# Ancient Christian magic

by Carol Zaleski in the October 25, 2000 issue

A few months ago I had a visit from the college-age daughter of a friend of mine. The young woman, an exceptionally gifted linguist, had developed an interest in religion and philosophy. What books, she asked, would combine her longstanding love of Latin and Greek with her newfound desire to plumb the mysteries of the cosmos? I was just about to recommend some key works in ancient philosophy and the history of Christian thought when she told me: “I only want to study alternative religions. What I’m really interested in is magic.”

She is not alone. The definitive English translation of Greco-Roman magical texts, *Greek Magical Papyri*, is almost always checked out from my college library. On the shelf next to *Greek Magical Papyri* sits an equally fascinating collection of Coptic Christian ritual texts called *Ancient Christian Magic*. Its leaves intact, its spine barely creased, it awaits the day when some student will think that Christianity has anything to do with magic.

Magic has always been a loaded word. The Greeks expressed their ambivalence by using a Persian loan-word, *magos*, to describe ritual practices going on in their own backyard; they alternated between condemning magic as a scoundrel’s craft and extolling it as a divine gift. My students are ambivalent as well: to some of them, magic means empowerment, freedom from coercive authorities, and mystical fellowship with the plant and animal kingdoms. For others the negative connotations prevail: magic is a dangerous art, manipulative and sinister, a medley of prescientific thinking and the lust for power. But now that neopaganism has joined the ranks of approved campus religious groups, this is beginning to be a minority view, expressed tentatively for fear of giving offense. One thing both sides agree on is that magic is fascinating. A course in the history of magic is sure to draw a crowd.

Christianity is too familiar, my students say, and even those who remain loyal to their childhood faith doubt that it holds much in the way of magical scintillation. I wish they could hear and take to heart Coleridge’s words in *The Statesman’s Manual* , “Alas!—the main hindrance to the use of the scriptures as your manual lies in the

notion that you are already acquainted with its contents. . . . Truths of all others the most awful and mysterious and at the same time of universal interest, are considered so true as to lose all the powers of truth, and lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul."

Here is a new challenge: to make Christianity strange again, as strange as a Tantric initiation rite or a Bacchic mystery-drama, so that young seekers who are flirting with magic may discover what C. S. Lewis calls the "deep magic" at the heart of Christian revelation.

I have an icon in my office that conveys this deep magic, a fresco from the Skete of the Holy Spirit in Mesnil-St.-Denis made by Russian émigré artist and monk Gregory Krug. It takes up the classical Christian theme of Christ's descent to the realm of the dead—the "harrowing of hell," as it was called in the West. Most versions of this icon are fairly crowded, but in Krug's there are only three figures: Adam and Eve, who sit so close together that they seem to form one person, and Christ, who bends down with infinite tenderness to grasp Adam's wrist and pull Adam and Eve together out of their underworld prison. The family resemblance is unmistakable, except that Adam and Eve are aged and Christ, the second Adam, is eternally young. When I look at this icon, I think of the words of Christ in an ancient Greek homily for Holy Saturday: "I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell."

This is the ancient Christian magic, the magic of redemption, by which we are tenderly yet powerfully raised out of captivity to sin and death. Nothing could be stranger than the idea of God making himself a sacrificial victim for our sake, submitting to death and traveling to the very pit of hell to take us out of it. All other magic is child's play by comparison, the stuff of Harry Potter books.

It will be argued, of course, that Christian redemption is the opposite of magic. If Adam were a magician, he would have climbed out of the pit by his own might, adjuring the demons to assist him. Instead, he is pulled out by Christ, who grasps him by the wrist rather than the hand, in the same way that a mother cat grabs her kitten by the scruff of the neck. All is in God's hands, and to attempt to play God is deadly folly. Yet I see in my post-Christian students what happens when there is no longer any risk of confusing Christianity with magic: faith becomes too safe, its

power attenuated, and restless young seekers begin to look elsewhere for enchantment. We have our work cut out for us if we wish to make better known what is novel and unique, earthshaking and world-renewing about the ancient Christian magic.