions, also has the corresponding virtue of leaving many of those important for us open, and of admitting a large variety of practices under the heading of 'magic'.

The practice of magic was ubiquitous in Antiquity; theorising about it was rare. The only sophisticated attempt at a theory I know of is Augustine's; but to place it in some sort of intellectual context, we must start with teasing out some scraps of theory from other Late Antique writers. It is a meagre harvest; but, broadly, in so far as any 'theory' can be identified, we can discern two main directions of thought. They correspond roughly to two ways many modern interpretations of magic have attempted to explain magical rites. These explanations are open to many objections, but, for all that, these are the lines followed, by and large, by ancient theory.

The first sees magic as dependent on a cosmology of world-harmony, or universal sympathy: you do something here, and as a consequence something happens there. To quote from the beginning of Plotinus's exposition of the subject:

4. For a survey of approaches by anthropologists, see M. & R. WAX, « The notion of magic », *Current anthropology* 4 (1963) 495-518, with the comments and reply in the 'CA treatment', 503-17. For their application to ancient magic, see D.E. AUNE, « Magic in early Christianity », *ANRW* II.23.2 (1980) 1507-1557. For more general discussions see: S.J. TAMBLAH, « Form and meaning of magical acts: a point of view », in R. HORTON, & R. FINNEGAN, edd., *Modes of thought* (London 1973), 199-229; 199: « ...magical acts are ritual acts, and ritual acts are in turn performative acts whose positive and creative meaning is missed and whose persuasive validity is misjudged if they are subjected to that kind of empirical verification associated with scientific activity », and p. 218-227 on their non-scientific, ritual, character. *Id.*, *Magic science, religion and the scope of morality* (The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, 1984. Cambridge, 1989) contains a wide-ranging discussion of the concepts and their history in anthropological thought. On their application in the study of Antiquity, see G.E.R. LLOYD, *Magic, reason, experience* (Cambridge, 1979).

5. V.I.J. FLINT, *The rise of magic in early medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1991), 3. Cf my review of the book in *EHR* (1992) 378-80.

But how does magic (*goeteia*) work ? By sympathy and by the fact that there is a natural concord of things that are alike and opposition of things that are different...⁶

To leave it at this is, no doubt, to oversimplify the thought of one of the greatest thinkers of Late Antiquity ; but it will do for our present purpose, which is to point to a general direction, not to give an account of his subtle and complex cosmology. The efficacy of magical rituals depends, on such a view, on natural forces. The laws governing these connections may be unknown to most of us, may be hidden even from the magician ; but it is in virtue of organic, natural, relationships, the rational harmony built into the cosmos – the *carmen uniuersitatis* as Augustine would call it⁷ – that magic works. Ancients were no less ready than we are to discriminate between genuine and charlatan claims to the expertise which enables the nexus of things to be exploited by various techniques. Magic is in effect a branch of physics. In our modern terms such a theory would translate into a theory of magic as false science⁸.

The second view considered magic as dependent on collaboration with demons : forming a community with them, so that whatever happens is a consequence of demonic power brought to the aid of the magician. Religion and magic belong together as against « scientific » manipulations of phenomena. They are distinguished on other grounds : most fundamentally according to whether they are generally approved (for whatever reasons) or disapproved. We might, for convenience, designate this distinction a « sociological » one. Just how magic is related to religion in this view is a question that will receive different answers according to what the religion concerned is. Generally we can perceive a strong tendency to treat magic as a parody or perversion of true religion. This second notion seems to have been more commonly held, though it is often found in combination with the first.

These two ways of thinking of magical activity did not generally have to be distinguished in Antiquity, and it was easy to hold them side by side. There was no pressure on non-Christians to distinguish the exercise of a scientific *techne* from recourse to the help of higher powers ; both were quite legitimate activities. But in a Christian perspective this ambiguity had to be banished ; for if a magical rite was not a case of exercising the art of medicine, or some other natural *techne*, then it must be a religious, though false, and therefore blasphemous, ritual. If magic is demonic and the demonic is wicked, idolatrous or godless, then there is a new and urgent need to distinguish between scientific activity and religious ritual. (Origen may stand for Christian thinkers in general in drawing so sharp a contrast between magic and true religion, leaving a separate, neutral, area to be occupied by human techniques based on the natural sciences⁹.) The sharp distinction

6. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.4.40 (trans. A.H. Armstrong). The discussion extends to 4.44.

7. *De musica* VI.11.29.

8. For a widely known example of treating magic among medical (and pseudo-medical) 'remedies', see Pliny *HN* XXXVIII and XXX.1.

9. In *C. Cels.* VIII.61 Origen commends the medical arts and prayer to God for healing bodily infirmity as better than the ministrations of demons. Christian thinkers were not always equally clear on this subject.

between magic and science is a result of Christian pressure on a range of activities which could often remain undifferentiated. In a Christian perspective, if a rite was neither the exercise of a human *ars*, nor the performance of an approved rite of Christian worship, then it was necessarily demonic magic. Augustine's views on astrology (closely related to those on magic and divination) provide a good example of this manner of driving a wedge between what we might describe as 'scientific' and as 'superstitious' predictions¹⁰. As *artes*, that of the *mathematicus* and that of *diuinitio*, are now radically distinguished, even though the terminology remained fluid.

Christians shared with almost all their contemporaries in Antiquity a sense of living in a world surrounded by invisible powers¹¹. These powers could be benevolent or malevolent; the important point for us is that they were *there*. For Plato they were intermediaries between men and the gods (e.g. *Sympos.* 202E-203A; for comment, see Augustine *De ciuitate Dei* VIII. 18). In Christian eyes the gods, and any power that allowed men to communicate with them, were sinister powers of evil. The *daimon* and the gods were subsumed within the class of demons; and they became « demonic ». It is in this perspective they saw all pagan magical, divinatory, and similar rites. Thus Firmicus Maternus, for instance, caricatured the non-Christian rites of the fourth century as counterfeits of the true Christian rites¹². Conversely, the pagan Celsus was very ready to believe that Christians got their powers from the demons¹³. Origen, in his reply to Celsus, consistently attributes the power of magical rites to demons, and contrasts their wickedness with the goodness of God¹⁴.

II. — AUGUSTINE'S 'THEORY' OF MAGIC

Augustine's theory of magic is cast, as one would expect, within the context of the cosmology he shared with Late Antique people at large. The structure of his spiritual universe was, in effect, not very different from, to take a particularly fine example, Porphyry's¹⁵. Porphyry's world contains good and bad demons within

10. Cf. the fine study by B. BRUNING, « De l'astrologie à la grâce » in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T. J. Van Bavel*, t. 2 (Roma, 1991) 575-643. Augustine's fullest discussion of the distinction is in *De doctr. chr.* II.20.30-21.32. Cf. also *De diu. daem.* 1.2, 6.10; *De ciu. Dei* V.9.

11. N. BROX, 'Magie und Aberglaube an den Anfängen des Christentums', *Trierer theol. Zeits.* 83 (1974) 157-180 contains a useful survey; 172-9 on Augustine.

12. Cf. *De errore prof. rel.* 18-27.

13. *Apud* Origen, *C. Cels.* I.6.

14. See especially *C. Cels.* I.60; II.51; VII.69; VIII.36 (on angels and demons); 59-60. Cf. Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* II.15-17.

15. Porphyre, *De l'abstinence*, ed. & trad. J. BOUFFARTIGUE & M. PATILLON. (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1977-79). References in this paragraph (in brackets) are given to this edition,

a monotheistic universe (II.37 ; 103-4) ; the good demons rule over both natural processes and human souls and their activities when engaged in their proper *technai*, notably the liberal arts, education, music, gymnastics, medicine (II.38.2 ; 104). The bad demons delude, master and collude with wicked, turbulent and rebellious human beings (II.40 ; 106-7). They hate and seek to harm the human race. Good demons communicate with the human race through significant action (*semaino-mena*) such as dreams, inspired words or other means ; bad ones through sorcery (*goeteia*) (II.41 ; 108). This cosmology and its attendant concept of magic has very close affinities with Augustine's.

Some of the fundamental ideas that came to dominate Augustine's views on magic appear in his earliest formal discussion of this subject in the context of a question about the efficacy of magical rites performed by Pharaoh's magicians and the way they differ from the wonders performed by ' God's servants '. A somewhat muddled discussion begins with a distinction which seems oddly remote, but is in fact crucial to all his reflection on this theme : the ' private ' and the ' public ' laws which govern individual action. The spirits which govern every agent in the visible world do so in accordance with both private and public law ; piety subjects the private to the public, obeying the latter willingly, for ' the universal law is divine wisdom '. The more any agent turns aside from God to his private good, the more he is turned in upon himself and subjected to ' those powers which desire their own private good, to be honoured by men like gods. ' To these powers divine law often concedes, through a private law (*priuato illo iure*), the ability to assist those who are subjected to them with a certain power akin to the miraculous (*miraculorum aliquid*) ; but where divine law rules as a public law, it overcomes private licence. Magicians, thus, work private quasi-miracles for selfish ends ; whereas visible ' miracles ' are wrought by God's servants when it is deemed — by God, presumably — useful for them to have this power ; and it is wielded in accordance with that ' public and imperial law ' which governs the universe, « that is to say, they command the lower powers according to God's supreme power... In them God Himself commands, for they are His temples, and they burn with love of Him, despising their own private power¹⁶. » The opposition between ' public ' and ' private ', a doublet which was to remain fundamental in much of Augustine's thought¹⁷, is the key to the distinction between magicians' wonders and miracles

Book II, chapter and page number in vol. 2. I wish to thank Hilary Armstrong for drawing my attention to this text.

16. *De diu. quaest. LXXXIII* 79.1. The work consists of notes taken on discussions held by Augustine with his *fratres* prior to his episcopal ordination, collected into a book — *Retract.* I.26. I see no good grounds for denying the authenticity of this question. For a later treatment of this theme, see *De Trin.* III.7.12.

17. On the fundamental opposition in Augustine's mind between *commune* and *priuatum*, the key text is *Enarr. in Ps.* 103.ii.11. Lying here emerges as the archetypal ' private ' utterance. See also : *De Trin.* X.5.7 ; XII.9.14 ; *De Gen. c. Man.* II.16.24 ; *Ep.* 140.26.63 ; *De cons. euang.* I.19.27. The relevance of the concept to Augustine's views on astrology has been noted by Bruning (*art. cit.*, above, 10), 620. The centrality of the notion of the ' private ' to much of Augustine's thought still needs a thorough study. See, however, my remarks in *Saeculum*.

of the saints : the former mobilise the powers they control (through secret pacts, Augustine suspects) for their own, selfish and partial ends ; the latter mobilise powers subject to God for disinterested, ' public ', ends, in line with God's universal purposes.

So the things done by magicians and by saints are often alike ; but in fact they are done ' for different ends and by different rights ' (*diuerso fine et diuerso iure*) : « for the magicians do them seeking their own glory, the saints seeking God's glory ; the former carry them out... as private transactions or sorceries (*quasi priuata commercia uel ueneficia*) ; the latter as public ministry (*publica administratione*) in obedience to Him to whom all creatures are subject... Hence it is one thing when magicians perform wonders, another when good Christians... perform them : magicians do it through private contracts [with the evil powers], good Christians through public righteousness...¹⁸ » This « sociological » way of contrasting magic and religion in terms of their ' private ' or ' public ' character, with reference to a moral community, has distinctly Durkheimian overtones¹⁹. It is, moreover, very much in line with the criteria invoked by Late Roman writers and legislators to distinguish magic from religion²⁰.

The essential ground for the distinction between miracles worked by saints and those worked by magicians seems to be the end for which they are respectively performed, God's glory and the public good, *versus* their own, selfish and private ends. There appears to be a subordinate distinction between the powers respectively invoked by magicians and saints : the former's accomplices obey them in virtue of a prior pact of association ; the latter invoke divine power or its agencies. Though of crucial importance to Christian preachers²¹, for our purpose this

History and society in the theology of Saint Augustine, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1988), pp. xvii-xviii and 60 ; and in *The end of ancient Christianity*, (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 77-79. See also my « *De ciuitate dei* : Pride and the common good », *Proceedings of the PMR Conference*, 12-13 (1989) 1-16 ; also in : *Collectanea Augustiniana : Augustine : « Second Founder of the Faith »*, ed. J.C. SCHNABELT & F. VAN FLETEREN (New York & c., 1990) 245-59.

18. *De div. quaest. LXXXIII*, 79.4 (reading *ueneficia*, not with some MSS, *beneficia*).

19. See E. DURKHEIM, *Elementary forms of the religious life* (N.Y., 1965) 57-63, who refers (n. 62) to Robertson Smith in this connection ; and on Durkheim, see AUNE, « Magic in early Christianity », (above, n. 4), at 1514-1515. Aune here suggests that « The sociological description of the nature and function of magic in relation to religion... appears to be the most satisfying theoretical perspective from which to analyze magic in Graeco-Roman religions », and gives references (n. 27) to « some significant studies of social deviance ». J. GOODY, « Religion and ritual : the definitional problem », *Br. J. of Sociol.* 12 (1961) 142-64, who criticises (145) Durkheim's « sacred/profane » dichotomy as not universally applicable. Cf. M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and danger* (London 1966), 22, 58-72.

20. See Nock, *op. cit.* (above, n. 2), 315-318. « What gets the name of magic is a varied complex of things, mainly *qua* professional or *qua* criminal in intent or *qua* alien » (317-18). Nock refers (p. 316) as an important illustration to Constantine's law, *C.Th.* IX.16.3.

21. For instance to John Chrysostom : see A.A. BARB, « The survival of the magic arts », in *The Conflict between paganism and Christianity in the fourth century*, ed. A. MOMIGLIANO (Oxford, 1963), 100-125, at 106.

difference may be ignored, for both give magic a semiotic explanation : it is the result of communication and shared meanings. In neither case is the efficacy of the act direct, mobilising a natural force, like manipulating a mechanism, pulling a lever ; rather, it is mediated by spiritual beings, involving wills and intelligence. Augustine's explanation of magical (including miraculous) efficacy follows in the track of the second of the ancient traditions distinguished above (see p. 2f.) — the explanation in terms of mobilising demonic powers rather than in terms of cosmic « sympathy ». Religion, in the words of a recent study, is ' magic made respectable '22 ; magic belongs, phenomenologically, to the same realm of action as sacraments23. Both, for Augustine, were systems of communication : for ' human beings cannot share a religion, whether true or false, without being associated within it by means of some shared system of symbols or visible rituals [*nisi aliquo signaculorum vel sacramentorum visibilium consortio colligentur*]'24. His account of magic would allow us easily to understand the more or less permanent state of competition between what in any particular society is recognised as ' religion ' and as ' magic '.

His fullest discussion, in the *De doctrina christiana*, is entirely in line with this. The work was the outcome of Augustine's preoccupation with the problems of learning, teaching, and, at the most fundamental level, of communication. This preoccupation set the context for his fullest and richest account of magic. Here the germs of the explanation given in the early work are filled out within the framework of a fully fledged theory of signs25. Augustine devotes several chapters (II.20.30-24.37) to idolatrous, magical, divinatory, or astrological practices which he groups together under the heading of ' superstitions '. The class comprises practices (*quicquid institutum est ab hominibus*) that pertain to the making and worshipping of idols, or to the worship of creatures, or parts of creatures, as divine ; also ' consultations and pacts about certain meanings agreed with demons by contract, such as the undertakings (*molimina*) of the magical arts '. Haruspication, augury, amulets and charms ' also condemned by medical science ', ligatures and ' thousands of vacuous observances ', Augustine tells us, all belong here (II.20.30-31).

Book II of this work explores the question of how communities are constituted by the way they understand and use the symbolic systems (i.e. all that Augustine includes under his category of *signa data*) established within them. Any human group is defined by the boundaries of the system of signs in use among its members. On Augustine's theory signs mean something to somebody ; the somebodies who agree on their meaning constitute a (linguistic) community. In

22. FLINT (see above, n. 5), 32.

23. See the remarks of Mary DOUGLAS, *Natural symbols* (London, 1970), 8, and below, Section 3.

24. See below, n. 27.

25. On this see my paper « Signs, communication and communities in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* », forthcoming in Proceedings of Notre Dame symposium on the *De doctrina christiana*, where, however, I did not consider magic.

the *De doctrina christiana* Augustine makes use of his general semiological theory to explore the relationships of groups sharing a culture, or of sub-cultures within a society.

Superstitious practices link demons and human beings into an association created by a 'pact' or an 'agreement'. Magical and other 'superstitious' practices rest on 'pacts about certain meanings agreed with demons by contract' (*pacta quaedam significationum cum daemonibus placita atque foederata* – II.20.30). The idea of such agreements is at first sight puzzling: magicians and soothsayers do not obviously make agreements with demons and then go on to use the conventions agreed on. But Augustine insists on this 'pact' repeatedly, in language of almost legal precision²⁶. He leaves us in no doubt that he thought of the agreed symbolic system as the bond of association: 'these arts of idle and noxious superstition [are] constituted by a certain association through faithless and deceitful friendship' (*pacta infidelis et dolosae amicitiae* – II.23.36); 'they [omens, auguries etc.] are valid only to the extent that they have been established by presumptuous minds as a common language agreed with demons' (*tantum ualent, quantum praesumptione animorum quasi communi quadam lingua cum daemonibus foederata sunt* – II.24.37). Like words,

all these meanings are understood according to the conventions of the society, and, as these conventions differ, are understood differently; nor are they agreed upon among men because they already had a meaning, but they receive their meaning from the agreement' (*hae omnes significationes pro suae cuiusque societatis consensione animos mouent et, quia diuersa consensio est, diuerse mouent, nec ideo consenserunt in eas homines, quia iam ualebant ad significationem, sed ideo ualent quia consenserunt in eas* – II.24.37).

Leaving aside, for the moment, the puzzle about the status and origin of this pact of association between men and demons, what Augustine's account makes wholly clear is that magic and the like are symbolic systems, a language of words, signs and rituals, which, in the first place, secure the association of men and demons; and, in doing so, establish the cohesion of the group on which the magical efficacy of its rites rests. 'Men cannot be brought together', Augustine wrote soon after working out his views on symbolic communities in the *De doctrina christiana*, 'in the name of any religion, whether true or false, without being associated by means of some shared visible symbols or rituals'²⁷.

Turning, now, to the puzzling 'pact' by which wicked men associate with demons, it is not immediately clear how Augustine wishes us to construe this. It was clear to Augustine that if the meanings of expressions are 'conventional' in the sense that their links with their referents are not fixed by nature, they are,

26. *De doctrina christiana* II.20 30; 22.34; 23.36; 24.37; 25.38; 39.58. The same notion is adumbrated in *De diu. quaest. LXXXIII* 79.1 (cf. above, n. 16), and used regularly by Augustine.

27. *In nullum autem nomen religionis, se uerum seu falsum, coagulari homines possunt, nisi aliquo signaculorum uel sacramentorum uisibilibus consortio colligentur.* (*C. Faust.* XIX.11).

nevertheless, not freely chosen by the language-user, but imposed by the conventions of the existing linguistic community, its habits and traditions²⁸. You do not *choose* to use the language of demons, thereby entering a community with them ; rather, you belong to their community, so you speak their language. The primary fact is the belonging ; by belonging, one comes to share the language that constitutes this community of human and demonic beings. A clue to how he is thinking of the establishment of such conventions can be found in his earlier discussion of magic (see above, n. 16) in *De diu. quaest. LXXXIII* 79.1. There Augustine envisages a community brought into being through evil men, seeking their own, selfish and ' private ' ends, being assisted by demonic powers similarly intent or their own, ' private ', glorification. The community sharing a symbolic system is brought into being by the identity of intentions. It must be the intention to enter such an association that lies at the roots of the conventions which hold it together. It is as if a person entered the ' contract ' with the demons in the very movement of his will towards the demons with whom he associates himself.

There is much in the *De doctrina christiana* to confirm this crucial role assigned to intention. Intention, for instance, is decisive in determining the meaning to be given to certain polysemic symbols. Augustine notes that there are practices which can be ambiguous : hanging certain objects on one's body, for instance, or taking certain foods or drinks, might be either sinister acts of superstition, or sensible medication (II.20.30 ; cf. 29.45). Augustine seems to treat such signs as capable of belonging to two different sign systems : either to a language resting on demonic convention, or to something different, resting, harmlessly, on human contrivance. Which of the two symbol systems the particular rite belongs to is determined by the agent's intention. Augustine's explanation differs from, for instance Porphyry's, (see above, n. 15) mainly by assigning the initiative in magical transactions to the human rather than the demonic partners.

Crucial for Augustine's view of magic is this anchorage of sign systems in intentionality. Meaning is bound up with will. This colours all he has to say about them in the *De doctrina christiana*²⁹. From the start of the work the will is central : ' We are on a road, one which is a road not from place to place, but a road of the affections ' (I.17.16 ; cf. I.36.41). So communication between sentient beings

28. Cf. Augustine, *Conf.* I.18.29 : *Vide, domine Deus, et patienter, ut vides, vide quomodo diligenter observent filli hominum pacta litterarum et syllabarum accepta a prioribus locutoribus...* ; Cf. F. DE SAUSSURE, *Cours de linguistique générale*, publiée par C. BALLY, A. SCHEHAYE & A. RIEDLINGER, 3rd. ed. (Paris, 1967) : « Si par rapport à l'idée qu'il représente, le signifiant apparaît comme librement choisi, en revanche, par rapport à la communauté linguistique qui l'emploie, il n'est pas libre, il est imposé » (p. 104).

29. See on this the contributions to the Notre Dame symposium (forthcoming ; see above, n. 25) by W.S. BABCOCK, ' *Caritas* and signification in *De doctrina christiana* 1-3 ', and by D. DAWSON, « Sign theory, allegory and the notions of the soul in the *De doctrina christiana* », to both of which I owe much. See also M. D. JORDAN, « Words and word : Incarnation and signification in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* », *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980) 177-96 : « ...an intentional sign is the kind of thing which starts a motion towards what it signifies and, mediately, towards whomever employs it as a sign » (186).

involves more than the manipulation of disembodied signs : hearing a voice ' we attend to the motion of the mind ' (*affectionem animi* - II.1.1) ; speech requires us to respond to the speaker's inner disposition, and, similarly, communicating with others by signs we seek to ' make another a participant of our will ' (*uoluntatis nostrae participem* - II.3.4). The speech-act performed overtly in any act of communication ' brings forth ', or ' expresses ', an inner movement of the mind (*quod animo gerimus ; ...gerit ; ...quod corde gestamus ;* I.13.12 ; II.2.3 ; I.13.12)³⁰. It seems that it is this affective element, the presence of will within acts of communication, that Augustine's ' pact ' with demonic powers ultimately rests on. Some speech-acts, he seems to be saying, are demonic from their inception in virtue of the direction of the speaker's ' affections '. Their significance unfolds within a community created by the selfish, ' private ', purposes. The superstitious rites of magic and similar ' demonic ' observances thus pertain « to a [system of signs] not divinely instituted for the sake of the love of God and the neighbour, as it were publicly, but they dissipate the hearts of the wretched through the private desire of temporal things » (II.23.36). This society of men and demons being « constituted, as it were, by a pact of faithless and deceitful friendship » (see above, n. 26) is self-stultifying in that the pattern of signification is constantly subverted within it by the ' spirits who wish to deceive ' manipulating the signs « so that they affect different people in different ways, according to their own thoughts and presumptions » (*ideo diuersis diuerse proueniunt secundum cogitationes et praesumptiones suas* - *ibid.*) « Far from joining person to person in genuine sociality, then, such a world-view actually caters to their private desires, reinforces their separate presumptions, and thus tacitly undermines the very social order that it appears to secure³¹ ». Magic is the language of a group which parodies and undermines a true social order.

On the lines of Augustine's exposition we should not, then, interpret magic as failed science, or pseudo-science ; it belongs, rather, to the realm of illocutionary or performative acts such as we have in ritual ; « ...magical acts are ritual acts, and ritual acts are in turn performative acts whose positive and creative meaning is missed and whose persuasive validity is misjudged if they are subjected to that kind of empirical verification associated with scientific activity³² ». It might be pressing anachronism too far to suggest that the illocutionary force of a magical rite is entry into a demonic society, its perlocutionary aim the performance or occurrence of certain acts, events, or states of affairs ; that, to use J.L. Austin's language, *in* performing a magical rite or uttering an incantation one is entering into such a relationship, and that *by* doing so one intends to bring about something³³. But something like this would be in line with Augustine's view.

30. This has been well brought out by Dawson, (see above, n. 29).

31. Babcock, (n. 29, above).

32. S.J. TAMBIAH, ' Form and meaning of magical acts : a point of view ', in R. HORTON & R. FINNEGAN, edd., *Modes of thought* (London, 1973), 199-229, at 199.

33. Cf. M. HANCHER, « Performative utterance, the Word of God, and the death of the author », *Semeia* 41 (1988) (*Speech act theory and biblical criticism*, ed. H.C. White), 27-40. I owe knowledge of this to the kindness of John Gager.

III. — MAGIC AND COGNATE RITES

In a study³⁴ of the efficacy of a Jewish ritual Jacob Milgrom concludes that for Judaism « it was inconceivable that any rite was inherently efficacious. In the absence of rational explanation there was, solely and sufficiently, the inscrutable will of God ». The efficacy of the rite rests simply on God's communication with man and man's with God. God can listen to the prayer of his faithful, and He can promise to come to their aid ; but He cannot be coerced by human words or acts. His sovereign freedom and monopoly of power is what distinguishes the miracles wrought by Moses and Aaron from the wonders worked by pagan magicians. Milgrom has traced with great elegance the emergence of Jewish monotheism from its pagan milieu, and characterised in a wonderfully persuasive manner that which distinguishes the one from the other. This can help us to understand Augustine's way of making sense of magic, for it is cast in a similar mould : like Milgrom's monotheistic Jew, Augustine refuses to credit any human ritual act with intrinsic power.

Augustine's theory of magic (if we may, as we surely may, call it a ' theory ') remained remarkably constant throughout his career. From the early discussions with his *fratres* (see above, n. 16) to the polemic in the *City of God* VIII-X his view remains, in substance, unchanged. The only major development it seems to have undergone in the course of his career is its incorporation in a wider theory of signs, communication, and community in the *De doctrina christiana*³⁵. This was not devised to provide a framework within which an explanation of magic could be articulated ; but once formulated, it was a powerful theory with wide bearings in a number of disparate areas, and it lurks in the background of Augustine's treatment of a number of themes, including magic³⁶. Prayer, sacraments, exorcism, the cult of relics, as well as magical rites, are among the practices on which Augustine's notion of signs might be expected to shed light. He accounts for magic and sacramental ritual in what are essentially the same, semiotic, terms. Both are systems of signs, in use in rival speech communities. One set of signs has validity

34. « The paradox of the Red Cow », in *Studies in cultic theology and terminology* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, 36. Leiden, 1983), 85-93. Quotation from p. 93. See also his « Magic, monotheism and the sin of Moses », in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God : Studies in honor of E. Mendenhall*, ed. H.B. HUFFMON, F.A. SPINA & A.R.W. GREEN (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1983) 251-265. I wish to thank Mary Douglas for bringing these marvellous studies to my attention, as well as for much other generous advice.

35. Also hinted at in the roughly contemporary *De fide et symbolo*, preached at the Council of Carthage, 393.

36. See the studies of C.P. MAYER, especially *Die Zeichen in der geistigen Entwicklung und in der Theologie des jungen Augustinus* (Cassiciacum, 24,1. Würzburg, 1969) ; and *Die Zeichen in der geistigen Entwicklung und in der Theologie Augustinus : II. Teil : Die antimanichäische Epoche* (Cassiciacum, 24/2. Würzburg, 1974). For a bibliography, see my paper referred to above, n. 25. The theory clearly underlies the *De diuinatione daemonum*.

in a perverse community of individuals working for their own selfish ends and deceiving each other, the other in a community united in their service of God and the common good.

Augustine's theology of the *ex opere operato* efficacy of sacraments, especially of baptism, even if administered by schismatic or unworthy ministers, has often been held to have encouraged a magical view of sacramental efficacy³⁷. It is important, however, to be clear that such *ex opere operato* efficacy did not involve, for Augustine, the direct efficacy of word or rite at the cost of the elision of spiritual (in this case divine) agency. Writing of the eucharist, in one of his most summary passages Augustine observed that « so far as the action of human hands is concerned... it is not consecrated to be so great a sacrament (*sacramentum* : 'mystery'?) except by the invisible working of God's Spirit... » (*De Trin.* III.4.10). The alleged 'magicisation' of the rite is usually held to appear in the fact that the communal dimension of the rite and the element of intentionality in it were by-passed, and its efficacy construed as a direct mechanical transaction, without the mediation of any spiritual agency. The spell came to take the place of prayer and invocation³⁸. Meaning has ceased to be, so it is said, something to be understood within a speech-community.

Moreover, this model of magical efficacy is thought to have encouraged wider ripples of imagined or expected control over events : baptism, for instance, came to be expected to bring political (and other) success, bodily as well as spiritual health, and so forth³⁹. It was, so it is generally held, only a short step from an *ex opere operato* theology of the sacraments to a wider magical interpretation of ritual action ; and the Reformation, on such a view, will tend to appear as a deliverance from a mechanical ritualism, even from 'magic'⁴⁰. This is too vast a theme to discuss here ; moreover, Augustine's theology of baptism cuts confusingly across the grain of some of his reflection on ritual action. I therefore consider another, and less well known theme as an example.

37. For instance, A. ANGENENDT, « Taufe und Politik im frühen Mittelalter », *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 7 (1973) 143-168, at 147 observes that Augustine's views on the efficacy of baptism « scheint nie vergessen ». For a remarkable study of baptismal theology in terms of the kinds of social context which encourage — or discourage — certain conceptions of ritual efficacy, see J. Patout BURNS, « On Rebaptism : Social Organization in the Third Century », *Journal of early Christian studies* 1 (1993) 367-403. For a somewhat unsatisfactory attempt to exonerate Augustine, see E.G. WELTIN, « The concept of *ex opere operato* efficacy in the Fathers as an evidence of magic in early Christianity », *GRBS* 3 (1960) 74-100.

38. The two often overlap, as S.J. Tambiah observes in « The magical power of words », *Man* n.s. 3 (1968) 175-208.

39. See ANGENENDT, n. 37, above.

40. Cf. DOUGLAS, in *Natural symbols* (see above, n. 23), 10, 47ff. Also, for some of the debate over K. THOMAS, *Religion and the decline of magic* (London, 1971), see H. GEERTZ, « An anthropology of religion and magic, I », *J. of Interdisciplinary history*, 6 (1975) 71-89 and K. THOMAS, « An anthropology of religion and magic, II », *J. of Interdisciplinary history*, 6 (1975) 91-109 (reply to Geertz). On Reformation views, see B. VOGLER, 'La Réforme et le concept de miracle au XVI^e siècle', *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité* 48 (1972) 145-50.

A revealing case is furnished by the cult of the dead at the tomb, and especially the custom of burial near the tomb of a saint (« *ad sanctos* »), a question Augustine considered with particular care, in his response to that devoted promoter of the cult, Paulinus of Nola. We have been given a careful study of Augustine's view and of contemporary practice as revealed in funerary inscriptions by Mme Yvette Duval⁴¹. Her conclusions will save us the task of surveying the evidence and analysing Augustine's text. Augustine's answer to Paulinus is stark and simple : the dead cannot expect any benefit from the *place* of their burial, only from the prayers of the living who may visit the place. Place by itself has no efficacy : « what may benefit the spirit of the dead is not the place of its dead body but the affection of a mother kindled by the memory attached to the place » (*ex loci memoria uiuus matris affectus* — *De cura pro mort. ger.* 6). This belief is frequently attested by funerary inscriptions (and, incidentally, by Gregory the Great, *Dial.* IV.52) which express the hope that the dead might be received among the elect thanks to the prayers of his friends and relatives (as well as his merits). Such an understanding of these burial practices accords well with the thought of Augustine, Gregory, and reflective thinkers and churchmen. But, as Mme Duval has shown, there is also another current of thought to be found among these inscriptions : that the dead body keeps a trace of the spirit it had lived by, which operates through the bodily remains on those in contact with or proximity to it⁴². There is a wide gap between popular belief in the direct magical efficacy of the buried saint's remains and Augustine's determination not to short-circuit prayer and God's providence.

What are we to make of this difference in views, on the one hand as represented by Augustine, on the other, by the many epitaphs, hagiographical stories and images which attest another, and perhaps more widespread notion ?

We are apt, as I have said, to think this way of short-circuiting the symbolic element of ritual action as turning the action into a pseudo-scientific act, and then to interpret such an act — presumably because there is a widely diffused notion among us of magic as 'pseudo-scientific' — as 'magical', in contradistinction to 'religious'. Augustine would certainly not have interpreted it in this way. He would have not have seen 'magic' at work, because the essential element of communication with the demonic world was absent. On the other hand, he might well have admitted that it fell short of the properly 'religious', for it by-passed the element of communication with the divine. He seems, rather, to have taken it upon himself, in his treatise on *The Care for the dead*, to supply this suppressed element. He appears to have thought that what was lacking in popular piety was the explicit articulation of something which was, nevertheless, present.

The short-circuiting of prayer in the rite could perhaps be understood in terms of Mary Douglas's discussion of 'ritualism'. This attitude she defines as « sensitivity to condensed symbols⁴³ » ; a sensitivity which will be operative in both sacramental and magical behaviour :

41. *Auprès des saints corps et âme. L'inhumation « ad sanctos » dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du III^e au VII^e siècle* (Paris, 1988).

42. DUVAL, *op. cit.*, 211.

43. *Natural symbols* (above, n. 23), 8.

The Bog Irishman in his faithfulness to the rule of Friday abstinence is undeniably like the primitive ritualist. Magical rules have always an expressive function. Whatever other functions they perform, disciplinary, anxiety-reducing, or sanctioning of moral codes, they have first and foremost a symbolic function. The official symbolism of Friday abstinence was originally personal mortification, a small weekly celebration of Good Friday. Thus it pointed directly to Calvary and Redemption⁴⁴.

Could we say that burying our dead near the holy burials is a similar piece of ritualism? Acting as a condensed symbol of the communion of saints enacted whenever one of the living prays at the graveside, and tenaciously adhered to even when the original symbolism is forgotten – just as Friday abstinence continued to be? If we accept this, then the modern (and discredited) idea that ‘magic’ tends to be ‘manipulative’ whereas ‘religion’ is ‘supplicative’ is beside the mark. Popular piety has condensed prayer and ritual into a single act, not fully explicated. Augustine has simply supplied the missing explication.

To sum up: Augustine distinguishes two semiotic structures. One is authentically public, shared by the whole language-using community, and is used by its members to communicate with one another as well as with God; the other is a ‘private’ code, restricted to some members of this community and used only by them, to communicate with demons. Magic is part of this second semiotic system⁴⁵.

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ABSTRACT: The article seeks to study Augustine’s theory of magic in the context of ancient magical theory. In the scraps of ancient theory devoted to this theme magic was interpreted either as the result of action within a nexus of occult interrelated causes, or as the result of communication with invisible powers. Augustine’s view falls in the second class. He was the only Christian or non-Christian thinker of Antiquity to develop a full theory of magical action; and he does this in terms of his carefully worked out theory of signs. Magical and sacramental rituals are both acts of communication: the one with demonic, the other with divine powers.

44. *Ibid.*, 37. For parallel « learned » interpretations of the healing action of relics, see ROUSSELLE, A., *Croire et guérir : La foi en Gaule dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 1990) 231-250.

45. Cf. BRUNING (see above, n. 10), 614: « On pourrait dire qu'[Augustin] aborde la *superstitio* comme un phénomène linguistique ».