

Explaining Coptic Christianity with Sørensen's Cognitive Theory of Magic: The Gospel of the Egyptians and other Coptic Texts as Test Cases

The overarching purpose of the paper is to test Sørensen's cognitive theory of magic (2007) by examining ancient Coptic texts of ritual power. Amongst Early Christianities (Mirecki & Meyer 2002; cf. Klauck 2000), Coptic Christianity is chosen for investigation, for her "magical" phenomena were quite prevailing and the extant Coptic texts of "magic" are relatively massive (Meyers et al. 1999). The Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians, Oxyrhynchus 1077, Berlin 9096 are some of the best illustrations. Sørensen's asserts that the human cognition of magic is universal. However, "Sørensen draws from a very limited set of empirical examples" (Bever 2008), that is, classic ethnographic data derived from Frazer, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Tambiah, etc. (cf. Yelle 2008). Hence, this paper tries to apply contagion, conceptual blending, indexical icons, tedium effect and other cognitive principles in explaining Coptic texts. Interestingly, ancient Christian users of Coptic "magical" texts did not perceive themselves "practitioners of 'magic,' which they regarded as a negative term" (Meyers et al. 1999). Thus, this paper must investigate to what extent are Sørensen's cognitive categories applicable to Coptic Christianity. This belongs to the first part. Afterwards, it discusses ancient perceptions on different "magical" sources. Basically, magic has received "a bad press" in Early Christianities (Aune 2006) or even being labelled as "daemonic". Two major competing interpretations of the actual praxis of daemonic magic prevailed, namely "Tatianic" and "Origenistic" (Thee 1984). In light of Sørensen's theory, the paper analyzes whether one could distinguish cognitively a "Christian" magic from the so-called "daemonic". Finally, it treats any discrepancy between Sørensen's theory and the Coptic phenomena. Instead of viewing magic from neurocognitive approach (Sørensen 2010), Sørensen formulates his "cognitive theory of belief in magic" (Bever 2008) which explains how human cognition can think that magic works, but not how magic works through altered state of mind.