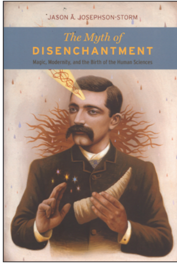

Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of Human Sciences*

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During the nineteenth century, some parts of the world entered an ever-accelerating maelstrom of changes. Due to a naive faith in the progress of modernity, an epistemological break occurred among scholars. They assumed that their own modern society had grown alienated from the divine and natural worlds due to a post-Enlightenment worldview based on rationality and scientific reasoning. As a consequence, the progress of modernity had caused humanity to become disenchanted with the world. In *The Myth of Disenchantment*, Jason Josephson-Storm calls this narrative the "myth of disenchantment" and gives an account of how nineteenth-century scholars came to associate the creation of modernity with the withdrawal from ancient magical beliefs.

The main argument of the book is that the "human sciences," the author's translation of the German word "*Geisteswissenschaften*" (6), have been dominated by the conflation of "modernity" with the process of "disenchantment." The notion of disenchantment is primarily based on Max Weber's usage of the term. According to Weber, modernity arose as a conscious rejection of magical, occult, and supernatural beliefs in favor of scientific methods, thus transforming the modern era into what Weber famously called "an iron cage of reason." The dialectic of Weber's categories of "enchantment" and "disenchantment" has, to a large degree, become a truism among scholars of the modern world. Josephson-Storm, however, rejects this narrative as a "myth." Religion, magic, and science, he states, cannot be understood as separate domains, but as expressions of an "entangled formation" (12). Magic, Josephson-Storm contends, never really disappeared, and our contemporary society has never really undergone a process of disenchantment (3).

The book is divided into two parts. The first part reviews the notion of disenchantment found in the writings of influential figures such as Francis Bacon, Giordano Bruno, Baruch Spinoza, Isaac Newton, Edward Burnett Taylor, Friedrich Schiller, William James, John William Draper, Denis Diderot, Rene Descartes, and, in particular, Arthur Schopenhauer. While these "disenchanters" were paragons of the Enlightenment, they also understood themselves to be "magicians" (41) and the Enlightenment itself as a "divine science" (309). Each of

these thinkers, Josephson-Storm argues, viewed the material universe as "thoroughly animated or possessed of mind and awareness" (305).

In the second part of the book, Josephson-Storm turns to the notion of disenchantment in the early twentieth century, examining several cases of "the magical foundations of critical theory" (209) in the writings of Theodor Adorno, Sigmund Freud, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and, specifically, Max Weber. Josephson-Storm argues that a widespread nostalgia over the loss of an enchanted universe and a longing to return to a magical world motivated much of the occultism in early twentieth-century Europe. He further suggests that this nostalgia was the reason behind Max Weber's interest in the source of disenchantment (244).

In the final chapter, Josephson-Storm discusses how Weber became deeply interested in mysticism through the circle of European scholars known as "Eranos," as well as other German-based spiritual groups. It is possible, he suggests, that Weber regarded mysticism as the only serious alternative to a disenchanted modernity. In fact, Weber, according to Josephson-Storm, proposed that "mysticism may indirectly even further the interests of rational conduct" (294). In other words, Weber, despite his adherence to the disenchantment narrative, was enchanted by mysticism and the possibility that it could benefit modern society.

While the field of religious studies has largely been a proponent of the disenchantment narrative, Josephson-Storm claims that the academic study of religion emerged in harmony with spiritualism, theosophy, and mysticism. "Many scholars of religion were fellow travelers, or at least, inhabitants of the same conceptual universe," he writes. Therefore, "it is now a matter of revising our narrative of the history of religious studies in the face of this insight" (122). Not only did many renowned scholars of religion join the Theosophical Society (115), but several—Edward Burnett Tylor, Ferdinand de Saussure, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Walter Evans-Wentz, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, and Max Müller—were directly or indirectly inspired by this group. Other well-known intellectuals of the time—George Bataille, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Gershom Scholem, and Michel de Certeau—were mystics or engaged in a broad spectra of spiritual milieus.

With its insightful analysis into the magical and occult inclinations of influential figures in the social sciences and study of religion, this book is undoubtedly a fascinating and important read. However, this is not to say that it is easy to read. The author draws on a broad selection of sources, which may not be immediately familiar to most readers. The original context of the copious passages quoted throughout the book is not always clear, requiring the reader to seek more information elsewhere. Another critique one might offer of the book concerns the consequences of deconstructing the Weberian enchantment/disenchantment dialectic. If the disenchantment narrative was merely a myth created by Weber and other nineteenth-century intellectuals, to what were they responding? Does

the notion of disenchantment simply reflect their individual psychoses, or does it speak to a broader anxiety within European society at the time?

Furthermore, to support the claim that many of the modern figures behind the disenchantment narrative were themselves "entangled" in enchantment (304), the author sometimes stretches the evidence. Max Müller, for example, was not, as Josephson writes, influenced by the Theosophical Society (110–11); actually, he was quite critical of them and considered the concept of esoteric Buddhism blasphemous (Müller 1893). That he corresponded with Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, used the term "theosophy" (primarily about Christian mysticism), considered Vedanta as an excellent form of religion, and in general was dissatisfied with the disenchantment of the world, does not necessarily make him a supporter of the movement. Similarly, the fact that James George Frazer wrote and thought about primitive religion and magic and that *The Golden Bough* was a book of worship for his "wicked son" Aleister Crowley (176) does not mean that Frazer believed in a magical universe. Just because many nineteenth-century intellectuals were Christians or believed in a divine power does not necessarily indicate that their academic work was the product of an "enchanted world."

In all, I highly recommend this book. It is a significant contribution to the fields of religious studies and philosophy, and it forces scholars to reconsider the connection between secularization and the narrative of disenchantment (304). Furthermore, Josephson-Storm challenges the notion that religious studies is a scientific tradition with a purely objective agenda, when, in fact, the founders of the discipline believed in a world of enchantment.

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