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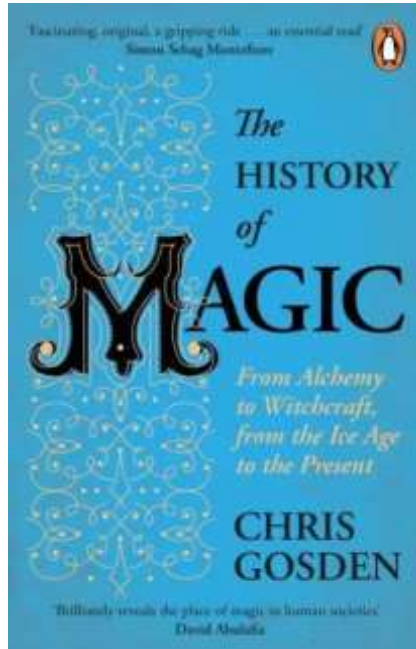
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**THE HISTORY OF MAGIC:  
FROM ALCHEMY TO WITCHCRAFT, FROM THE ICE AGE TO  
THE PRESENT  
CHRIS GOSDEN  
London: Penguin, 2021, 512 S.  
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Magic has been marginalised in Western society since the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and the rise of rationalist science. Indeed, it is possible to study humanities and the social sciences at the university level and never read in-depth about the history of magic worldwide. Conversely, religion and science dominate the humanities curriculum. While this is understandable in light of the modern and technological society we live in; nonetheless, magical perspectives deserve an updated academic analysis. Professor of European Archeology Chris Gosden's *The History of Magic: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present* is an encyclopaedic and objective study of magic and all things magical and is a good starting point for students, scholars, and general readers. It is important to clarify that this book is not about demonism, devil worship, or black magic; rather, it is about how individuals and cultures understand each other, society, nature and the universe in the face of social, cultural and environmental change.

Gosden's definition of 'magic' '*emphasizes human connections with the universe, so that people are open to the workings of the universe and the universe is responsive to us.*' The author explains that 'religion' addresses 'God' or 'gods', while 'science' is a '*distanced understanding of physical reality*' (p. 1). All of these concepts are more complex, but they at least provide us with a starting point. The forms of magical participation discussed in the study are transcendence (astrology), transformation (alchemy, Eurasian shamans), and transactions (Chinese ancestor worship, oracles, demons, angels and saints). Often, the three operate in 'mutual interaction' (p. 10).

Accordingly, the Western claim that magic is dead is premature. In fact, human history consists of '*a triple helix of magic, religion and science*' (p. 11); the book analyses magic within this context. The main argument attempts to look beyond magic's bad reputation and magical charlatans; equally, the work highlights the anti-magic propaganda made by religious and scientific institutions (including missionaries, colonialists and imperialists). Indeed, magic is seen as an alternate form of logic (able to exist with religion and science).

Gosden argues that magic is still widespread internationally and has a long history, affecting individuals and cultures. He comments (in the final chapter) that a magical revival – or re-enchantment – of sorts might provide some philosophical and ethical responses to the emerging global ecological crisis. Indeed, '*Magic is one of the oldest world-views and yet is*

*capable of constant renewal, so that a modern magic can help us to explore our physical and ethical connections to the world in a time of profound ecological crisis*' (p. 1). Furthermore, he aims to '*document the strange and compelling variety of magic*' at an international level and, importantly, place magic in the history of world studies, '*I also aim to explore its positive qualities and to ask: what can magic offer the world today?*' (p. 2).

The book's ten chapters trace the historical development of magic's diverse expressions from 40,000 BCE to the present day. Numerous images and photographs prove helpful and relevant, while the index is comprehensive (see pages 455 to 482). The timeline is succinct and summarises the book. Overall, the work is well structured with the geographic regions separated, allowing the reader to focus on prehistory, ancient history, premodern and modern history in each region. Chapter One ('What is Magic and Why is It Important') states Gosden's terms and analytical framework. In the context that the universe is animate and sentient, he discusses how benign magic fosters a holistic view of humans. Chapter Two ('The Deep History of Magic c.40,000–6,000 BCE') imagines what human life might have been like in the deep past, particularly after the last ice age. The chapter outlines the role of magic in making sense of a risky and unpredictable environment. This theme of humans, society, nature and the universe is developed by analysing the first civilisations and empires in the Near and the Middle East and North Africa in Chapter Three ('The Magic of the Cities: Mesopotamia and Egypt 4,000-1,000BCE'). Likewise, Chapter Four considers this by studying China—concentrating on ancestral spirit worship ('Chinese Magic: Deep Participation c.20,000 BCE—to present'). The significance of the Eurasian shamans in that region – and among the American indigenous peoples – is investigated in Chapter Five. Artistic and magic connections are noted between the Eurasian Steppe, prehistoric Europe, and later the Celts (p. 151). Politically, shamanism became more active during colonial resistance (for instance, Imperial Russian or Chinese annexations of other lands) (p. 182). Prehistoric Europe and its magical traditions (10,000 to 0BCE) is the next region under review (Chapter Six). One key idea is that magic was invented and reinvented according to historical circumstance and conjuncture (throwing a sword into a lake being an example) (p. 237).

Chapter Seven examines Jewish, Ancient Greek and Roman magic from 1,000 BCE to 1,000 CE. In brief, Jewish magic is linked with the issues and worries about everyday life

and protection from devils and spirits. Conversely, Greek and Roman magic include aggressive curses. The study then shifts to the magic of Africa, Australia, and the Americas (Chapter Eight) and the similarities and differences between them. The chapter also mentions the impact of Western colonialism on local magic practices and worldviews. Chapter Nine studies a period and region with numerous research materials available: medieval and modern Europe from 500 CE to the present. The final chapter pulls the key concepts and analytical frameworks together. It suggests a role for contemporary benign magic to assist with the twenty-first century's psychological, social and ecological issues; for example, a case is made for similarities between the latest physics theories and the animist view that the universe is energetic (p. 424). Also highlighted is the fact that trees appear to communicate with each other through their roots; thereafter, the debate considers whether all matter is sentient.

Gosden's book is worth the intellectual concentration and time to read; the book covers magic, archaeology, place, nature, people and society, the universe, and God. It is an extraordinary sweep of history about a topic somewhat sidelined in many humanities and social science courses—except for witchcraft beliefs. On the downside, the book is dry in places, and one is left wondering if its length could have been reduced by 100 pages, making it more concise. However, the counterargument is that the breadth of coverage requires an encyclopaedic tome. Chapter Two has a strong archaeological element. However, the discussion about magic in this chapter is limited because the author tries to explain prehistory magic (a time before documents and written evidence). Lastly, Gosden might have said more about magic's negative or dark side. Witchdoctors can have a detrimental and manipulative hold over a community. Human sacrifice is one other key example. In this case, the arrival of Abrahamic religious morality, despite flaws and misapplication, would have been a general improvement for many pre-modern people.

*The History of Magic* suits undergraduate and postgraduate humanities and social science students. General readers of intellectual history and the history of ideas, and religious history will appreciate its content and arguments. Overall, Gosden's book is the outcome of decades of academic research and is an excellent introductory text to the study of magic history.

#### **Source**

Chris Gosden. (2021). *The History of Magic, From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present*. London: Penguin.