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Podcast Transcript

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Magic and Modernity

Podcast with **Richard Irvine and Theodoros Kyriakides**

(26 March 2018).

Interviewed by **David Robertson**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/magic-and-modernity/

David Robertson (DR)*: I'm joining you again from Milton Keynes, where I'm at the Contemporary Religion in Historical Perspective Conference. And today I'm joined by Richard Irvine and Theo Kyriakides who have a project called Magical Thinking in Contexts and Situations of Unbelief, which is part of the bigger Understanding Unbelief project. Today they're going to be talking about magical thinking in contemporary, "modern" society – with quote marks on it. So, welcome to the Project!*

Richard Irvine (**RI**): Thank you very much.

Theo Kyriakides (**TK**): Thanks for having us.

DR: *So yes, Richard, perhaps you could tell us about the project that you're working on?*

RI: I mean, the basic set of questions we're asking, it comes out of reflections on the secularisation thesis, the general idea being that: as societies become more apparently rationalised, more secularised – as you see fewer people directly affiliating with religious groups – surely the follow-on from this would be that there's less space in society for practices that we might term "magic", for thinking about the world as an enchanted place. But, in actual fact, what we see in our different field sites is that even with people who would define themselves as non-believers, who would see themselves as outside of religious structures and, indeed, rejecting forms of belief, there still seems to be this place in their life for reflecting on what is unknowable and trying to engage with it in different ways. And so, really, what we want to say is that, rather than secularisation squeezing magic out of contemporary life, out of modern life, that in fact secularisation seems to open up new spaces that magic can grow within.

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TK: Yes. Just to add that, if you take the notion of modernity, it was Max Weber who kind-of predicted the disenchantment of modernity. It was kind-of a prophecy. When would you say that was, about 1920s?

RI: Yes. He's speaking, in *Science as Vocation*, just after the First World War.

TK: Yes. And obviously it's taken some criticism. But, to an extent I guess, somebody can make the argument that modernity is disenchanted with magic. So, yes. That's our starting point: to see to what extent disenchantment can allow magical phenomenon to manifest.

RI: Yes. Because I mean, what I was talking about this morning with *Science as Vocation*, which I mentioned in that lecture, what Weber does is he says . . . . He's addressing those two students. And obviously, they think they're very smart. And he's saying, "You think you're smart. How much do you actually know? Because, if you think about natives and tribes elsewhere in the world, they have a great store of their knowledge." So he says, you know, "You board a street car. You don't know how it propels itself unless you're a physicist. You buy things without really any notion of why sometimes you can get less or more for the money, whereas in many societies, in fact, people have an understanding of where their food comes from, they have an understanding of . . . ." So he's saying, in fact, in modern, technologically advanced, specialised societies there's actually far less of a portion of the total knowledge that we have. So in that, he's saying, "Yes, we are becoming more rationalised. But does that necessarily mean that we are entering into a state of being more knowing? So, in a sense, the secularisation thesis, as Weber sets it up, allows for this space of enchantment, rather than disenchantment. Because what you have there is that whole space of unknowing about everything that isn't your very particular job within the division of labour.

DR: *But there was another model of modernity, which actually might be slightly earlier, but was certainly in currency around the same time: the whole James Frazer model, in which modernity, you know, building on evolutionary models – Darwinism, social Darwinism, basically – that we moved from superstition and magic, to religion, to science. And so that modernity was, as you said, it was a prediction but it was a prediction, in that model, which does replace magical thinking completely. So Weber's model of modernity is definitely not the only version of it that's going around at the same time.*

TK: Yes. What's interesting about Frazer's work is that it perseveres. He's taken so much critique for being a cultural evolutionist or primitivist, because he presents this linear trajectory which societies

have to be following in order to be legitimised as modern, right? So he's a kind of . . . I think anthropologists have the knee-jerk reaction of denouncing the evolutionary model. But, at the same time, he's well-known, you know. People talk about him. People who are not anthropologists know about Frazer's work. And, in an ironic twist, the trajectory that he kind-of presented as evolutionary – that work, that corpus of work – kind-of substantiates magical belief in modernity as well, in my opinion: the way that magical traditions can become reiterated in modernity through Frazer's work, anyway.

RI: So, would you say, when people are buying and reading The Golden Bough . . .

TK: Yes.

RI: Because you can still get it in those editions, for £2 or something. So when people buy it, are they looking for magic, rather than . . . ? What is it they're looking for in there? And is it that disenchanted, I suppose?

TK: Yes, I think the book has a certain allure. I don't know why people are going to read it, but the fact that you . . . take the back cover: it's to do with magic,

DR: *It's very readable, it's very accessible even to non-academics. It does that sweeping grand theory that . . . It boils down to quite simple . . . there's one central narrative.*

RI: And he was a tremendous publicist. Contemporary academics could learn a lot from him about getting their ideas into a mass marketplace!

TK: Absolutely!

DR: *Actually, you could make the argument that Frazer's work is a form of magical thinking in itself, in that he connects all these disparate elements and links them together into a grand narrative. It's that sort of knowledge that we see in a lot of schools of Occultism, for instance. But when you guys are talking about, you know, magic, magical thinking and all these kind of terms – break that down, how you're using that for us. You already mentioned ideas of the ineffable, earlier on. I don't think you used the term ineffable, but you said something similar. But there's also a kind of practical aspect, as well. So break down how you're using ideas of magic.*

TK: So I think the way we kind-of use the term magical thinking, it doesn't necessarily have to do

with people subscribing to existing magical traditions or practices. It also has to do with the way by which they can develop their own worldviews and philosophies that have the underlying assumption of magical efficacy. So magical efficacy can adopt characteristics of contagious efficacy or automatic efficacy, or what Frazer called sympathetic and contagious magic. So yes, once again, it's not necessarily people following explicit magical traditions, but also developing their own ways of understanding and dwelling in the world, which can adopt those characteristics that anthropologists associate with magical traditions, in a more implicit manner.

RI: I mean, one of the things we talked about in terms of how we were defining magic in the project – you can shoot this down if you think I'm being too specific about it! But it's important to think about, especially in what we're talking about as a modern context, it's important to think about individual practices that people adopt in order to make sense of the world around them; in order to, in certain ways, gain some kind of mode of control over the world around them. So I think that emphasis – that is classic in most anthropological theory – that what we're talking about here are certainly social practices that exist within a social space, but which are in the domain of individual actions, rather than necessarily religious ritual which brings social groups together. But I think that that's quite important in a way, for talking about the modern world because, in fact, as has been repeatedly pointed out, we're seeing more and more individualisation, more and more fragmentation in how people . . . You know: the whole designation of people talking about themselves a spiritual but not religious, these kinds of things. It's often about this idea that people are being more idiosyncratic, more personal, in how they engage with the world, and what is potentially unknowable. But something I mentioned this morning which I think is a really interesting case in point, because it's a contested one: recently Sally Le Page launching an attack on water companies in the UK for, in her terms, practising magic. Because she says she contacted these water companies and they said, "Yes, we're divining, we're going out with dowsing rods." Or, "Some of the people who work for us are going out with divining rods and they're looking for water. And that's part of the battery of things that are used." Now what's interesting there is, immediately she leaps to this idea that this is magic because it's something which doesn't necessarily fit with our hypothetical deduction method of science. So this is a thing which we should have been left behind, once we'd worked out proper scientific ways of finding water. But, in fact, when I talk to people in Orkney – some of whom do rely on divining in order to find where to bore for water – this works. This is practical knowledge that people have of the landscape and where to find water. So, they're not necessarily – and I think this is an important point – they're not necessarily thinking of it, or describing it as magic. But, certainly, they would reject the idea that simply because something

doesn't fit with what is tested and known, according to the parameters of science, they're not going to reject it just because of that. They're not going to say, "Oh well it doesn't fit with the peer-reviewed literature. I'm not going to divine for water anymore!" In fact, this is practical knowledge of the landscape and that's what they go with.

DR: *It seems to me that really you've got two different kinds of magic in play there, and I think this is common across the board. It's not meant as a criticism of you, but rather for the listener in terms of how we are using the term discursively. So on the one hand you said, that it was something that wasn't part of a recognised religious tradition, it wasn't about religious communities but it was used by the individual. But then we shifted to talking about it as something which wasn't . . . that was a practice that was thought of as having efficacy, but not through appeals to science.*

RI: Mmm.

DR: *So those are two quite different things, are they not?*

TK: Yes. That's a good question. One of the reasons that the project is interesting to me, as well, is that people have lost touch with what magic is. Because if you go to initial ethnographic studies, like magic is not just a belief in the supernatural, or belief in, you know, Gods or spiritual beings. Magic is also like a system of practices which have actual ways of reproducing societal structures and kinships. And I think, as Richard said, modernity kind-of led to the fragmentation of the individual and, in a way, led to the fragmentation of magic as well. So we can talk about this later as well, that magic has certain polysemy.

DG: *Yes.*

TK: Like people understand what magic is in different ways. So, to use Richard's language from this morning, today there is a certain archaeology of magic. The word magic has been hidden under kind-of layers of modernity, layers of science, and so, in a way, we're kind-of conducting an archaeology of how people relocate these traces of magical thinking in the everyday.

RI: And in terms of whether or not . . . . I mean, this is always going to be kind -of the problem both methodologically and theoretically. Because when you're talking about something like magic you're talking about something which has simultaneously been the locus of thousands and thousands of papers or theorisation, and also something which is in the popular imagination. I think Graham Jones, which you've read quite a lot, Theo, but Graham Jones in his recent book – what's the title?

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TK: *Magic's Reason*

RI: *Magic's Reason*. That's very interesting because Graham Jones did his PhD with – what I suppose a lot of people would associate with magic – he did his PhD on stage magic. But he's gone through this archaeology, to use the word, he's gone through this to look at, well: what does this idea of magic and performance say about the longer strands of magic that were available in European and American culture? Rather than this being a different thing. So the basic problem here is that we are talking about something which is everyday language and can't necessarily be . . .

TK: labelled.

RI: labelled purely from the point of view of sociological or other theories – which is so much the case in Religious Studies.

DR: *Yes.*

RI: Because we don't have ownership over these words. And you can't necessarily say. . . So sometimes that does mean that you're involved in shifts . . . . So, you know, with the Sally Le Page example, what's interesting is that she's using magic in that particular way. She's using magic in – we would say – the Frazerian way: this is what society *should* have evolved beyond.

TK: It's backwards, yes.

RI: Yes. Now when you have people who are simultaneously saying "I'm an unbeliever, I've gone beyond, I don't hold with religion, I don't hold with people telling me what to believe," well, from a Frazerian point of view, right, they've stepped into the next level: they're beyond religion. But what's curious there, from the point of view of these conflicting views of magic is: hang on! They've stepped into that, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they've left it behind. In fact, what it means is they're rejecting religious authority structures, but they may also reject authority structures which are rationalist authority structures. So you've got these conflicts of an idea of magic as a failed form of science, which is one model, coming into contact with a practical way of engaging with a world which is full of unknowable things. And it's full of unknowable things because of the nature of a society where – to go back to this point – it's so specialised. We know less and less about the whole store of knowledge, because we only really have proper understanding of the tiny bit of the division of labour that we've got – if even that!

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TK: Officially, I don't use the word "magic" when I do fieldwork a lot. So I'm not going to ask people "Do you believe or practise magic?" Because, as Richard said, it kind-of ended up being a signifier of irrationality and backwardness. So I might use the local term in the Cypriot dialect for magic. But what's interesting is that once something's labelled as magic, it's labelled as irrational, kind-of excluded from the normative order of things. But at the same time, to take the case of the dowsing example, it is something that people did without questioning. Like, the fact that they went around . . . . Maybe they were questioning it in their heads, but the fact that this practice was being reproduced is interesting. They were going around divining for water and that this was a practice that had, you know, attributes of magical thinking, but was nevertheless naturalised into the normative order of things.

RI: I mean one interesting conversation we were having earlier, with one of the other participants of the conference, struck me as a great example of magical thinking. We were talking about how there's lots of debates about how in court, when you make your oath, you know, well, what of an unbeliever? Should an unbeliever be allowed to – and this is contested in many places – should an unbeliever be allowed to not make an oath on the Bible? Well, how do they make an oath? But what's interesting in a lot of these debates, is not . . . . The focus is on whether the Bible is there or not. But the actual question of the oath isn't necessarily called into question. That, somehow, that performative act of making an oath has a transformative effect on the truthful quality of the entire thing. Now, it's quite striking that that's still something which is at the heart of . . . it's a part of our legacy. It's at the heart of our ideas about what constitutes the rule of law. Now, ultimately, these are ideas of magical thinking, which I think in some respects, go unexamined. And our task isn't . . . well certainly, I don't see our task as being to, in some way, debunk these, or to suggest . . . But, rather, to give lie to the idea that a modern, secularised, rationalised – you can add in all kinds of words for this – leaves these things behind. I mean I suppose I've come right back to killing the Ghost of Frazer, again. But that wasn't my intention when I started this sentence!

TK: He's already dead, so . . .

RI: (Laughs)

DR: *Just to go back to something Theo was saying, there. I mean, a couple of times recently I've been thinking about – and this came up during my fieldwork on conspiracy and UFO communities – is the idea that sometimes these things are in the subjunctive mode. And I think this is particularly pertinent when we talk about things like dowsing, but also alternative therapies. One thing I found was that it was almost always . . . it was very common for people to get into new age, or UFO, or conspiracy*

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communities through alternative health care, essentially because they had chronic illness of one type or another. And so, when the scientific mainstream treatments didn't work, they were prepared to try anything. They would try them in the subjunctive mode, to see if they work. And then, when one of them works for whatever reason, that then is a confirmation that, "Oh, some of these things do work, even though science says it's not true." And this leads them to then embrace a number of other possible things in the subjunctive mode. And I think that dowsing is like that. The council is probably thinking, "Well, I don't know if it works or not – but it might work!" You know, if it has given us results then, fine. I'm not going to be thinking too much about whether it's scientific or not. And you find the same thing in acupuncture treatment on the NHS. They're prepared to pay for acupuncture, or sometimes aromatherapy and things. And they're like "Well it doesn't matter if it's only working because it's a placebo. If it's working, it's working."

TK: So subjectivity kind-of demands maintaining a certain propensity to the potential of something to be unknowable.

DR: *Yes. The rational justification for it is secondary to the practical application, or the function.*

TK: Yes. There's this famous phrase I like from Jeanne Favret-Saada's work: "I know that magic is a joke, but still . . ." You know, it's that tension that the unbeliever can oscillate with that magical thinking emerges from. I know that magic is a joke, or it doesn't exist, but still . . . And she borrows this from psychanalyst Octave Mannoni, who kind-of deals with subjectivity in terms of magical thinking, as well. So that was a phrase that was kind-of foundational in the theoretical foundations that we tackle.

RI: I mean, I think the way that you've talked about the "evil eye" is a very good example of that. Because you talk about the way that in certain modes this can be used seriously.

TK: yes. So the evil eye, in Cyprus, on certain occasions can be used as decoration on people's shoes and T-shirts or things, or houses in general. But, under certain occasions, it is granted much more magical qualities by the people using it, so under occasions of uncertainty or stress. Even the other day, I talked to people and they tell me: "I don't really believe in the evil eye. I don't acknowledge that it's in my house. But sometimes, if I'm having a bad day, or I'm having bad thoughts, I might just think about it. I might look at it."

RI: It sort of goes back to what you were saying about, "I know this is a joke, but still . . ." I mean that,

there's certain sense of what unbelief would involve, which should end after the first part: "I know it's a joke," full stop. But that's not what we see in the messiness of everyday life. It's: I know, but that doesn't mean that there are not – in the subjective mode – there maybe other contexts in which I might want this to . . . . or, at least, I cannot be sure that there is not. So it's better to do it just in case.

DR: *I don't know if you're familiar with Martin Stringer's work.*

RI: It came up in the discussion today, yes

DR: *But he talks about situational belief, and exactly the same sort of idea where – and this actually relates to the sort of subjunctive example I gave before. If you asked this person, "Do you believe in the chi flowing around the body?" They'd say, "No". But when it came down to, "If I try this, I might be able to put that aside for long enough that it works!" Or, people don't tend to believe in prophecy or speaking to dead. But if their husband or loved one has just died, they might have an overwhelming desire to speak to them. In which case, they enter a different mode of expressing belief.*

RI: I mean, I was saying this in the discussion earlier. One of the things I find interesting in this work is that you have . . . particularly, this situation that he discusses in relation to the dead and practices, to do with communication with the dead, even among people who would not necessarily see themselves as believers. And that's very interesting in the context of . . . . And one of the reasons why I chose Orkney to do this fieldwork is that you have a landscape here which is very much archaeologically defined by the presence of these Neolithic tombs. It's recognised as being a landscape of the dead. And, indeed, the cemeteries – even though the kirks themselves may have been made into private houses or just falling down – the cemeteries retain that kind of space. And that, to me, is something that's quite interesting. Because, in essence, you can have a personal stance in relation to: "I don't believe that it is possible to communicate with the dead," for example. You can have that as a personal stance, but you're still living in a landscape where reminders of the dead are all around you. And I think one of the issues at stake, here, is how do you simultaneously engage with a personal stance which says, "I know this is all nonsense", say, and also a recognition that there is an entire world, which is around you, which is built on the idea that there is some continuity of the dead, that there is some possibility . . . that there is a continuing involvement of the dead in social life? And part of what is interesting, then, in terms of the practices that people adopt, is how they might find a way of dealing with that unknowability of the landscape which surrounds them. So, I think – we were talking about this earlier – so the idea that you can adopt a stance in relation to objects which is not purely materialistic, or in relation to a landscape, which is not purely materialistic: it doesn't seem to be that

that is completely incompatible with people nevertheless expressing their personal set of beliefs as materialistic sort of beliefs. So that stance in relation to these things.

DR: *One of the things I like – and we're getting close to time – but one of the things I like most about your project is the two case studies that you're comparing in Orkney and Cyprus. And at first glance they're quite different. One of them is familiar to me, one of them is completely alien. Tell me a little bit about how you see these two case studies working together. What are the potential kind of tensions and possible similarities that you see there, that you can tease out in the comparison?*

RI: Well they're both islands. (Laughs)

All: (Laugh)

DR: *Let's start with that!*

TK: I think the two things that we've identified thus far are – do you want to talk about anti-authoritarianism?

RI: OK.

TK: And I'll do unknowability.

RI: Yes. I mean, I think that one of the – we weren't aware of this. This is a part of anthropology and ethnography in general: you don't necessarily know what's going to happen until you get into the field. There is a leap of faith in anthropology. And it was only, really, once we started comparing notes that we realised that one of the things that was quite central, in both of these cases, was that people who spoke about themselves as unbelievers were doing so as an anti-authoritarian stance: that this was a way of saying that people shouldn't be allowed to define what you believe in; that people shouldn't tell you what to think, as though you don't ken yourself. And that's very striking in the Orcadian example that most people spoke about the idea that, in essence, religion was part of a power structure, which was a power structure associated with those who were property owners, etc; that it was something that they didn't feel they should be subject to – and which has very long lines in histories of dissent in the Church of Scotland, too, which rejects the idea of patronage from the church, by the by. But it was interesting, when I started comparing notes with Theo, that we realised, especially among – correct me if I'm wrong – especially among the young people, who would describe themselves as atheists or non-believers, it was that sense of an anti-clericalism, an anti-authoritarian stance.

TK: Yes, a sort of a knee-jerk reaction against dogmatic depictions of religion in Cyprus. In Cyprus the rise of the republic kind-of parallels the rise of the Cypriot church. Our first President was a clergyman and so on. So the church and state kind of dovetail together. And I think that ended up in this gesture: of kind-of distancing yourself from religious authority.

RI: Yes. But just to segue into you talking about unknowability. One of the crucial things, then, if you've identified that when we're talking about unbelief, we're not necessarily talking about an idea of rationalism, which says, "The world is now knowable." It's saying, "What I'm rejecting is being told what to believe, here." It still leaves openness to the possibility that there is an unknowability in society . . .

TK: Yes. It's a good segue. So with your research, as well, I find the question of the conspiratorial subject very interesting. Because it kind-of denotes, you know – UFO cultures are associated with counter-culture in the US.

DR: *Yes.*

TK: And I think it's likewise: people who distance themselves from governmental and religious authority, only to try to put the pieces together themselves. So, usually, following a conspiracy theory or formulating a conspiracy is like a practice of connecting the dots, you know. And I think that's what we're trying to figure out with unbelievers as well, in both occasions. So once you make that swift dismissal of normative understanding of religion, where do you go from there? And it's usually people plunging into that grey area of religious beliefs and social norms and kind-of devising their own worldviews and perspectives.

RI: Which I think, in a way, brings us full circle. Because if your starting point in talking about modernity is that, in essence, as individuals there's so much that we don't know . . . . We might assume that somebody else knows it, or we hope that somebody knows how to make planes work, or whatever. We hope there's somebody who understands all these things. But, on an individual level, it's left to us to piece those things together and to try and work out what those chains of causality are.

TK: Yes. I think there's a greater point to be made about – an ontological point – to be made about unknowability, about the unknowability of relations. Like, social relations can never be complete. Like, our understanding of the world can never be complete. And I think there's two or three ethnographies I read on witchcraft, and they start – the ethnographer says, "I've never seen a witch."

It's like, on the first page. Is it Nils' book on The Empty Seashell?

RI: Mmm.

TK: That's the starting line: I've never seen a witch. The locals have never seen a witch. But nevertheless, because of this, people's awareness of their fragmented understanding of the world they can entertain the possibility of the witch.

RI: And I think that's a core thing and one of our theoretical influences in a way. In Evans-Pritchard's classic study of witchcraft – in which he debunks the idea that may have been common at the time, that these are people with a primitive mind-set who don't understand the rules of cause and effect – he says, "No. They think through exactly the same mind-set as us." If somebody dies whilst sleeping under the granary, then do you ask why that is? Well, if the explanation is witchcraft, that doesn't mean that they dismiss the fact that termites ate through the legs, and that's why the granary fell down. There's a question of, "but why did termites eat through the legs of the granary *at that point*, when *that person* was sleeping under it? And he says, "Now this is the same the logic that we operate on. It's just that we dismiss *why* questions as legitimate questions." So we have all kinds of means of explaining these *how* questions, of explaining physical causality, but the problem of the why is generally dismissed as a legitimate question to ask. But it remains as a problem. And it remains a problem that people grapple with, in their everyday lives. And they do so in ways that sometimes can be referred to as magical.

DR: *It does bring us full circle. And we are not immune from answering why questions at the Religious Studies Project. And the why of why we have to stop now, is that we've run out of time! I want to thank you both for taking part and, hopefully, we can have you back on another day, to continue the conversation.*

TK: Sure.

RI: Hope so. Thank you.

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