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MAGIC WITH A MESSAGE: The Poetics of Christian Conjuring

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“For this next trick, I need a special young lady,” the magician says, peering into the audience. “How about you?” he asks, indicating a young woman with sandy blond hair. “Let’s give her a round of applause!” The magician leads his volunteer to a small table and gives her a deck of playing cards, which he asks her to inspect. “Now mix them up. Make sure that *you know* that *I don’t know* what order the cards are in.” After a half-dozen shuffles, the volunteer appears satisfied. The magician hands her a sealed envelope with the word “PREDICTION” printed on it. Inside is a piece of paper. It reads, “On Wednesday, July 18, you will shuffle the Four of Clubs to the top of the deck.” When the volunteer turns over the top card, it is in fact the Four of Clubs. Spectators cheer at what would appear to be the end of the routine. Then the magician addresses them pointedly.

“I want you to know that’s just a trick. I’m not going to tell you how it’s done, but it’s a trick. But it is possible sometimes to predict the future. . . . And I’m going to predict the future!” As he speaks, the magician paces the stage, gesticulating emphatically, his voice rising and falling in a dramatic cadence. “I’m not just going to predict *the* future. I’m going to predict *your* future. And it will come true. Are you ready? It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that, the judgment. You say, *Well I don’t believe that!* Doesn’t matter. It’s going to happen, because God said it would. You say, *Well, I don’t want any part of it!* My friend, you have no more choice in whether to participate in God’s judgment than in whether or not

you were born. . . .” Transitioning from a conventional card trick into a sermon about Christian conceptions of judgment and salvation, the magician hybridizes domains that may seem otherwise incompatible: spectacular entertainment and ritual speech, popular culture and religion, and—most impressively—magic and Christianity.

The performer is Dr. Jerry Burgess, a full-time physician from Kentucky and a part-time *gospel magician*. Evangelical Christians who convey religious messages with conjuring tricks, gospel magicians perform to strengthen the faith of fellow believers and to evangelize or “witness” (Ammerman 1987:91–102; Greenhouse 1989:83–86; Harding 2000:34–38) to those who have yet to accept Christ as their savior. Their performances are radically different from the miraculous gifts of the spirit such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, or healing that constitute a basis for authority (Engelke 2007) and an “aesthetics of persuasion” (Meyer 2010) among Pentecostal and charismatic Christians (Robbins 2004a). Emphatically denying that they have supernatural powers and scrupulously avoiding material that too closely resembles biblical miracles, gospel magicians take pains to present their tricks as unambiguously skillful performances intended to entertain, uplift, and instruct. Once a year, hundreds gather on the campus of an evangelical college in rural Indiana for the weeklong convention of the world’s largest gospel magic organization, the Fellowship of Christian Magicians (FCM). Through instructional workshops, inspirational talks, and entertaining performances, they help each other cultivate the illusionary talents through which they serve the Lord.

How do gospel magicians repurpose secular entertainment magic, incorporating tricks into projects of evangelism? To begin to answer this question, I attended the FCM convention in 2007 and 2008 as a participant-observer, hypothesizing that their effort to reconcile magic’s problematic connotations with a Christian view of the world would be a rich source of cultural elaboration. I filmed over a dozen gospel magic workshops, including the one in which Dr. Burgess performed trick described above. I also audio-recorded in-depth, open-ended interviews of one to two hours with seven gospel magicians, including one current, one future, and three former presidents of the FCM. In the dorm and cafeteria, I spoke informally with many other participants about their involvement in magic and other forms of “creative ministry” the FCM promotes: juggling, clowning, mime, puppetry, ventriloquism, balloon sculpture, chalk art, face-painting, storytelling, and so forth. FCMers were warm and welcoming. Several showed an active and ongoing investment in witnessing to me, an unsaved person, just as they sometimes use a common interest in magic to minister among secular magicians.

Registration figures set the attendance these two years at 542 and 635 people, respectively, suggesting the relatively large scale of the gospel magic subculture. Attendees were overwhelmingly white and mostly from the southern and mid-western United States, although a small number of international participants came from overseas. Many traveled with a spouse, and numerous families brought children of all ages. Although women attended in roughly equal numbers to men, they principally seemed to be involved in forms of creative ministry other than magic, such as puppetry, storytelling, or face-painting. With the exception of a few female assistants, gospel magic—like the genre of evangelical preaching (Harding 2000:177; Ingersoll 2003:84–86) with which it intersects in performances like Dr. Burgess’s—seems to be a decidedly male activity.

Performing for each other during FCM conventions allows gospel magicians to practice their craft, draw inspiration from others’ ministries, and savor an enjoyable form of entertainment that reaffirms their Christian worldview. However, as enriching as such experiences may be, they are essentially preparatory for performances directed to unsaved people outside the organization. To this end, the FCM sponsored free gospel magic stage shows during the convention, drawing several hundred spectators, principally families with children, from the surrounding community each night. Measured by attendance and audience enthusiasm, these performances seemed successful, but their efficacy as a form of ministry, along with the overall sociocultural impact of gospel magic, was difficult for me to assess.

The meaning of any performance is contingent on audience reception and coconstruction (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Duranti 1986), whether or not spectators vocalize their reactions. Just as Ghanaian comedians’ parodies of Charismatic preachers enact wariness of spiritual fakery (Shipley 2009), the possibility of that gospel magic could fail to convince non-Christians is implicit in artist Jonathan Allen’s parodic photographs of fictional gospel magician Tommy Angel. “Angel and his strategic snake-oil gospel pull back the curtain on the sleight-of-hand that inevitably operates behind the scenes of any organized system of belief,” writes Allen (2007:106). These photographs suggest that, far from winning converts, gospel magic could reinforce incredulous audiences’ negative stereotypes of Christianity.

Although gospel magicians circulate stories about successful witnessing and even reported winning converts from the community during the FCM convention, they also tell each other about disappointing encounters with unsaved people. For instance, one workshop leader unhappily recounted his ongoing, but ultimately unsuccessful, effort to reach a friend who “loved to play cards” with gospel magic card tricks. Gospel magicians are intensely aware of the possibility of failure, and

employ “performance precautions” (Yankah 1985:149) to ensure that their magic conveys the desired message, and that this message is heard as widely as possible. Focusing on the “staging talk” (Goffman 1959:175) they devote to evaluating, theorizing, and strategizing performance, I describe gospel magicians’ ideas about the effective use of magic as a medium of witness. In particular, I present the viewpoints of two seasoned performers with decades of experience and reputations for leadership in a community of practice that now encompasses several thousand gospel magicians worldwide.

Following his demonstration of the above routine during an instructional workshop he playfully entitled “Devious Principles for Divine Purposes,” Dr. Burgess engaged attendees in precisely this kind of staging talk. Of the dozens of gospel magicians listening in the collegiate lecture-hall, many either filmed or scribbled notes like the avid students they were. Dressed in a smart tan blazer, the bespectacled 57-year-old Dr. Burgess, a past president of the FCM, looked decidedly professorial. He carefully explained how he uses this card trick to convey a gospel message about judgment: “You can do this with any prediction trick, it doesn’t matter what kind. I use one as my transition trick. I do some straight magic to entertain the audience, then I do a transition trick into the gospel presentation, and from then until the end of the show, it’s the message illustrated by magic.” Performing at one of the FCM’s public galas, he broached the topic of judgment with a prediction trick before driving a bed of steely spikes through his arm to dramatize the agony of punishment and then explaining the forgiveness of sin through the intercession of Jesus by changing a filthy rag into a clean, white cloth. “One thing I learned from practicing medicine thirty-three years,” he would say, “is that you can’t get people well before you first get them sick.”

My analysis necessarily contextualizes these kinds of performances as a form of U.S. evangelical expressive culture, drawing selectively on the anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2004b:31–32). However, I approach this foray into gospel magic first and foremost as an ethnographer of magic. Building on long-term research among secular entertainment magicians (Jones 2011), my primary concern here is the poetic dimensions of producing what gospel magicians call “applications” of secular magic tricks. Magicians the world over perform card tricks like the one Dr. Burgess uses to preach about judgment and salvation in his gospel magic act. To apply an entertaining trick to a serious topic, Dr. Burgess asserts an iconic parallelism between a particular effect (the prediction of a randomly chosen card) and a spiritual concept (the promise of inescapable judgment). Before exploring the role of iconicity in the production and performance of such routines, in the

following sections I describe the characteristics of magic as an expressive genre and the historical development, theological justification, and social organization of gospel magic as one of its most distinctive subgenres.

MAGIC WITHOUT A MESSAGE?

Skilled performers in many different cultural traditions employ secret contrivances or sleight-of-hand manipulations to produce stunning sensory phenomena. Anthropologists have focused overwhelmingly on the role of such practices in the ritual performances of healers, mediums, and shamans (e.g., Lewis 2002; Morris 2000; Taussig 2003), virtually ignoring the area in which these techniques have reached their most extensive elaboration: entertainment magic, or conjuring. Although conjuring in India connects with the cosmological principle of *maya*, the world-as-illusion (Siegel 1991), in the modern West, it has converged in significant ways with materialist ontology and empiricist epistemology: by cultural convention, modern magic audiences must be willing to be deceived but not so credulous that they mistake illusions for miracles, failing to imagine naturalistic explanations of a magician's prodigious feats (Jones 2010). The modern magician, in turn, is culturally accountable to delight but not delude (Saler 2006:713).

In their staging talk, secular and gospel magicians alike distinguish between *effects*—illusions as experienced by an audience—and *methods*—illusions as they are actually, but secretly, produced. In performing, they use what magic theorists term *misdirection*: “that which directs the audience towards the effect and away from the method” of a trick (Lamont and Wiseman 1999:31). Conjuring is, in essence, the performance of inexplicable effects through the mystification of otherwise intelligible methods. This mystification of method is closely linked to the kind of fascination magical effects exert. In the words of Gregory Bateson, “Conjurers . . . concentrate upon acquiring a virtuosity whose only reward is reached after the viewer detects that he has been deceived and is forced to smile or marvel at the skill of the deceiver” (1972:182). Magic tricks are self-referential insofar as effects accrue significance by calling attention to the secret, inscrutable, methods of their own production—the locus of magicians' deceptive skill. Magicians both invite audiences to speculate about their methods even as they systematically thwart possible hypotheses (Jones 2011:57), for instance, by allowing spectators to inspect props before, during, or after an effect, as Dr. Burgess does with his deck of cards.

In this sense, magic recalls Alfred Gell's characterization of virtuosic works of art and performance as indexical signs that point to the originating agency of the skilled artists or performers who create them. According to Gell (1998:71),

the enchantment “produced by the spectacle of unimaginable virtuosity . . . ensues from the spectator becoming trapped within the index because the index embodies agency which is essentially indecipherable. Partly this comes from the spectator’s inability mentally to rehearse the origination of the index from the point of view of the originator, the artist. The ‘blockage’ in cognition arises at the point when the spectator cannot follow the sequence of steps in the artist’s ‘performance.’” As Bateson saw, secular entertainment magic emphasizes the enchantment spectators feel before the effect–index whose method–agency lies irretrievably beyond their grasp as the principal justification for performance. Gospel magic presentations add a dimension of semiosis to magic tricks beyond the indexical signification of virtuosic agency by positing iconic resemblances between magical effects and spiritual concepts or motifs. I will argue, however, that indexes of agency remain a crucial—but also problematic—part of gospel magic performance.

MAKING CONJURING CHRISTIAN

According to tradition, the first gospel magician of note was Clarence Woolston, a Philadelphia-based Baptist minister who began performing magic for children sometime around the beginning of the 20th century (Adair and Varro 2004:6; Laflin 2000:17). Describing his effects as “object lessons,” and himself as an “object teacher,” Woolston (1910:17) reflected in the opening pages of his gospel magic primer *Seeing Truth*,

the Art of Magic is the wonderland of childhood. . . . Why cannot the teacher of Religion enter this domain of Wonderland and open the books of Holy Truth in the “Castle of Make Believe” and thus cause the highest truths to be clothed with that bewitching interest that fascinates little hearts and heads with the charm of the “happy surprise,” which has made the Art of Magic a delight to eye and head? [Woolston 1910:17]

In 1911, Woolston began meeting regularly with other Philadelphians seeking to use magic in ministry, and eventually founded an organization, the Gospel Illustrators of America, that would host a number of conventions over the coming decade (Adair and Varro 2004:7–8).¹

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, interest in gospel magic steadily increased, as a growing number of publications on magical ministry attests (Laflin 2000:21–24). On November 27, 1953, 19 Christian magicians gathered at the St. Paul’s Methodist Church in San Francisco resolved to found the FCM (Adair and Varro 2004:15–22). They created a magazine, the *Christian Conjurer*, which

members still receive on a bimonthly basis. In 1958, the first national Christian Magicians Conference, held in Montrose, Pennsylvania, attracted ten members of the FCM and six nonmembers (Adair and Varro 2004:47). By the late 1980s, the organization could boast well over 2,000 members worldwide, and averaged 1,000-plus attendees at its annual conventions (Adair and Varro 2004:95–100). Declining attendance at the convention in recent years results from, in part, a series of unpopular venue changes (Laffin 2000:29–32), but one organizer told me that it also reflects the overall vitality of gospel magic, as newer regional events—for instance, annual creative ministry conventions in Colorado, Ohio, and Tennessee—have given enthusiasts less expensive alternatives closer to home.

Unlike secular magic clubs such as the International Brotherhood of Magicians, there is no test of skill to join the FCM, only a screening of faith. Would-be members simply submit their dues and sign the following statement, as mandated in Article 3, Section 1 of the FCM Constitution (Adair and Varro 2004:176–177): “I have received Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and believe the Bible to be the only inspired infallible Word of God; I believe that Jesus Christ was born of a Virgin, and that He died on the cross and shed His blood as the only atonement for our sins; that He rose from the dead; that He ascended to the Father’s right hand in heaven and will, one day come back for those who trust in Him.”² This statement of biblical literalism and inerrancy clearly aligns the FCM with theologically conservative forms of Christianity. Its membership oath goes on to enjoin proselytizing, practice, and adherence to the magic community’s standards of conduct regarding secrecy: “As a member of this Fellowship, I commit myself to: (1) reaching lost souls and encouraging growth in the Body of Christ through the use of such talents as magic, ventriloquism and associated crafts, (2) diligently to be a more proficient performer with these talents, and (3) carefully upholding the code of ethics of the magic profession (relative to exposure of magical effects and ideas).”

The expansion of gospel magic as a form of ministry and, with it, the growth of the FCM, reflect more general trends in evangelical expressive culture. U.S. evangelicals make widespread use of popular entertainment to enhance their efforts to spread the Word of God (Balmer 1993; Moore 1994), as exemplified by the “Hell House” phenomenon. Although these Christian-themed haunted houses use fear and revulsion to stir longing for salvation (Pellegrini 2007), gospel magicians tend to emphasize the experience of enchantment that, for reasons I explain below, they consider especially effective in evangelism.

Hell House and gospel magic represent recent manifestations of what Jackson (2009:16) calls a long-standing current of “homiletic realism” in U.S. evangelism: “Seeking to simulate lived experience for religious audiences already trained in transforming visually oriented rhetoric into their spiritual reality,” 19th-century “reformers created vivid forms of realism, blending a narrative tradition steeped in an imaginatively interactive readerly hermeneutic with the empirical immediacy and the seemingly self-referential veracity of visual media” like photography and the magic lantern. Jackson (2009:20) demonstrates that new forms of multimedia religious instruction devised for children ultimately provided models for religious communication directed to adults, as I have found in the development of gospel magic.

Given that magicians in the Bible generally oppose God and his messengers (Kee 1986) and that Christians have historically persecuted alleged practitioners of magic (Thomas 1971), the use of magic tricks to spread the gospel may seem paradoxical. Early modern European culture blurred boundaries between magic as entertainment, protoscience, and demonic perversion of religion (Eamon 1994; Kieckhefer 2000). As these categories grew increasingly distinct during the Enlightenment, however, modern magic emerged as a form of secular entertainment largely stripped of supernatural associations (During 2002; Mangan 2007), and therefore amenable to Christian appropriation and resignification. Through a similar process of demystification, ventriloquism, another genre once associated with demonic powers and dangerous deceptions, became less threatening for Christian performers and audiences: “The demonic voices and the divine locutions of the old ventriloquism sounded incredibly docile once turned into an amusement. Just how safe that medium had become is indicated by the evangelical embrace of the art as an acceptable form of evangelistic entertainment over the past several decades. Now ‘gospel vents’ have crowded onto the stage . . . in a thriving evangelical subculture of entertainers, puppeteers, clowns, and magicians” (Schmidt 2000:163).

Gospel magicians I spoke with reported that even those rare Christians who still reject magic as being “of the devil” usually can be won over with an explanation or demonstration of gospel magic (sometimes congregations may insist that performers refrain from using props such as playing cards that retain diabolical connotations). They justify their use of conjuring as an evangelical device with direct reference to the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 9:22, the apostle Paul says, “I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some” (Authorized King James Version). I repeatedly heard gospel magicians cite this passage and others as a mandate to use creative approaches in evangelizing. They also find scriptural support for

their performance practices in the biblical ministry of Jesus, who not only teaches with parables and illustrative demonstrations but also frames miracles both as the substance of his beneficent power and as signs requiring interpretation (Kee 1986). In the words of one gospel magic author, “John’s gospel refers to Jesus’ miracles as ‘signs’—pointers to, or living vivid illustrations of, the things God could do in a person’s life. . . . Jesus always encapsulated the truth he was communicating in vivid terms. . . . Thus the gospel preacher must not only know his subject, but he must also know how to communicate his subject” (Wills 1999:32–33).

Professional and semiprofessional gospel magicians perform at church services and functions either for pay or for a collected donation (called a “love offering”), and may also be hired by Sunday schools, Christian schools, or vacation Bible camps. Most also have family-friendly, although not explicitly Christian, acts that they can perform in secular venues. The vast majority of attendees at the FCM convention are amateurs who use magic as part of individual ministry or church outreach in settings like hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, or shelters. The level of investment in magic itself varies greatly among these amateurs; some may only use a few simple effects to initiate witnessing, while others have extensive magical repertoires and considerable conjuring skill (this is particularly true for individuals whose interest in the hobby of secular magic preceded their involvement in gospel magic). Overseas missionaries told me that gospel magic helps them overcome cultural and linguistic barriers.³ Dr. Burgess, who makes frequent mission trips abroad, said that he has won “many, many, many” souls through his worldwide magical ministry, “from every walk of life, every age, every culture, every faith” including “many Hindus and Muslims.” On a whirlwind tour of India in 1999, he reported performing for “50 or 60,000 people” in just 15 days.

Just as the apostle Paul says, “woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16), these disciples categorically believe that it is their sacred duty to spread the Word of God. Magic is not only a versatile medium of evangelizing but also structures and focuses the evangelistic impulse, providing skills and resources for presenting the message effectively for, as Ammerman states simply, “witnessing is hard” (1987:95). Attending the convention, FCMers acquire new ways to witness, and draw resolve from each other’s personal testimonies.

Just as some are called to learn, others are called to teach. In recent years, professional gospel magician and former FCM president Duane Laflin has emerged as a leading educator, with an obvious pedagogical gift. In 2007, I managed to interview him in a rare moment of relative calm. Between emceeding an evening gala, manning the exhibit stand where he had gospel magic props and instructional

materials for sale, and teaching two meticulously organized afternoon classes and a late-night workshop (which he conducted in total darkness after a power failure), Laflin was in high demand. The 53-year-old Midwesterner with dark hair and chiseled features exudes confidence in well-oiled stage shows that feature carefully timed musical accompaniment, multiple changes of brightly colored suits, expensive large-scale illusions, and a complement of female assistants, including his radiant wife Mary. Offstage, I found this consummate showman unexpectedly self-effacing.

He explained that, although he had a childhood passion for magic, it wasn't until he became a young pastor in South Dakota that he began experimenting with magic in ministry. "At the time, I really felt all alone. I very sincerely prayed that the Lord would help me know how to see things in a real practical light so I could pass on whatever I could that would make ministry more effective and maybe a little easier for others. I say it humbly, it's almost an embarrassing kind of thing to say, but I believe God answered that prayer, because I do seem to be able to put things into words and give a practical kind of description that helps people understand." Laflin explained that helping to educate others in gospel magic involves providing instruction—both in person, and through his numerous print and video publications—and creating, manufacturing, and selling magical effects for ministry. It also requires him to exemplify the highest standards of professionalism. "Because [being a teacher] is part of my role, I have to model it, I have to be out and be seen, so I have to be a performer," he told me. "I think that's what biblical works are really supposed to be. Didn't the apostle Paul say, 'Be the follower of me, as I am of Christ?' And isn't the whole biblical teaching about discipleship, about training faithful men?"⁴

The inexorable element of risk in magic poses particular problems for gospel magicians: when a performer flubs a trick (as I occasionally saw), the mistake can distract spectators from the message it is meant to impart. More generally, associations with a sometimes-tawdry show business genre risks trivializing a sacred message, particularly in a cultural setting like the contemporary United States where entertainment often seems to usurp the place of religion (Chidester 2005). In this context, Laflin cautions gospel magicians that sincere good intentions are not sufficient to ensure successful performances. In his compendious book *Greater Gospel Magic*, he writes that when "illusions are done . . . poorly . . . people are turned away from truth. . . . Clumsy attempts to make sophisticated moves which obviously haven't been practiced make a joke out of what should be meaningful testimony" (Laflin 2000:50). He maintains that, for gospel magicians, the stakes

are too high for technical incompetence: “If our only purpose is to do magic tricks, we can mess around as we choose. If we see Gospel Magic as a means of ministry (and we do), if we dare to deal with the most blessed truths in the universe as we perform our tricks (and we do), then it is required of us to use every means at our disposal to be as effective as possible” (Lafin 2000:84).

Achieving excellence in magical ministry is the explicit justification for the FCM convention, and I regularly heard participants in workshops, assemblies, and morning services lead prayers to this effect. Workshops generally consist of performances of scripted routines interspersed with explanations of magical methods. In addition to introducing listeners to new tricks and conjuring techniques, a principal focus is on what magicians refer to as *presentation*, that is, the manner of performing effects or framing them as somehow significant (Jones 2011:123–126). In magicians’ jargon, the process of scripting a presentation (which may include decisions about things like costume, patter, props, musical accompaniment, etc.) is called *routining*. Lecturers demonstrated applications and presentations for listeners to emulate, while simultaneously showcasing iterative principles of routining, focusing on creating what they call “illustrations” of the gospel message. In the following section, I describe several routines that exemplify salient patterns in the routining of gospel magic.

FROM TRICKS TO TRUTH

Gospel magicians self-consciously conceptualize and utilize magic as a system of signs, placing particular emphasis on iconic relations of resemblance between magical effects and gospel referents. To illustrate a gospel message, they sometimes explicitly instruct audiences how to interpret their performances, clarifying the nature of magic as a medium of signification, and differentiating it from charlatanism or the occult. In one lecture, Lafin explained that it is “really crucial in our programs that people understand that, even though we call ourselves ‘magicians,’ we don’t claim to have powers.” He demonstrated a “disclaimer” he performs at the beginning his shows, in which he demystifies pseudopsychics’ phony miracles. After bending a fork at the tips of his without any visible force à la Uri Geller, Lafin says, “The difference between Uri Geller and me is that I’m telling the truth. How did I do that? It had to do with my hands, with something I know, and with the fact that I practiced a lot. That’s something I want you to understand as you watch my program: I’m an illusionist, not a miracle worker. I believe in miracles because I believe in God, but I don’t do miracles, I do tricks. I keep the secrets, but I tell you the truth.” Placed at the beginning of a show, a statement like this serves not

only to dispel misconceptions spectators might have about magic itself but also to establish Laflin's credibility as a purveyor of truth.

In a similar vein, Laflin told me that there is "a very strong avoidance" of representing biblical miracles through magic because "you don't want to do something that makes it look like you're saying Jesus was a trickster." The caution these performers exercise to differentiate their illustrative effects from supernatural powers—real or feigned—may lead them to deemphasize straightforward mimesis. Thus, in a routine in which he does illustrate the story of a biblical miracle, Laflin does not replicate it, but, rather, figures it through synecdoche, referring to the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) by transforming a cane such as a blind man might use into a large silk foulard emblazoned with the face of Jesus.⁵

Some gospel magic routines emphasize the kind of iconic signification Peirce identifies with diagrams, which "represent the relations . . . of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts" (1955:105). For instance, in a short routine summarizing the gospel message, Laflin begins with two silk handkerchiefs—purple representing God, "the sovereign of the universe," and red representing man, His creation. Holding the two silks together, Laflin explains that God's desire was to have a wonderful relationship with his creation, but that "Adam and Eve decided to go their way instead of God's. . . . The result of that is spiritual death." Here, he presents a third handkerchief, depicting a skull and crossbones, and knots it between the other two. "Please get the picture in your mind: A skull and crossbones to remind us that sin separates man from God." He deposits the three knotted silks in a small plastic receptacle, and produces a fourth with the face of Jesus. "The Good News of the Bible is that . . . God has a plan for spiritual death to be taken away." He explains that Jesus came into the world as the Son of God, died for mankind's sins, and was resurrected from the tomb. Suddenly, the Jesus silk vanishes from his hands. When he removes the knotted silks from the receptacle, the Jesus silk has reappeared in the place of the skull and crossbones, tied between the red and the purple silks. "When we put our trust in Jesus Christ . . . he takes spiritual death away . . . and man the creature is united with the Creator."

This routine has a strong diagrammatic component, illustrating the relationship between God and man using silks to concretize the conventional spatial metaphor of sin as separation from, and salvation as reunification with, God. Performing this effect, Laflin repeatedly underscores its diagrammatic nature with patter emphasizing that the silks are "representations" and "reminders." Laminating the disappearance and reappearance of the Jesus silk with patter about Christ's intervention in the

relationship between God and man, this presentation furthermore associates the sensory thrill of magic with the sublime mystery of Christian miracle.

Routines featuring interactions with audience volunteers can result in particularly rich diagrammatic tableaux, as the following example illustrates. Demonstrating an effect he simply called his “Do-As-I-Do Rope Routine” during a workshop, Dr. Burgess gave a female volunteer a yard of white rope and took one for himself. “There’s a mystery that goes, ‘Is it possible to put a knot in a rope without letting go of the two ends?’” Grasping the two ends of his rope, he performed a few simple motions and, without letting go, tied an unmistakable square knot. He asked the volunteer to do it along with him. Although she followed his minutely detailed instructions, she failed in a half-dozen attempts, while Burgess repeatedly succeeded. “You tried as hard as you could to obey everything I told you, and it still didn’t work out,” he said. “I want you to try one more time.” She performed the same sequence of moves, but before she pulled the rope to see if the knot had taken, Burgess interrupted. “Stop right there. Just hand it over to me.” He took the rope from her and, without any further manipulation, pulled the ends, forming a knot. It may sound like a simple effect, but my video camera picked up my own astonished gasp as I reacted to its perlocutionary force. Dr. Burgess concluded, “We just learned a valuable lesson. You don’t live the Christian life successfully by following a bunch of rules. . . . The secret to victorious Christian living is to give up control to the one who knows how.”

When I asked him about routining gospel magic effects such as this, Dr. Burgess graciously gave me a set of his pellucid lecture notes containing an explanation of the compositional strategy involved. “There are only about seven basic magical effects in the whole wide world!” he writes (Burgess n.d.:5). “A magician can make objects, thoughts, or people (1) appear, (2) vanish, (3) change, (4) penetrate, (5) violate scientific law (e.g. levitate), (6) escape bondage or (7) restore from destruction.”⁶ He advises gospel magicians: “your job is simply to MATCH THE ACTION OF EACH MAIN POINT IN YOUR [message] TO THE BASIC CATEGORY OF MAGIC listed above. The closer the two coincide, the better the illustration—e.g., Christ *changes* our desires; our old habits *vanish*; new desires *appear*; our hearts are *penetrated* by His word; our broken spirit is *restored* . . . etc.”

The “Do-As-I-Do Rope Routine,” which posits a metaphorical parallel between trying to tie an impossible knot and living a Christian life, illustrates this approach to routining. Just as the volunteer can *do the impossible*—tying a logically unfeasible knot—when she hands the rope over to the magician, so can an inherently sinful creature *do the impossible*—living a Christian life—by giving him or herself to

God. This rope effect is not only an iconic representation of a Christian concept. In addition, the very “participant framework” (Goodwin 1990:10) of the performance, in which a (female) volunteer succeeds in tying an impossible knot by entrusting the rope to the (male) magician, is diagrammatic of the action of entrusting one’s life to a God “who knows how.” In this sense, the effect places the volunteer (and, vicariously, the other spectators for whom she is a proxy) in a situation analogous to the one she faces as a moral agent who can, by choosing to rely on God, lead a “victorious” Christian life. As I explain below, this kind of homology is designed to bridge the thrill of a magical effect and the experience of a spiritual sublime, not unlike patterns of emotional transformation found in ritual performances (Kapferer 1979).

VIRTUOSITY AS VIRTUE AND VICE

Iconic resemblances between effects and Christian concepts form the basis of specifically Christian presentations of magic, but indexical properties of enchanting agency are crucial to the particular efficacy of gospel magic as a mode of conveying the Word. Both Burgess and Laflin were in agreement that, as a form of ministry, magic offers unique opportunities because of its enchanting qualities. Dr. Burgess told me that the state of mind associated with the enjoyment of magic tricks can also favorably dispose spectators to receiving a message that their skeptical minds might otherwise resist: “The appeal of magic as a theatrical art is that it’s one of the few situations in modern day culture where a group of people willingly suspend their disbelief,” he told me. “I’ve found that one of the best ways that I can get a chance to get a genuine, legitimate hearing of the claims of the Gospel of Christ is with an audience who have already willingly suspended their disbelief. . . . I can walk in with a magic show, bring them to the point of willingly suspending their disbelief, and let them, maybe for the first time in their lives, take an honest look at Jesus.” Similarly, Laflin told one workshop, “I like doing magic that is high impact, exciting, and impressive. . . . I hope it’s not ego. There certainly is satisfaction in doing a trick that gets the audience excited, enthusiastic, even captivated by your presentation. . . . But my motivation is communication. And when you have a captive audience, you’ve got their eyes, you’ve got their ears, you’ve got an open mind, which means a wide-open door to the heart.”

The “bundling” (Keane 2003:414) of iconic and indexical properties in the same magical performances creates presentational tensions and spiritual challenges that gospel magicians grapple with. Laflin explores this issue in a series of essays entitled “Spiritual Dangers to the Gospel Magician,” identifying three significant

ways that magic can lead a minister astray. The first danger is “the enchantment of technique” (Gell 1992:44) itself. “Magic can become a lover,” Laflin (2000:64) writes. “If one is not careful he will become more excited about tricks than truth. The art and craft of illusion is enticing. Its ability to interest and mentally stimulate can addict and even overwhelm. Magic can take over a person’s life! I know individuals who place magic over everything else. It is above church, family and God. I have seen excitement about tricks and illusions lead to spiritual and financial ruin.”

The second major pitfall Laflin identifies is the pride that can come with cultivating an exclusive—and exclusionary—talent. According to Gell, “Artistic agency, especially of the virtuoso character . . . is socially efficacious because it establishes an inequality between the agency responsible for the production of the work of art, and the spectators” (1998:71). Magic, which conventionally involves someone fooling and someone being fooled, is a genre that typifies such enactments of interactional inequality. Along these lines, Nardi (1988) argues that the continuing predominance of white males—and the marginalization of women and people of color—in entertainment magic reflects these undercurrents of social power culturally associated with the magician’s role. For Christians who value humility, involvement with a genre of performance that confers asymmetrical personal emphasis poses both practical and moral challenges.

Simply put, tricks cannot enhance one’s witness if they prevent the magician from personally “embodying ‘the Spirit’” (Elisha 2008:62). Laflin is intensely mindful of this imperative, cautioning gospel magicians that they must embody godliness on and off stage. He points out that many magicians derive self-satisfaction from knowing things that others do not. “Christians must not make such a mistake,” he writes (Laflin 2000:68).

The attitude of “Aha, I fooled you!” is not consistent with godliness. Instead of boosting one’s own ego by demonstrating the possession of information and ability that others do not have, there must be an intent on serving others by giving them the opportunity to have a happy sense of appreciation and amazement. . . . To inwardly glory or outwardly gloat about possessing superior knowledge definitely does not reflect the spirit of Jesus Christ. If we can’t do our magic with a humble spirit we have no business doing it at all. [Laflin 2000:68]

For his own part, Laflin admitted during one workshop that, when he began his magic career, he thought it was un-Christian to bow or pause for applause. “A

problem Christians have,” he said, “is knowing the justification behind the elements of staging. We’re supposed to be humble, so how do you justify stopping for applause cues?” Eventually a secular mentor taught him that “audiences like to clap. Giving them the opportunity to applaud and to absorb the trick is a part of establishing a positive interaction with audiences. You have to learn to hold still long enough for people to appreciate what you just did.” In this way, presentational imperatives can compel gospel magicians to engage in practices of self-display that threaten to contradict Christian norms of comportment.

The third spiritual danger Laflin describes concerns the efficacy gospel magicians attribute to their effects. Regardless of the enthusiastic response magic may generate, “we must not forget that no magic trick ever has changed or ever will change another person’s heart for good. How well one does the cut and restored rope does not bring another human being to salvation. People are converted when the Spirit of God works in their hearts” (Laflin 2000:72). As mentioned above, both Burgess and Laflin describe magic as a way of visually capturing attention, but maintain, as Harding puts it, that “it is the Word of God, the gospel, and . . . the Holy Spirit, God himself, that converts, that changes the heart” (2000:36). For these evangelical Christians, conversion is an intense and personal encounter with God (Luhmann 2004), one that a magician might be able to facilitate, but can in no way claim to cause.

Two gospel magicians I interviewed independently reported that, at some point in their lives, for reasons such as these, magic proved so spiritually compromising that they had to abandon it altogether. For instance, Burgess told me, “I reached a point in my life where the magic itself, doing the gospel magic, the ministry itself, had begun to completely overshadow my love of Christ, and I dropped it. I quit. I walked away. God told me to put it on the altar. I had a huge illusion collection, a tremendous magic collection. I got rid of every bit of it. I didn’t even have a set of my own lecture notes, and I never thought I’d go back to it.” Nevertheless, two years later, he felt God calling him back to gospel magic ministry:

I was reading Exodus, where Moses was in front of the burning bush. God said to Moses, “What’s that in your hand?” And he said, “It’s a rod.” And God said, “Cast it down.” And Moses cast it down and it became a serpent, and then God said, “Now pick it back up by the tail.” He picked it up by the tail and it became a rod. . . . And the next time the Bible refers to it, it’s the rod of God. Before it was Moses’ rod. And the Lord just opened up my understanding,

and said, “You know, this is exactly what I’ve done with you.” “What’s that in my hand? Well that’s my gospel ministry, Lord.” “Cast it down! Because I want you to see that it’s really a serpent. It’s a serpent and it’s puffing you up with pride, making you think how cool you are, calling attention to yourself. You know it’s just really a serpent in your hand.” So he showed me what it was and he took the serpent out over a two-year purging period. He said, “Now, pick it up by the tail. Because now it’s the rod of God.” And he went a point beyond that. I can tell it as if it’s a conversation, but it really wasn’t. It was deeper than this, but the only way I know is to put it in words. . . . He said, “Well, I just want you to know that if you ever decide that gospel magic ministry is yours instead of Mine, it will turn into a snake and it will bite you. So you just keep in mind, this is Mine and I’m letting you carry it.” I’ve never forgotten that.

In this extraordinary testimony, Burgess recounts a revelatory experience of reading in which God unlocks the personal relevance of a biblical passage at a critical biographical juncture. He embeds the story of this epiphany in a broader skein of typological references likening personal events with biblical antecedents.⁷ To fulfill moral imperatives of Christian personhood, Burgess says he had to put his magical ministry “on the altar,” evoking the story of God instructing Abraham to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:1–14). The call to resume his gospel magic ministry, which Burgess qualifiedly reports in the form of “constructed dialogue” (Tannen 1986), came unexpectedly during a moment of Bible study as the revelation of the significance of a lesson God teaches Moses about the nature of his office as a messenger (Exodus 4:2–5). A medium that can be technically engrossing, personally aggrandizing, and deceptively efficacious, magic is like the staff that can become a dangerous snake in the hands of a messenger who neglects his higher calling but that can be handled safely by the grace of God. At the end of a long period of purgation, this revelation allowed Dr. Burgess to assimilate a difficult lesson about separating ego from magic.

To couch this lesson in Gellian terms, to the extent that gospel magic effects function as indexes, the agency they must ultimately refer back to does not belong to the skillful magician, but the loving God whom the magician skillfully serves. In the context of performance, gospel magicians strive to constitute the magical indexes of agency that they enact as themselves iconic of a particular relationship of service to God, purified of reference to the performer himself. At least as a conceptual ideal or as what Elisha (2011) calls a “moral ambition,” this strategy

aims at a form of iconic indexicality that complements the “indexical iconicity” (Silverstein 2003:203) of gospel presentations. This modulation of agency in the performance of gospel magic thus requires a kind of spiritual virtue—and semiotic virtuosity—beyond whatever manual skill the magician might need to produce an effect.

CONCLUSION

Birgit Meyer writes that “the question of how (if at all) sacred texts, images, or other representations are able to embody and make present the divine is at the heart of religious traditions” (2006:290). According to gospel magicians, magical effects cannot make the divine present, although magical performers themselves can and should embody godliness. To resignify secular magic as a form of evangelical expression, they use qualitative interfaces between magic effects and spiritual motifs as points of semiotic attachment. The self-referential virtuosity that makes magic effects inherently fascinating, however, also threatens to undermine gospel magicians’ spiritual credibility as witnesses: a performer who glorifies himself, rather than God, cannot be a worthy token of a Christian type of person. Just as gospel magicians carefully guide audiences to Christian interpretations of their effects, they also model their self-presentation as performers on normative modes of conduct, and closely monitor their involvement with magic for conformity with Christian tenets of virtue.

Because the qualities of effects most relevant to their message are always bundled with others, gospel magicians must take care to constrain the parameters of signification. My research suggests that paradoxical connotations of magic as a potentially diabolical practice are far less problematic for them than the compulsory bundling of iconically Christian imagery with indexes of virtuosic agency in gospel magic performance. In the eyes of these performers, making conjuring Christian not only means presentationally coupling magic effects with biblical motifs but also decoupling magical performance from personal projections of agency—to the extent that it is possible, taking the magician out of the magic so that the message can be heard.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the performance practices of U.S. gospel magicians, evangelical Christians who convey religious messages with conjuring tricks. Emphatically denying that they possess supernatural powers and scrupulously avoiding effects that resemble biblical miracles, they take pains to present their tricks as unambiguously skillful performances intended to entertain, uplift, and instruct. When patterned on a Christian

motif, otherwise self-referential magic tricks constitute a versatile signifying medium. Addressing the poetics of gospel magic in the setting of instructional workshops, this analysis explores a variety of ways performers utilize iconic resemblances between conjuring effects and Christian referents to produce complex and evocative expressions of faith. At the same time, they carefully manage signifiers of virtuosic agency that are intrinsic to the efficacy of gospel magic performance, but that also threaten to undermine their Christian message. [entertainment magic (conjuring), expressive culture, performance, semiotics, evangelical Christianity]

NOTES

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1. See Hasinoff (2011:71–79).
2. Application form at https://www.fcm.org/usa/member_application.php, accessed on October 10, 2010. As an unsaved person, I could not ethically sign this statement, and attended the FCM conventions with officials' consent, but without joining the organization.
3. Varro (n.d.) offers detailed instructions for gospel magic missions in the developing world.
4. "Be ye followers of me, even as I also *am* of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).
5. The BBC–Discovery Chanel coproduction "The Miracles of Jesus" (Bragard and Cox 2006) is an interesting exception to gospel magicians' general avoidance of performing Jesus's biblical miracles. As the DVD packaging states, the host, U.S. gospel magician Brock Gill "attempts to reenact the miracles of Christ. . . . in an effort to prove that these acts could not have been accomplished other than through divine intervention."
6. Compare Lamont and Wiseman (1999:2–7).
7. Jackson (2009:97) argues that typological reading practices establish a template for the way evangelicals produce and consume Christian media. In this sense, the pairing of conjuring effects and biblical referents in the routinizing of gospel magic may reflect a worldview attuned to typological configurations of meaning in everyday experience.

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Cultural Anthropology has also published articles on Evangelical Christianity. See, for example, William E. Connolly's "Some Theses on Secularism" (2011) and Omri Elisha's "Moral Ambitions of Grace: The Paradox of Compassion and Accountability in Evangelical Faith-Based Activism" (2008).