

## TRIVIA: GOSPEL MAGIC

### Jonathan Allen opens up God's box of tricks

In *Modern Enchantments* (2002), cultural historian Simon During describes the magic of conjuring and stage illusion using the term 'secular magic'. Such magic is to be distinguished from the 'real' or 'potent' magic of the shaman (and later the institutionalised priest), and the 'natural' magic of the alchemist (and later the scientist). Gospel magic, tricks performed by committed Christians, represents therefore something of an amalgam since it operates within the spheres of secular magic and real magic simultaneously.

According to American evangelist Duane Laflin in *Greater Gospel Magic* (2000), the first documented gospel magician was Rev Charles H Woolston, a Pennsylvanian pastor who used magic tricks, or 'object lessons', to illustrate biblical themes to late nineteenth-century revivalist congregations. The use of magic effects in the didactic service of Judeo-Christian belief was in fact common to European mediaeval mystery plays; the decollation of John the Baptist, and the miraculous ascension of Christ were both achieved using principles well documented within magic history (see Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* [1584], and John McKinven's *Stage Flying: 431BC to Modern Times* [1995]). Cloistered monk Thomas Betson (d.1516) was busy at Syon Abbey with invisible inks, levitating eggs and mysteriously ambulating apples (created, respectively, with urine, a human hair and an inserted beetle), and lets not forget the infamous Rood of Boxley, a kind of Jesus-as-Action Man figure with eagle eyes, operated secretly by monks using 'certain engines and old wire'. The term hocus pocus may even have its roots in a mishearing of the phrase hoc est corpus, the incantation uttered by the priest at the moment of the host's miraculous transubstantiation during the Catholic mass, a moment in the West that has been the site of an ongoing magic war so to speak, between Roman Catholicism on the one hand, which claims that the Eucharist is the physical body of Christ (real magic), and Protestantism on the other, which prefers a symbolic interpretation (the natural magic of language).



The UK website [www.tricksfortruth.com](http://www.tricksfortruth.com) supplies props and patter routines to a largely fundamentalist Christian community. With echoes of Julius Schiller's *Coelum Stellatum Christianum* (1627) – the Christianisation of pagan celestial charts in which the constellation Cassiopeia became Mary Magdalene and Perseus St Paul – contemporary gospel magic supplants the iconography of secular magic with Christian narratives. A standard rope trick becomes the 'Trinity Ropes', which tangle and untangle to solve the riddle of one God in three persons. A sponge ball routine retells the biblical account of one of Jesus's own performances, the loaves and fishes. The magician's stock-in-trade coloured silks feature as 'Sin Silks', reducing the world's mischievousness to, well, sheer fabrication.

Offering perhaps more performative flexibility and even numinous proximity, the 'fire bible' evokes counter-reformation brimstone, and should, I suggest, be used within easy reach of holy water. In the area of money magic, a finely observed gospel dollar bill is available, with Jesus in place of the presidential cameo and valued at 'one saviour'. Elsewhere online, Duane Laflin's 'Jesus silk' is of particular note, inadvertently appropriating the apocryphal myth of St Veronica's cloth, upon which Christ's face became imprinted en route to Calvary. Its appearance and disappearance in a variety of ingenious magic routines generates a seductive conundrum of veracity, especially given the myth's etymological roots in the Latin *vera icon*, the true image.

The Fellowship of Christian Magicians is an international community of artistes who, along with Christian ventriloquists and even gospel balloon modellers, travel the world with their maverick ministries. Like most magicians, Laflin and wife Mary have a tour-weary yet generous mischief in their eyes. Their oeuvre extends to ambitious stage illusions, including a version of the classic sword cabinet into which 16 swords are thrust, each representing distress, persecution, peril, famine, nakedness and other challenges that might beset the Christian (Mary) trapped in this world (the cabinet). Mary emerges unscathed of course, arms raised in victory and with a change of clothes to boot. When I met the couple at their stall at Blackpool Magic Convention several years ago, it was hard to imagine a more ideologically hazardous environment into which believers might dare to tread. Indeed Greater Gospel Magic sets out careful dos and don'ts for would-be practitioners, spiritual precautions for those taking risks not just outside but also within their own community, where dipping into the devil's toy box still carries a stigma.

One contributing factor towards the hostility David Blaine faced in the UK last summer was, might I venture, a gospel magic issue. Britain is now a far more secularised culture than the USA, an inconvenience for Blaine, whose persona and performances, despite his Jewish background, presuppose a Christian-literate audience. When he 'cut off' his ear at a press conference last year just before spending 44 days and nights in his self-created Perspex wilderness, commentators read the event as a reference to Van Gogh's self-mutilation, especially given the magician's desire for his work to be received as art. But an ancillary ear-cutting reference is the biblical account of Peter's attack on the high priest's slave in the garden of Gethsemane on the eve of Christ's final journey. After Blaine leapt from his Calvary-like post in Bryant Square, New York, in 2002, carefully crafted footage showed him leaving the scene slumped, arms outstretched over the shoulders of attendants, echoing so many descent-from-the-cross images. Watching his trademark vacant gaze and messianic features over the years, I have often been reminded of the convention of depicting Christ's face unperturbed, a sign of his detached spirit communing with the beyond while his earthly body suffers unimaginable deprecation. Blaine is 33 in a few years time. Perhaps we will see him celebrate the anniversary in unexpectedly biblical style.

The line between magic and institutionalised belief wavered momentarily in Vatican City on 30 January 2002, when Salesian priest and magician Silvio Mantelli presented Pope John Paul II with a magic wand and requested that the pontiff give magicians their own saint. The proposed candidate was Don Bosco (Giovanni Melchior Bosco, 1815–1888), a nineteenth-century Italian priest, founder of the Society of St Francis de Sales and noted prestidigitator. Bosco was canonised in 1934 and already offers saintly protection to students and editors. Papal approval for his revised canonisation remains in doubt.



Gospel magic itself is generally dismissed within the mainstream magic community as an impoverished performance concept, or filed away by historians on the dusty shelves of *magicana*. In contrast to 'pornographic magic' (a focus on technique, the search for more and more novelty and the desire for multiple climaxes), theorist Robert E Neale locates gospel practice within the category of 'existential magic', albeit an institutionalised version, where meaning tends to foreground effect. Set, however, against a global backdrop of both religious fundamentalism and widespread political duplicity, the contradiction inherent in gospel magic's presentation of a 'truth' narrative through a medium dependent on hoodwinking takes on less abstract associations. With an audience/congregation set before a magician/preacher, it is not hard to trace magic's historical indivisibility with religion and the relationships of power upon which both rely. After historian Richard Hofstadter's conflation of religious fundamentalism with delusional psychology in his influential essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1963), could gospel magic performers be said to embody something of a 'paranoid magic style'? It is significant perhaps that the phenomenon has evolved and thrives to a large extent in the USA, where fundamentalism can abut conspiracy theories and xenophobia.

An anomaly in the field is Tommy Angel, a magician whose act breaks just about all Laflin's rules. Angel cites a lapsed Italian catholic upbringing and a fundamentalist stepmother from Utah, giving his genealogy the feel of magic's late-nineteenth-century golden era, when a magician such as Edwin Hargreaves could perform as Signor Edoiun Arvi, a self-mythologising tendency which makes magic history a hall of mirrors in itself. A twenty-first-century version of Burt Lancaster's salesman-turned-preacher, Elmer Gantry, Angel's act begins benignly enough, but soon descends into a parody of Sunday-school manners with levitating crosses, a vanishing stigmata routine, and his assistant Miss Direction firing a child's BANG-gun which instead shoots a flag reading the word FAITH. Their choreography seems to draw as much from the gesturing of contemporary politicians as from evangelists, but also references religious painting, as when a 'holy spirit' dove appears fluttering above Angel's head. If his flaming bible threatens to engulf the word of God itself, it does so by evoking existential theologians such as Paul Tillich (d.1965) who proposed a more immanent concept of God, one therefore open to subjective imagining, a benevolent misdirection of the self, as it were. Tommy Angel's magic routines become arguments with God, double-edged meditations on belief itself, highlighting the ambivalent power of illusion and its role in assembling our sense of the real.

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