



UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

A monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 or 8 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6
Forums usually with Canon Richard T. Nolan

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TOPIC: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MAGIC AND THE SACRAMENTS

(Without realizing it, many Christians prefer "magic.")

A Prayer To Be Said In Unison

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who has committed to your holy Church the care and nurture of all the faithful; Enlighten with your wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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I. WHAT IS *MAGIC*?

Dictionary (Houghton Mifflin eReference Suite Copyright © 2001-2004):

- 1. The art that purports to control or forecast natural events, effects, or forces by invoking the supernatural.
 - 2. a. The practice of using charms, spells, or rituals to attempt to produce supernatural effects or control events in nature.
 - b. The charms, spells, and rituals so used.
- 3. The exercise of sleight of hand or conjuring for entertainment.

excerpt from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition:

magic, practice of manipulating and controlling the course of nature by preternatural means (exceeding what is normal in nature). Magic is based upon the belief that the universe is populated by unseen forces or spirits that permeate all things. Since human beings seek to control nature and since these supernatural forces are thought to govern the course of natural events, the control of these forces gives humans control over nature. The practice of magic is held to depend on the proper use of both the ritual and the spell.

II. THE BIBLE AND MAGIC

Eerdmans Bible Dictionary: MAGIC. The attempted manipulation of events through charms, amulets, incantations, and the like. In the ancient world, magic was not sharply distinguished from religion. In polytheistic religion no power is thought of as having final control over all things; magic is the attempt to affect events within this situation of multiplicity. Indeed, in Mesopotamian and Canaanite religious texts, as also in Homer, the gods themselves are portrayed as using magic and wearing amulets.

Magic was quite widespread in the ancient world—both the Old and New Testament exhibit extensive vocabulary for the various aspects of magic, their practitioners, and adherents. Yet magic was also often proscribed by the opinion of society and sometimes by law (cf. ANET pp. 166, 184; OCD, p. 638). The Old Testament is quite definite in its prohibition of a wide range of magical practices, sometimes linking them with human sacrifice (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10–14; cf. 2 Kgs. 23:24). That the prohibitions were made indicates that such practices were engaged in not only by neighboring peoples, but by Israelites as well (cf. 1 Kgs. 17:17; 2 Chr. 33:6; Isa. 3:2–3; Mic. 5:12). Among the practices specifically mentioned are the wearing of amulets (Isa. 3:20; KJV “earrings”) and of “magic bands,” charms associated with witchcraft (Ezek. 13:18, 20).

This entirely negative attitude toward magic is maintained in the New Testament (Acts 13:10; Gal. 5:20; Rev. 9:21; 18:23; 21:8; 22:15). The sometimes close relationship of magical powers and of religion is especially evident in the case of Simon Magus, who inspired religious devotion by magic (Acts 8:9–11), then attempted to buy divine power as if it involved only a simple incantation (vv. 18–21). The power of Jesus over diseases and spirits might adhere to Paul’s handkerchiefs (19:11–12), but this did not mean that the name “Jesus” could become a neutral incantation (vv. 13–16). A wide variety of incantations were used in the Hellenistic world, some derived from Old Testament names of God; they were highly prized secrets and available for a price in scrolls sometimes called “Ephesian letters” because of the association of magic with Ephesus (cf. v. 19).

 excerpted from the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Baker Book House, 1997, c1996 (Baker Reference Library; Logos Library System)

The Old Testament. Magic—the attempt to exploit supernatural powers by formulaic recitations to achieve goals that were otherwise unrealizable—was seen in a negative light in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:26, 31; 20:6; 1 Sam. 28:9; Isa. 8:19; 44:25; 57:3; Jer. 27:9; Ezek. 22:28; Mic. 5:12; Nah. 3:4; Mal. 3:5) and was banned under penalty of death (Exod. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:10–11). However, many Canaanite magical practices were later widespread in the divided monarchy: Jezebel practiced sorcery (2 Kings 9:22); Manasseh encouraged divination (2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chron. 33:6); Hebrew seers and diviners practiced the magic arts (Mic. 3:7); and Isaiah condemned women who wore charms (Isa. 3:18–23). The multiplicity of terminology used in the bans testifies that magic was a pervasive problem in the Israelite world. However, many of the banned terms (primarily in Deut. 18:10–11) have defied easy explanation, including child sacrifice (possibly used for divinatory purposes; Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 21:6), types of divination (Num. 23:23; Deut. 18:10–11; 1 Sam. 15:23; 2 Kings 17:17; Mic. 3:6), sorceries (Exod. 22:18; Deut. 18:11; Jer. 27:9; Mic. 5:12; Mal. 3:5), and necromancy (1 Sam. 28).

Magic was considered an aspect of pagan wisdom; magicians were counted as wise men (Ps. 58:5; Dan. 1:20; 2:13) and officials of foreign governments (Gen. 41:6; Exod. 7:11; Dan. 2:2). Different from pagan sources, the Old Testament writers did not see a connection between magic and the gods. Foreign magicians in Scripture did not invoke help of their gods for magical formulas, but often called upon self-operating forces that were independent of the gods (Isa. 47:13; the monotheistic Israelites did not accept the existence of the

foreign gods). Moreover, the biblical writers seemed to attribute a reality to magical power that it did not ascribe to the gods. Magic was considered human rebellion that unlocked divine secrets, making humanity equal with God.

Although there was a formal ban on magic, Israelite religion appeared on the surface to have adopted some Canaanite magical practices.

However, foreign materials and technical terms of magic were simply used as vehicles of expression in Israelite religion. The magical features preserved ancient elements whose original meaning had been radically altered. The writers stripped the magical actions of their autonomous power and made them serve as vehicles of God's will.

New Testament Christians viewed magical practices like their Old Testament counterparts. Although Simon the magician (Gk. *magos*; originally a term for an Iranian priestly group, it came to have a technical meaning; cf. Herodotus, *The Histories* 1.101, 132; Matt. 2:1–16; Acts 13:6–8) was severely criticized by Peter (Acts 8:9–24), the efficacy of his power was not denied, and he was considered dangerous.

Many of the accepted practices in the New Testament (exorcisms, faith healing, and the use of lots; Acts 1:26) could have been construed by the Gentiles as similar to their own rituals. In fact, there were some linguistic similarities between words used for exorcism and healing in the New Testament and pagan magical rites. The Gentiles saw miracles as magical in nature, and thus confused those of the apostles with their own magic (Acts 8:9–11). The exorcisms of Jesus appeared to some as magical (Matt. 12:25–37; Mark 3:23–30; Luke 11:17–20), as well as his use of saliva to heal the blind (Mark 7:33). In fact, some rabbinical references claimed that Jesus was a magician. But the New Testament writers regarded Jesus and the apostles' miraculous acts as of divine origin.

III. THE EVOLUTION OF THEOLOGY (Anglican-Episcopal Theology)

The theology (literally "the study of God") of the Episcopal Church is the evolving understanding of the Creator's graceful self-disclosure through Christ. Recognizing that no historical period has complete comprehension, the Episcopal Church respects a number of informed theological explanations. All interpretations must be faithful to the Bible, informed by Tradition, and illumined by Reason - accompanied by our corporate experience.

Beginning in the 3rd century a significant development occurred. The "Mind of Christ," the Semitic context of the Gospel, was interpreted within forms of Hellenistic (Greek) thought patterns. Consequently, a focus on philosophical matters, such as "is-ness", "substance", and "essence" began to overshadow the biblical-Semitic emphasis on action. Although some theologians attempted to retain the Semitic outlook within which, for the most part, the Bible was produced, the shift from "verbs" to "nouns" took hold. Thus, for example, a focus on the "is-ness" of the blessed Bread and Wine began to overshadow and replace a comprehension of the divine and actions related to the elements. To this day, the consecrated host for many, perhaps most, Christians is a quasi-magical object which in and of itself can be venerated.

IV. RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT Source: Walter H. Clark, Ph.D. *Psychology of Religion* (Macmillan, 1958)

CRITERIA FOR MATURE RELIGION

1. Mature religion is primary, derived from a sense of compelling individual need, not pious, imitative play-acting.
2. It is fresh; like the religion of childhood, it has a fresh sense of curiosity and wonder.
3. It is self-critical; the individual can see weaknesses in his religious position while at the same time remaining loyal to it.
4. Mature religion is free from magic; it is not merely a means of securing favors from a cosmic source.
5. It gives meaning to life in such a way as to enlist and motivate one's total energies so that it is capable of becoming a satisfaction for its own sake.

6. It relates itself to all of one's experiences, thus integrates one's life and demonstrates moral results consistent with one's own aims as well as those of a wholesome society.
7. A mature religion strengthens the individual's sense of community with others in such a way as to be ultimately creative of a more wholesome society. It is socially effective.
8. It demonstrates humility.
9. It is growing; one's faith expands in the search for deeper truths and in the progressively wider, willing identification of the interests of others with one's own.
10. A mature religion is creative; the religious life of the individual contains elements and shows characteristics of its own; it is not a mere repetition of the religion of others.

V. PEASANT RELIGION (often includes magic)

“Peasant religion” is a pejorative term for “folk religion” in its meaning below. It is most likely characteristic of the majority of those who identify themselves as a member of any world religion. Because structured religion is commonly a public utility easily available to the paying public and because religious leaders generally require of their flocks little or no understanding of their scriptures, doctrines, and various rituals, peasant religion flourishes; it thrives in unorganized fashion among otherwise educated people within mainstream traditions (*e.g.*, the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Churches). Members of the highest judiciaries, legislative and executive bodies of world governments have been exposed only to the most naïve and uninformed levels of religious education, which usually came to an end in early adolescence if not before. They are in the same league religiously with most university professors and corporate executives. Moreover, nearly all do not have a clue that there is a more sophisticated and learned dimension to their heritages. They have taken for granted that they have comprehended their tradition more than adequately – which reinforces and perpetuates the peasant level quality. Furthermore, it even functions at “official” levels.

The following entry is from the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (1997).

“Folk religion “... In a wider sense, folk religion is the appropriation of religious beliefs and practices at a popular level. This may occur as much in urban as in rural environments, and may also be the way in which individuals or groups belonging to mainstream religions practise their religion: it may be at considerable variance from what is officially supposed to be the case, and is thus also referred to as non-official religion. In this sense, folk religion absorbs much that might be frowned upon by official religion. It is extremely eclectic, and picks up elements from popular culture, superstition, sentiment, the paranormal, the occult, astrology, etc., and it is characteristically unorganized. Nevertheless, it can form systems of belief and practice, as in the cult of Elvis Presley, whose home at Gracelands has become a shrine.”

VI. THE SACRAMENTS

Every human community has visible signs of its beliefs, relationships, and special occasions. Signs of becoming a member, continuing actively as a member, as well ceremonies celebrating adulthood, marriage, and new leadership are ingredients of many cultures and organizations. In addition, some groups have ways of expressing sorrow and forgiveness, healing, and death. It is characteristically human to dramatize convictions, changes and special moments, whether it is a nation’s parade on a holiday, a school graduation, or the awarding of Nobel prizes. For most men and women it would be unthinkable to mark such events with a passive nod! The Christian Church is no exception.

The Christian sacraments are traditionally understood as "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." They are reliable signs and occasions of God’s gracious activity among us. They are transforming acts by which we enter the heartfelt testimony we hear and retell. “In the sacraments, therefore, the church enacts not merely its own word, but God’s Word.” (Norris, *Understanding the Faith of the Church*, p. 216) The sacraments are administered within the Church community; they are not rites to which all persons are automatically entitled. As the Rev. Professor Massey H. Shepherd, Jr. noted years ago (in “Sacraments,” *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, pp. 331ff.):

Apart from the context of corporate church life, a sacrament is meaningless, if not, more extremely, a superstitious piece of magic. To be a Christian involves more than a personal faith in the redeeming act of God and Christ. It demands an incorporation into the community where the effects of Christ's redemption in reconciliation and charity may be actualized and nurtured. A sacrament cannot be performed by an individual by himself alone; it requires at least another party. Thus a sacrament is more than a visible token of God's free favor and grace offered to one who accepts His redeeming love in faith and devotion. It is an instrument whereby the individual is made a member of a covenant-community and ordered by its disciplines and responsibilities. To say that any particular sacrament is necessary to salvation does not mean that God is tied and bound to bestow grace only by this means, but to affirm that in all normal circumstances an individual is made a partaker of Christ's redemption by being related to others who share the same benefits. In the sacraments, therefore, both the personal and the social relationships of Christian salvation are publicly ratified, accepted, and communicated.

[*Redeeming and redemption refer to the reality that human circumstances, often deathlike, are out of alignment with God's purposes for creation and our lives; in Christ's ministry we are offered the pathway to the abundant, liberated, reconciled life with God within the Covenant community of agape (love). There are many interpretations of redemption.]

The Episcopal Church affirms two sacraments as instituted by Christ and as necessary to the life of a Christian: Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Five other sacramental rites evolved in the life of the early Church: confirmation, ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitence (sometimes referred to as penance), and unction (years ago in a limited way known as "the last rites").

VII. GRACE VIA THE SACRAMENTS

What does "grace" mean? During the 1958-9 academic year at the Berkeley Divinity School in New Haven, Visiting Lecturer Dr. Leonard Hodgson (Canon of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and Regius Professor of Divinity, Oxford) commented: "We begin by repudiating all notions of grace which think of it as a something given by God to work mechanically, after the manner of a medicine given by a doctor to be taken three times a day after meals. We think of God's grace after the analogy of that help which one can give to another in personal relationships, help which does not set aside or supersede a man's own freedom but enables him to be more truly himself and more fully free: the sort of help which leads him to say with gratitude, 'I could never have been what I am but for X.'"

In the Bible, grace is synonymous with "favor," "mercy," "compassion," "kindness" and "love." Because of our human limitations, individuals are unable to establish truly personal, faithful relationships with God solely by their own efforts. God's grace is extended to us that we might become more aligned with God's purposes and to mature toward a fuller communion with the Creator and each other. Neither controlling nor coercing, God's freely given grace enables, strengthens, and empowers. Recipients of grace remain free to respond or not; otherwise, God-given human freedom would be shackled.

Under most circumstances preparation for participation in the sacraments is expected. At the very least the participants should understand the basic meaning of the Prayer Book words to be used.

What follows in this paragraph is harsh, but valid. Too often, clergy are guilty of liturgical malpractice - by "selling" liturgical rites; - by cowering under pressures from influential individuals who demand "christenings," confirmations, and weddings; - by trying to appear "successful" by means of reports of numbers/quantity of their liturgical victims; or - by trying to be nice/popular/"pastoral." This is clearly sinful on the part of such clergy, and they try to excuse their wizardry by declaring that those involved receive God's grace regardless of any preparations. This irresponsibility flirts with magical understandings of the sacraments and is often labeled pejoratively and rightly "cheap grace." Recipients of such reckless generosity rarely have any significant commitment to the words muttered in Services, to the Church, and to the Covenant with God through Christ. Afterwards we wonder why we see in church only a minority of the people who amble through these rites-on-demand from the ecclesiastical public utility!

The Holy Eucharist

Baptism, the grace-filled affirmation of one's most basic and profound identity as a unique child of God, is the foundational Sacrament of Christianity. Other sacramental rites, including the Eucharist [from

the Greek *eucharistein* “to give thanks”], generally presume baptism. (An exception occurs in matrimony wherein at least one of the two persons must be baptized.)

In the Episcopal and many other churches the Eucharist is the central rite of corporate worship in which bread and wine are consecrated (blessed, set apart) by an ordained minister and consumed by the minister and members of the congregation in obedience to Jesus' command at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me." As a sacrament, it both symbolizes and nurtures the participants' baptismal identity as well as Christ's fellowship (communion) with the faithful. From this individual and corporate identity flows each Christian's primary vocation: to live out faithfully the Summary of the Law (see Unit 5), including the invitation to all human beings to become disciples of Christ.

Traditionally, Jesus' specific command to his disciples at the Last Supper (Luke 22:17-20 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-25) to eat the bread and drink the wine "in remembrance of me" constitutes the institution of the Eucharist. There is no mention of how often this is to be done. Moreover, the command "Do this in remembrance of me" does not appear in either Matthew or Mark's account of the Last Supper.

In any case, the practice of eating meals in remembrance of Christ and his ministry and the belief in the presence of Christ in the "breaking of the bread" were universal in the early church, where there was considerable diversity in both the practice and the understanding of the Eucharist; no evidence exists of any Christian church in which the sacrament was not celebrated.

During the Middle Ages a more elaborate doctrine of the Eucharist was developed by Scholastic philosophers under the influence of Aristotle. According to Scholastic speculation, the substance (the essential and true spiritual reality) of the Eucharistic bread is, by the power of God, wholly transformed into the body of Christ; the wine is likewise transformed into the blood of Christ. Contemporary Roman Catholicism continues this explanation, and some “high church” Anglicans (sometimes labeled “Anglo-Catholics”) seem to come very close to it.

In their interpretations of the Eucharist some modern theologians have attempted to recapture the ancient Judaic sense of remembering the acts of God. By invoking the presence of God and by remembering the events by which he has delivered them, worshipers “experience” or empathize with those events as present events. Thus, just as each generation of Israelites participates year by year in the Exodus (the wanderings in the wilderness and the crossing into Canaan), so each generation of Christians participates in the Last Supper, the cross, and the resurrection. (What this actually means requires further interpretation.)

Commentary on the Eucharist by Canon Nolan

A further consideration as yet having little impact on interpretations of the Eucharist is that Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek (the language of the New Testament); in his own language he could not have said “This IS my body.....” as usually understood in Greek. In Aramaic the verb “to be” does not focus on essences/substances, but is a connecting verb suggesting action/activity. It would seem that Jesus never intended to address the “is-ness” (essence/substance) of the blessed bread and wine, but rather how the sacred elements act in the life of the faithful. As one Anglican theologian noted in the mid-twentieth century, “God’s grace is conveyed not through the elements but through the act.” [from J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (1952), p. 163.]

In any consideration of the sacraments, strong emphasis should be laid on the truth that the sacraments and sacramental rites, if they are to produce the results for which they are instituted, must be met with a definite response on the part of those who use them. Sacraments are not mechanical acts; they do not work in a magical way. They are means whereby God brings us his grace, that is, his loving help. This grace is always present, but its effect upon us depends upon the use we make of it. [from “The Church and the Sacraments” (Forward Movement Publications, 1999), p. 14]

It might be added that it is unfair to expect recipients to respond in faith to sacramental rites, if they have not been adequately prepared in both heart and mind. The Sacraments are neither magical objects nor magical acts. *Furthermore, our prayers ought to be free from attempts to manipulate or control God, which is also attempted magic.*