

Miracle or Magic? The Problematic Status of Christian Amulets

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Introduction

In 1171 C.E., Hugh de Puiset, bishop of Durham, hired an engineer named Richard to repair and enlarge Norham Castle in Northumberland. Richard, a respected local land owner, wore a silk sack from his neck that contained a number of small parchment amulets, or *phylacteries*, which contained the names of God, and also extracts from the Bible, including portions of the Gospels. He wore these amulets as a means to resist evil and win divine protection. A Benedictine monk from Durham learned of Richard's sack and decided to offer him an amulet of superior power: a relic from St. Cuthbert. The monk gave Richard a piece of the burial shroud in which the saint was wrapped. The relic was believed to bring about miracles and resist fire. Richard, accordingly, thanked the monk and added the relic to his sack.¹

This brief story illustrates a common occurrence within the history of the Christian church: the use of amulets as a conduit of supernatural power. Yet these amulets were problematic. The use of amulets was condemned outright by not only Augustine but numerous ecumenical councils as well. They claimed that the use of amulets evoked the power of demons and created implicit or explicit pacts. Nevertheless, during the Middle Ages, only members of the clergy were educated enough to make the amulets and thus, were the primary supplier of them to their parishioners—although there

1. The story of Richard the engineer is found in Reginald of Durham's *Libellus* of 129 miracle stories about St. Cuthbert. The story is summarized in Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 53-4.

were non-clergy who sold them too. The Church Fathers and intellectuals made the distinction between the miracle of the relics and sacred words of the Bible, *verba sacra*, versus condemned amulets labeled as superstitious magic, a term used to delegitimize their use and imply demonic association. But for the illiterate and uneducated, the distinctions between magic amulets and church-approved amulets were hardly discernable. Moreover, enforcement of amulet prohibition was uneven and intermittent. Entering the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, amulet creation became a shared duty between the local clergy and common “cunning folk,” common men and women who supplied “magical services,” including amulets, for money. This created a very tenuous status for these amulets. In this essay I will briefly explore the complex history of various types of amulets, primarily focusing on textual amulets, as they manifested in the Middle Ages and continued to be used in the Renaissance, and in common creation and usage by the various classes of Europeans. I will suggest that the problematic status of amulets is a symptom of the larger problem of a division between the theory and theology of the Church elite, and the ignorance of the general membership. Amulets and similar objects were on the edge of the negotiations made by the Church to control vast territories and groups of people from both external pagan influences, and also the internal influences of demons, which were seen as constantly battling for the souls of everyman; yet the populace was not equipped to understand the differences. Moreover, the Church’s use of polemic discursive language added complication to this negotiation. This same complication is found in modern scholarship about magic, and I will briefly touch on these issues at the end of the essay.

However, before examining the various states of acceptance of amulets, it is useful to define the term. The word amulet is a derivative of the Latin *amuletum*, the etymology of which dates back to the Arabic word, *hamalet*, which meant an object worn on the body or around the neck as a protective agent against a number of afflictions.² In the Middle Ages, a significant number of amulets were created on parchment and contained some kind of writing and/or symbols. The languages used were Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and various vernaculars. Regardless of the language, they all were seen as a means by which power could be attained and negative effects averted.

Origins and Uses of Amulets

Although I will be examining Christian amulets, amulet use was not a

2. Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 6.

Christian creation. The origins of amulets date back millennia to Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures. These amulets were sewn into clothing, worn around the neck in sacks, kept in bags, or placed in hidden locations. There were many reasons to use amulets; however, the most common were as protection from malevolent forces and for healing. Other reasons could be to attract the love or attention of another, to retrieve or find lost or stolen objects, protect one's property or live stock from witchcraft and demons, or to gain knowledge or understanding.³

In one example, to treat fever a Roman physician advised a patient to wear an amulet made of papyrus with the word ABRACADABRA arranged in an inverted triangle that diminished with each line ending on the letter A.⁴ There are cases of other medical amulets including a Syriac amulet made on leather dating from late antiquity which appears to both heal and expel demons from a woman. In part it reads:

Appointed is this amulet for the healing of this girl, upon whom this amulet is hung. Oh, mighty and awful God Adonai Sabaoti the Lord, command the holy angels that they should annul from this girl, upon whom this amulet is hung. ... [the g]ods may remove and extract from this girl, upon whom this amulet is hung, all the demons and devs [and] sticking and whispering [spirits], and Sheshnasar the educator, and spell(s), pebble-spirits and liliths.⁵

Judaism also had amulets. One kind, called *tefillin*, are narrow parchment strips with the names of God and excerpts from Exodus (13:1-16) and Deuteronomy (6:4-9, 11:13-21). Housed in leather boxes, these amulets were attached to the forehead and left arm. They served as a memorial function as it states in Deuteronomy 11:18, "Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul, and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes."⁶ Worn on Sabbath and while praying, *tefillin* are still used today by Orthodox Jews. In addition to *tefillin*, Jews also had amulets for medical purposes called *kemiya*. Because the possibility of saving a life was so important, rules and

3. Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 147.

4. Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 25. See also Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), 476. He notes the use of the word ABRACADABRA and also shows the diminishing triangle: "Also *Serenus Samonicus* delivereth amongst the precepts of physic, that if the name *Abracadabra* be written, as is here expressed, viz. diminishing letter after letter backward, from the last to the first, it will cure a hemitritaeon fever or any other."

5. Neveh, 'Syriac Amulet', p. 36.

6. Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 12.

limitations were created in the Halakah allowing the use of *kemiya* regardless of other laws and commandments to the contrary. These rules allowed a doctor to be the final arbiter for their use, as opposed to the rabbi. For an amulet to be recognized as valid, the same amulet formula had to cure a disease in three separate people or the same disease three separate times in the same person.⁷ The medical amulets used a variety of scriptures, but the Psalms were used more than any other. These Psalm-based amulets were used to treat fertility, fear, plague, exhaustion, skin wounds, as well as problems with the heart, eyes, bones, sunstroke, epilepsy (or falling disease). Other, less “medical” uses included bringing peace upon Israel, concern about one’s soul or life, and engendering hope.⁸ Jewish medical talismans were common in antiquity and are still used today, although it is significantly less common.⁹

Not surprisingly, the use of amulets for health issues as well as other problems arose in Christianity as the religion spread and pagans were converted. Similar to the Jewish *kemiya*, Christians frequently turned to the Psalms for protection and health issues. In one example of a Christian amulet on papyrus, dated to the sixth or seventh century, we see the use of Psalm 90. This Psalm was the most common on Christian *phylacteries*.¹⁰ It ends with the lines,

15 Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us and the years wherein we have seen evil.
16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.
17 And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.¹¹

In another example of a Christian amulet on wood from the fifth or sixth century, we find an amulet with a number of Psalms written on it. In particular it quotes Psalms 120, 28, 12, and 8, all asking the Lord for protection.¹² However, in addition to using the Hebrew Scriptures, Christians also used

7. Davis, ‘The Psalms’, p. 173.

8. See Davis for an extensive list of the Psalms used on amulets, the lines used, and what ailment the text was aiming to treat.

9. See Rosner. He relates a story about how a 5-year old girl began treatment for leukemia in 1962. Her parents gave her a *kemiya* in addition to her chemotherapy treatments, and she was cured of her cancer. He notes, “Her parents were and still are convinced to this day that the amulet cured her of her acute leukemia.”

10. Daniel, ‘Christian Amulet’, p. 400.

11. Psalm 90, KJV, lines 15-17.

12. Warga, ‘Christian Amulet’, p. 149.

portions of the Gospels and other New Testament texts on amulets. There were other texts used like this well known prayer from the Middle Ages. In it we find an invocation of the cross:

Cross + of Christ be with me. Cross + of Christ is what I ever adore. Cross + of Christ is true health...May the Cross + of Christ banish all evil. Cross + of Christ...be ever over me, and before me, and behind me, because the ancient enemy flees whenever he sees you...Flee from me, a servant of God, o devil, by the sign of the holy Cross + behold the Cross of the Lord + begone you enemies, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered.¹³

What is important to note about this prayer is that it was believed by some to be brought from heaven by an angel to Charlemagne on the eve of a battle. This would indicate that the texts that were presented on Christian amulets extended beyond simple scripture but also included prayers and invocations of a purely Roman Catholic origin. This prayer had many uses. "Pregnant women could ensure safe delivery and the survival of their children long enough to receive baptism by writing the prayer on a strip of parchment and placing it or wearing it round their bellies." Others used it for treatment of epilepsy.¹⁴

Additionally, the Christian liturgy became a source of inspiration for amulets. On a fifth century amulet written on papyrus, we find the following written in Greek: "The holy oil of gladness against every adverse Power and for the grafting of thy good olive tree of the catholic and apostolic church...Amen."¹⁵ What is important with this amulet of protection is that the formula on it was taken from the baptismal rite in fourth century Jerusalem. In particular the phrase the holy oil of gladness "appears in pre-immersion anointing formulae in the later Syrian and Coptic baptismal liturgical texts."¹⁶ This is significant because it shows that the liturgy becomes a source for ideas that are extended into Christian amulets. This distinction of origin, as well as the prayer noted before, is essential as there has been significant debate whether Christian amulets were of pagan origin only, or if after being adopted into practice they evolved into their own unique system. While there still is no consensus, many see continuity from the original pagan use of amulets to what quickly turned into a unique practice within Christendom. As Don Skemer writes in reference to the

13. Duffy. *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 273.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Bruyn de, *P. Ryl. III.471*: 'A Baptismal Anointing', p. 95.

16. *Ibid.* p. 101.

amulets, “By the end of the Middle Ages, textual amulets were no longer a pagan survival, but rather a widespread practice that flourished at the heart of Christian society.”¹⁷

Magic’s Prohibition: Saving People from Demons

From the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church, there was always the view that the world was populated by demons looking to corrupt man and damn his immortal soul for eternity. Magic, the term frequently used by the church, designated a category of practices, beliefs, and ideas that were seen to directly associate a person with the devil. Previous pagan practices, beliefs, and behaviors associated with the pagan gods, if not incorporated within the Church practices, were deemed superstitious and erroneous, and therefore in the category of magic. One of the first prohibitions against the magical use of amulets came from Augustine. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine condemns the use of medical amulets as superstition. He groups the amulets in with other pagan practices like idolatry. He calls them signs and states they are forbidden.

All the arrangements made by men to the making and worshipping of idols are superstitious, pertaining as they do either to worship of what is created or of some part of it as God, or to consultations and arrangements about signs and leagues with devils, such, for example, as are employed in the magical arts, ... In this class place also all amulets and cures which the medical art condemns whether these consist in incantations, or in marks which they call characters, or in hanging or tying on or even dancing in a fashion certain articles, not with reference to the condition of the body, but to certain signs hidden or manifest.¹⁸

As a founding father of the church, Augustine’s condemnation of amulets had long lasting consequences. His prohibition established the excluded category of magic that continues within the Catholic Church today. Whatever was seen as superstitious, pagan, or demonic was placed in this category. Magic was less of a description of particular behaviors, but in-

17. Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 73. See also Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 283. He points out that Christianity also created practices based on liturgy that were unique to Christianity. “My point is simply that the rhetoric and rationale at work in such incantations cannot be sensibly called pagan. Instead, they represent the appropriation and adaptation to lay needs and anxieties of a range of sacred gestures and prayers, along lines essentially faithful to the pattern established within the liturgy itself. This is not paganism, but lay Christianity.”

18. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book II, Chapter 20.

stead it was a class of ideas and actions deemed unlawful by the Church and condemned. As Richard Kieckhefer notes, “Terms such as ‘heretical’ and ‘magical’ were often used broadly; indeed it is a common characteristic of pejorative terms that they lend themselves to loose employment.”¹⁹ The church used Augustine’s prohibition and the category of magic to ban the use of amulets of any kind. The premise was that the use of amulets called upon the forces of demons to function. To save the people from themselves they must not use these objects and create pacts with demonic powers. These prohibitions, however, did not stop their use, as illustrated by the various amulets discussed earlier and the continuous reissuing of bans by popes, bishops, and ecumenical councils. Despite the prohibitions, amulets were prevalent at all times during the church’s history. Pope Gelasius I (492-496) prohibited *phylacteria*; the council of Constantinople followed suit in 692, as did the Council of Ratisbon in 742.²⁰ Prohibitions were continually reissued over the centuries throughout Christendom. As Skemer muses, “the proscriptions were endlessly repeated, it sometimes seems, in hope of compliance.”²¹

By the thirteenth century, shifts in church policy begin to show that there was no way a complete prohibition of amulets could be maintained. Science was proposing natural reasons for occult phenomena instead of the assertion of demonic involvement. Amulets were part of this shift. Claims were made that amulets attracted natural powers from celestial bodies made by God. Thus there was nothing demonic about these amulets. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas Aquinas addresses these claims and agrees with them, to a degree:

However, it does not seem necessary to deny altogether that some power may be present in the aforementioned objects [amulets], resulting from the power of celestial bodies—only it will be for those effects, of course, which any lower bodies are able to produce by the power of celestial bodies.²²

This acknowledgement of the power of celestial bodies becomes important because in the future individuals would attempt to reconcile magic with natural causes as opposed to demonic. The Source for this view of natural causes derives from the ninth century Arabic astrologer and alchemist, Al-kindi. In *On the Stellar Rays*, he writes:

19. Kieckhefer, ‘The Devil’s Contemplatives’, p. 253.

20. Skemer, *Binding Words*, p. 45.

21. *Ibid.* p. 47.

22. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, p. 93.

For into every place every star pours rays, on account of which, because the diversity of the rays having been blended, as it were, into one, varies the contents of each place, since in each diverse place, the tenor of the ray (which is derived from the harmony of all the stars) is diverse. ... It is therefore clear that all diverse places and all diverse times construct the diverse individuals in this world, which the celestial harmony continually diversifying itself produces through the rays projected into the world, and it is also declared by sense in some things and in others.²³

Using the logic of celestial rays as natural phenomena from God, certain amulets became permissible in the eyes of the Church. Aquinas' admission of celestial influences created two kinds of amulets. The first were amulets that, by their natural composition, attracted celestial influences. These could be used because they required no intelligence to function. However, the second category contained amulets with symbols, signs, words, or images. These amulets required an intelligence to understand; they contained a "noetic" quality. Thus they did not attract the influence of celestial bodies, but instead, of intelligent entities: humans and demons. Thus the first category is permissible, according to Aquinas, and the second is forbidden.

Marsilio Ficino, a fifteenth century priest and philosopher, attempted to unify various doctrines, knowledge, and ideas into a synthesis without conflicts. Using Aquinas' distinctions he created two categories: amulets, which were permissible and only attracted celestial powers by their inherent qualities, and talismans, which were forbidden because they contained noetic attributes.²⁴ Ficino also creates an elaborate scheme in which he ranks objects' abilities to receive celestial rays, determines how well these objects work, if they are natural or demonic, and if they contain occult properties or not.²⁵ However convincing and useful Ficino's system is, it was only for the most literate and had no impact on the common use of amulets. Despite Ficino recognizing and agreeing with Aquinas that amulets with noetic qualities (talismans by Ficino's designation) are demonic, the average person and priest continued to use amulets with words. Moreover, Ficino did not make a significant differentiation between words which were scripture, liturgy, or common within Christian practice, and words that were not; both Aquinas and common people did. Thus Ficino creates a set of categories that, while matching the theory of the Church Fathers, does not address the actual practices of the common people. In addition,

23. Alkindi. *On the Stellar Rays*, Chapter 2.

24. Copenhaver, 'Scholastic Philosophy', p. 530.

25. See Copenhaver for a detailed analysis of Ficino's categorical enunciation.

Ficino's categories are mutually exclusive regarding amulets. Either the power in them is natural from celestial influence and lawful according to Aquinas or supernatural, i.e., demonic, and therefore unlawful. But there was another category that was in widespread use by Christians that he ignored in his theory: both lawful and supernatural. However, the supernatural power source was not demonic but instead from God and his hierarchy of angels and saints. This category seems to have been missed because it is not based on theory, *per se*, but on the adaptation of practice from the liturgy and ritual of the Church. Moreover, because it was based on scriptural and acceptable practice, it was not considered magic. This is why Christian amulets are problematic for classification. At the highest levels of the Church, they were condemned. At the lowest levels, in the local parishes and with the local clergy, the amulets were widespread and often created by the clergy as a service to their parishioners.

Returning to the fact that Aquinas permitted some amulets, he did so albeit with two distinctions. First, amulets could only have sacred words or symbols, meaning the sign of the cross. Second, amulets must not be seen as the source of power but as a token or symbol of faith in God's power. Aquinas writes in the second part of Book II, part two, question 96, article four of *Summa Theologica*,

one should beware lest besides the sacred words it contain something vain, for instance certain written characters, except the sign of the Cross; or if hope be placed in the manner of writing or fastening, or in any like vanity, having no connection with reverence for God, because this would be pronounced superstitious: otherwise, however, it is lawful.

These two caveats are important to note. They create the basis by which clergy could justifiably use church sanctioned amulets. Indeed, these same exceptions were the basis by which the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* allowed some amulets by stating,

But, on the other hand, the Doctors answer as follows, especially S. Thomas where he asks whether it is unlawful to hang sacred words round the neck. Their opinion is that, in all charms and writings so worn, there are two things to be avoided.

First, in whatever is written there must be nothing that savours of an invocation of devils; for then it is manifestly superstitious and unlawful, and must be judged as an apostasy from the faith, as has often been said before.

Similarly, in accordance with the above seven conditions, it must not contain any unknown names. But if these two snares be avoided, *it is lawful*

both to place such charms on the lips of the sick, and for the sick to carry them with them. But the Doctors condemn their use in one respect, that is, when a man pays greater attention to and has more reliance upon the mere signs of the written letters than upon their meaning.²⁶

The issue that keeps arising is the categorization of magic or miracle. Aquinas and others permit certain amulets because they are not superstitious, but indications of faith that have results from the mercy of God, i.e., miracles. God's power was seen as infinite and his mercy was sought. Whenever there is a discussion of God alleviating suffering, it is always placed in a passive request; the Christian supplicates oneself asking for assistance, "if it be God's will." This means that the amulet itself contains no power; the relief comes from the grace of God who could be acting through the angels or saints. This distinction was a real concern, because as history showed, common people did not see the difference; they saw the amulets as containing power. This view is what the Church had to continually work against. In addition, because the appeal was passive, the view that a person could command God to alleviate health issues or answer a request was unlawful. Man did not command God; man accepted the fate God gave man. Transgressing these conditions moved one from a Church sanctioned position, a view of miracles, to a forbidden position, one of magic. Transgressing the first involves the evocation of demons; transgressing the second was the sin of pride. In either case, the Church deemed those positions as heretical.

Magic or Miracle? The Diminishing Differences?

Over time leading into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, due to many factors including increased literacy, book publishing, and the emerging merchant or middle class, the creation of amulets changed from a primarily clergy-based function to one of professional or semi-professional "cunning men and women." These "cunning-folk" were individuals to whom people turned when they had issues and needed amulets, healing, etc. However, there was no doubt though that they provided magical services. By this time, there was less of a fear of the demonic nature of amulets, and while the Church still forbade their creation and use under the categories of the past, its ability to enforce this prohibition diminished continuously. In the past when the Church had been the highest power, its prohibitions were expansive and relatively universal. But once the Protestant Reformation split

26. Kramer and Srenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, p. 182 Part II, Question II, Chapter VI. Emphasis added.

Europe, there was a more fragmented attempt to prohibit magical activities and this diminished its effectiveness. In addition, the state occasionally assumed oversight functions. For instance in 1604, the English government passed the James Act making it a criminal offense to consult cunning-folk to find stolen items, know who their future spouse would be, or obtain other kinds of fortune telling.²⁷ Nevertheless, while the law was technically on the books for 131 years, prosecution was variable and generally lax.

This laxity was due mainly to the government being too busy with other concerns. Most cases were brought up by people who felt the cunning-person did not deliver what they paid for. These same laws also were targeted at witches. In the mind of the people, there was a big difference between witches and cunning-folk. As Davies notes regarding the people's attitudes, "Witches were evil but cunning-folk were useful."²⁸

As stated before, originally the Church tried to make the distinction between the amulet having intrinsic power and the resource of power being demons or God. This distinction was not generally held by the masses. The amulet was visible as was the result; any power from God or demons was not seen and thus generally ignored. This imbued the amulet with power and also opened the ability for the cunning-folk to work their trade. Frequently the cunning-folk would be fully or semi-literate and would "consult a book" to create the amulet. This gave the cunning-person the appearance of knowledge and engagement in the problem of the client. Some cunning-folk had "impressive libraries" of occult books. This too added "authority." In addition, the ability to read, or seem to read, and the ability to write added to their power.²⁹

As for the text of the amulets, it varied. As Davies notes, "Most written charms contained a strong religious content. ... They included passages from the Bible, appeals to the Holy Trinity, Catholic exorcism, and lists of divine names in different languages."³⁰ In essence, the cunning-folk picked up where the clergy of the past left off. However, one difference is notable; while the amulets often had Christian religious symbols and words, the cunning-folk were not restricted to these formulas. Also, because of the varying levels of literacy, often the spelling and characters were erroneous. Davies continues,

27. Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 8-9.

28. *Ibid.* p. 13.

29. *Ibid.* p. 160.

30. *Ibid.* p. 148.

Scriptural passages were often reproduced in Latin, with the occasional smattering of Greek or Hebrew. Such passages were often badly spelt and grammatically poor, presumably from repeated copying. Not surprisingly, there was also considerable use of overtly magical words and phrases, spirit names, occult symbols, planetary signs and astrological symbols.³¹

Thus the use of amulets were no longer the domain of the clergy; their use became commercialized and instead of a demonstration of Grace from God or a pact with the devil, they became commodity objects bought and sold as the occasion arose. What was earlier seen as a miracle from God, or disparaged as demonic, had now become a tool to address a problem or need. Still seen as magic, the category no longer had the exclusively pejorative designation. Cunning-folk magic was simply pragmatic.

The Difficulties in the Study of Magic and Miracle in the Academy

The difficulties with the determination about amulet use and if it was illicit magic or legitimate Christian worship also extends into the academy. In fact the whole category of magic is problematic, just like the amulets sometimes placed in this category. This is evidenced in books like Valerie Flint's *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. In it she describes the practices examined in this essay as magic, even the forms sanctioned by the Church Fathers. As she writes in her introduction, "in choosing a single modern English word as a starting point, and one so loosely employed as this often is, one inevitably does some damage; ... I can only plead that magic is helpful as a sounding word for the exploration of the many ways in which a hopeful belief in preternatural control reached the Middle Ages."³² While Flint's "loose employment" of the term magic relating to Ecclesiastical rites as well as the use of amulets, scholars like Richard Kieckhefer take issue with her presuppositions. Critiquing Flint's use of magic and her application of it in her book Kieckhefer writes,

Ultimately, she views the distinction between approved and disapproved ritual as a distinction without real difference. She insists repeatedly that many approved rituals were magical, even if churchmen said otherwise. But this ahistorical use of the word "magic" blurs the distinctions vitally important to those who made them. ... She argues that in spite of their own protestations, what they were defending and perpetrating was also a kind of magic; they tried to distinguish between magic and approved ritual, but

31. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

32. Flint, *Rise of Magic*, p. 5-6.

their distinctions were not cogent.³³

Clearly there are problems on both sides in the representations of magic. If we apply the polemical term magic to approved practices of the Church, as Flint does, then we are dismissing the distinctions that were important for over a millennium. However, if we adopt those distinctions, then we are perpetuating the categories created by the Church when it was the hegemony. This significantly removes the scholar from his or her neutral position.

In addition to the difficulty with the use of the term magic, we also have scholastic biases about the magical use of amulets by the learned intellectuals and the common masses. Scholars in the field of the history of magic focus acutely on the work of intellectuals like Ficino, Agrippa, John Dee, and Pico della Mirandola. They ignore the esoteric practices of the folk people. Instead they leave these people to the anthropologists. As Davies notes about the historians of magic,

They have been drawn to the world of erudite high magicians, not only because the magicians were intellectual, literate, and left accounts of their experiments, but also because they embraced a coherent and sophisticated philosophy which modern historians can engage with and study within the context of early science. Cunning-folk left little record of their thoughts and experiments, not necessarily because they lacked the intellect to comprehend occult philosophies, but rather because it just did not interest many of them.³⁴

Indeed, historians of magic hardly mention the everyday practices of the magic they theorize about. Instead they cite sources, debate theories, and seldom look at application beyond what the intellectuals note. Conversely, those who do study the folk people and their practices often lack the sophisticated background knowledge presented by the historians of magic. They may reference that folk practitioners had access to Agrippa and used the ABRACADABRA triangle on amulets; but they lack the background knowledge to engage in this use and compare it to previous utilization.

The end result is that there is a distinct bias by historians of magic against folk practice. There is an ignorance of high magic practice by the anthropologists, and there is an assumption of categories regarding magic that either distorts the past or inadvertently plays into the pejorative view of magic. Certainly these issues are complex and with something as

33. Kieckhefer, 'Specific Rationality', p. 822-823.

34. Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. xiii.

polemic as Church lawfulness, the negotiation must continually be made and contextualization must continually be sought. In spite of that, it seems as if this is not done most of the time, and preconceived notions and assumptions are very prevalent. Scholars are also constrained by time and the vast amount of material that has emerged over the last two to three decades; no one can read or know it all. Still, there can be a better effort to understand these issues, challenges, biases, and assumptions, while continuing to negotiate the difficult category of magic and the various practices that may or may not fall into them, such as Christian amulets.

Conclusion

Christian amulets play a very significant role in the history of the Christian Church. They were the site of important difference and the intersection of religion, science, and magic. Studying how they were handled by both the common people and Church elite opens up avenues of investigation that becomes obscured when only the theory of the Church Fathers is examined. By using both points of view, theory and practice, we can begin to see how the everyday negotiation of these differences and distinctions were made. The term magic was highly polemical and had deep resonance in the minds of all the Church members, high and low. When historians examine these time periods, they need to keep in mind this complexity and the fact that one group of Church members may have acted in a different way than others. There needs to be a more concerted effort towards contextualization and representation of the intricacy. Moreover, modern scholars need to work past their biases and engage in the work of historians and anthropologists who, together, can give a broader, more rounded picture of life during this time period. Magic polemics, and the use of Christian amulets, was fraught with difficulty. It is not surprising that even today, there are issues examining their history. Nevertheless, we need to challenge our preconceived notions if we are ever going to get a better idea of how the problematic status of Christian amulets, and magic in general, manifested in the Middle Ages and after.

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