

# The Myth of Disenchantment

## *Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*

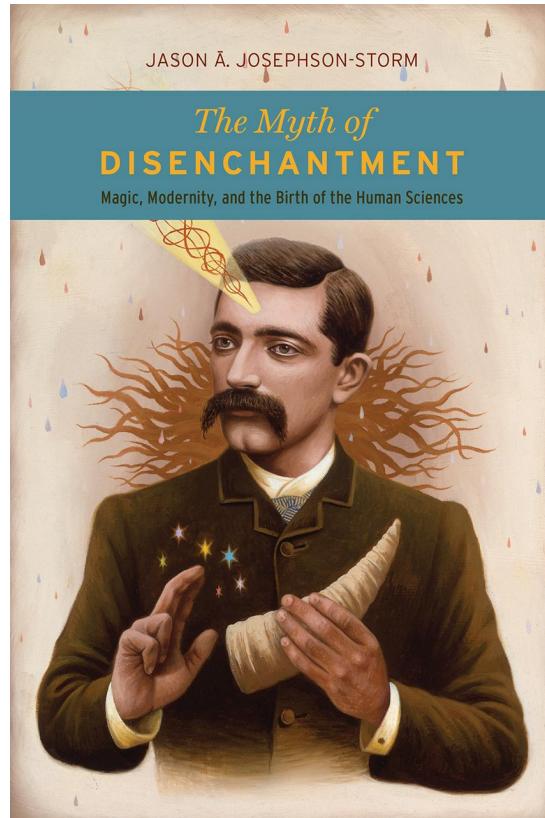
by Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm

A great many theorists have argued that the defining feature of modernity is that people no longer believe in spirits, myths, or magic.

Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm argues that as broad cultural history goes, this narrative is wrong, as attempts to suppress magic have failed more often than they have succeeded. Even the human sciences have been more enchanted than is commonly supposed. But that raises the question: How did a magical, spiritualist, mesmerized Europe ever convince itself that it was disenchanted?

Josephson-Storm traces the history of the myth of disenchantment in the births of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, folklore, psychoanalysis, and religious studies. Ironically, the myth of mythless modernity formed at the very time that Britain, France, and Germany were in the midst of occult and spiritualist revivals. Indeed, Josephson-Storm argues, these disciplines' founding figures were not only aware of, but profoundly enmeshed in, the occult milieu; and it was specifically in response to this burgeoning culture of spirits and magic that they produced notions of a disenchanted world.

By providing a novel history of the human sciences and their connection to esotericism, *The Myth of Disenchantment* dispatches with most widely held accounts of modernity and its break from the premodern past.



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### about JASON Ā. JOSEPHSON-STORM

**About the Author:**

**Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm** has at one time or another: worked for a private investigator, been a Buddhist monk, been shot at, hiked a volcano off the coast of Africa, dined with a British lord, been jumped by a gang in Amsterdam, snowboarded in the Pyrenees, piloted a boat down the canals of Bourgogne, played bass guitar in a punk band, and once he almost died from scarlet fever.

Along the way Josephson-Storm has lived and studied in five countries -- England, France, Germany, Japan, and the USA -- and attended some of the most prestigious universities in the world -- Oxford, Harvard (M.T.S. 2001), and Stanford (Ph.D. in Religious Studies 2006)-- all he hopes without losing his sense of perspective.

Since Fall 2007, Josephson-Storm has been a faculty member at **Williams College**. He is currently **Chair and Associate Professor of Religion**. He teaches about half his courses on East Asian religions/philosophies and the other half on “theory” (including courses on theories and methods in religious studies, continental philosophy, critical theory, and sociology). He has also recently began teaching courses on the history of magic and European intellectual history.

Josephson-Storm is the author of ***The Invention of Religion in Japan***, winner of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Distinguished Book Award. He also recently published ***The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences***, which challenges the most widely held account of modernity and its rupture from the pre-modern past. It shows how the idea that belief in spirits and magic was a necessary victim of modernity -- what Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world” -- was ironically articulated in the shared terrain between spiritualists, sorcerers, and scholars during the very period in which Britain, France, and Germany were in the midst of occult revivals.

From the beginning, however, Josephson-Storm’s reason for studying Japanese religions and European intellectual history, in addition to grappling with his family’s religious background, was to intervene in the conversation in the humanities and social sciences in general. Having completed two works targeted towards religious studies, his upcoming work, ***Absolute Disruption: The Future of Theory After Postmodernism***, attempts to do just that.

## Talking Points

- While many theorists have argued that the defining feature of modernity is the departure of the supernatural - that what makes the modern world modern is that people no longer believe in ghosts, spirits, occult forces, or magic - this book argues that the magic never vanished.
- The idea that people don't believe in magic or spirits is disproven every day. According to several surveys, the majority of people living in Europe and North America still believe in ghosts, witches, psychical powers, magic, astrology, or demons.
- Despite the association between Nazis and the occult, belief in the paranormal can be found on both sides of the political aisle, albeit in different typical forms.
- Though it has often been assumed that the human sciences resulted from the rejection of magic and theology, it turns out that many of Europe's great thinkers - Max Weber, Freud, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, and Benjamin, to name a few - were profoundly enmeshed in the occult milieu.
- It was specifically in relation to this burgeoning culture of spirits and magic, I argue, that European intellectuals gave birth to the myth of a myth-less society - often while being described in terms of rationalization, divine death, and fading magic.

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## PRAISE for THE MYTH OF DISENCHANTMENT

"The implications of this book are vast and potentially revolutionary for the humanities. Josephson-Storm's mastery over the history of western philosophy, his sharp eye for the magical lives of the intellectuals, and his expertise in Japanese religion render his voice uniquely multidimensional, utterly original, and eerily persuasive. I am deeply excited about *The Myth of Disenchantment* and what it portends for both our academic fields and our human futures."

--Jeffrey J. Kripal, author of *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*

"I know of no other study that offers such an ambitious reassessment of the genealogy of the notion of disenchantment. Building on impressive historical research, Josephson-Storm offers innovative readings of foundational social scientific and theoretical texts. This book is a major addition to the critical literature exploring the origins and nature of modernity."

--Randall Styers, author of *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*

## an interview with JASON Ā. JOSEPHSON-STORM

**Let's start at the beginning. What inspired you to write this book? Why did you start to think about this topic?**

One afternoon in March 2011, I was at a Tantric Buddhist tattoo parlor in Kyoto when news came over the radio that a major earthquake had occurred just off the coast of Tohoku. At that time, I was in Japan researching a book tentatively titled "Ghosts and Resurrections: Shifting Boundaries between the Living and the Dead in Modern Japan," but I was in the tattoo parlor getting the finishing touches applied to a set of tattoos. When the reports came in, tattooing stopped and everyone in the parlor gathered in front of the TV to watch the news. It took a long time before we understood the full scale of the tragedy, but as we watched we made small talk. Eventually, I mentioned my research project, and heard anecdotes about protective talismans and ghostly premonitions. One of the Japanese patrons asked me, curiously, if these sorts of things didn't go on in America. Before I could answer, however, another patron (whom I took to be from Scandinavia) jumped in, assuring everyone that Japan was a unique case and more spiritual than the West. He looked to me to confirm the sentiment, which I did my best to refute. But it reinforced something that had been bothering me for some time—by using Japanese history to challenge the thesis that equated modernity and disenchantment, I risked reinforcing clichés about a mystical Orient.

This isolated European was not alone in his assessment. A great many theorists have argued that the defining feature of modernity is that people no longer believe in spirits, myths, or magic. This is often supposed to be true of America and Western Europe if nowhere else.

However, I knew full well that many Americans and Europeans also believed in protective icons and spiritual premonitions. In fact, my grandmother was a famous professor of anthropology who after her retirement went

public with her belief in spirits and ecstatic trances; throughout my childhood I remember scholars, scientists, and artists travelling from Europe, Mexico, and the United States to participate in "shamanic" trance workshops under her leadership. My grandmother inspired me to become a scholar, but I was always skeptical of spirits, and but moreover I was doubly skeptical of the notion that the modern Western world had lost its magic.

I found myself shifting gears and looking at America and Europe through the eyes of an outsider—with the same sort of gaze often leveled at non-Europeans. When I did so I discovered that the sociological data suggested that the majority of Americans believe in ghosts or demons. Indeed, a surprising 73% of Americans have at least one paranormal belief, and while the data is less robust it looks like there are similar belief patterns in Western Europe. At the very least, it seems hard to argue that the "modern West" is straightforwardly disenchanted. So how did we get the notion that modernity means an end of belief in magic and spirits?

The issue becomes even more troubling when you realize that the canonical European theorists (anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and so on) who came up with the various accounts of modernity as disenchantment lived in nineteenth century in the midst of spiritualist, and occult revivals. Magic and séances were on the surface of European culture at the very moment when Europeans came to argue that magic had vanished. So began to ask how did we come to this narrative of modernity? Put differently, how did a magical, spiritualist, mesmerized Europe ever convince itself that it was disenchanted?

**Can you tell us a bit about your research methodology and the process of writing the book?**

After my initial insight, I had a short sabbatical in Germany and I traveled around Western Europe going to various libraries, where I looked through the diaries, letters, and other archival materials of a number of canonical theorists trying to figure out how much they knew about their period's occult and spiritualist revivals. In the end found that a number of influential figures—including Theodor Adorno, Francis Bacon, Walter Benjamin, Rudolf Carnap, Marie Curie, Denis Diderot, Sigmund Freud, G. W. F. Hegel, Max Müller, Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, E. B. Tylor, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Max Weber, and others—were not only aware of, but profoundly enmeshed in the occult milieu, such that the very objects of inquiry, methods, and even the self-definition of many disciplines still bear the marks of this important early encounter with esotericism.

**What are the major conclusions the book makes?**

*Disenchantment is a myth.* The majority of people in the heartland of disenchantment believe in magic or spirits today, and it appears that they did so at the high point of “modernity.” Education does not directly result in disenchantment. Indeed, one might hazard the guess that education allows one to maintain more cognitive dissonance rather than less. Secularization and disenchantment are not correlated. Moreover, it is easy to show that, almost no matter how you define the terms, there are few figures in the history of the academic disciplines that cannot be shown to have had some relation or engagement with what their own epoch saw as magic or animating forces.

The single most familiar story in the history of science is the tale of disenchantment—of magic's exit from the henceforth law-governed world. In

*The Myth of Disenchantment*, I argue that as broad cultural history, this narrative is wrong. Attempts to suppress magic have historically failed more often than they've succeeded.

*Modernity is a myth.* The term *modernity* is itself vague. There can be value in vagueness, but “modernity” rests on an extraordinarily elastic temporality that can be extended heterogeneously and in value-laden ways to different regions and periods. It also picks out different processes such as urbanization, industrialization, globalization or capitalism. Moreover, when described in terms of the de-animation of the world, the end of superstition, the decay of myth, or even the dominance of instrumental reason, modernity signals a societal rupture that never occurred.

**What implications do you think this book might have for religious studies, critical theory, or the humanities as a whole?**

This book hopes to retell the grand narrative of European history. The book is a challenge to most conventional notions of modernity. A whole host of theorists - from critical theorists, to cultural critics, to contemporary policymakers - often share a notion that there is something exceptional about modernity and the thinking it entails. But I argue that this notion is suspect, if not flat-out wrong.

This implies a new way of re-conceptualizing the history of the academic disciplines. For scholars in a range of areas (from religious studies to anthropology to psychology to sociology and modern philosophy), I locate the birth of these disciplines in their actual cultural milieu. I show that founders and canonical thinkers in these areas worked out their various insights inside an occult context, in a social world overflowing with spirits and magic, and how the weirdness of that world generated so much normativity.

## an excerpt from THE MYTH OF DISENCHANTMENT

Paris, 1907. Marie Curie sat in the sumptuous chambers of an apartment on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. As the lights were dimmed, the chemist joined hands with the man sitting next to her, and together they watched the psychic medium across the table begin to shake and mumble, speaking in a strange low voice, overcome by the force of a possessing spirit called “John King.” Eusapia Palladino, as the psychic was called, was believed to be able to make objects move without touching them and to produce “visions of lights or luminescent points, visions of hands or limbs, sometimes in the form of black shadows, sometimes as phosphorescent.” Indeed, as Curie and others later recounted, in that very séance, luminous points began to appear in the darkness, as if crowning Eusapia’s head in a shimmering halo. Slowly, the medium extended her hands and ran them through Marie Curie’s hair, passing on a glowing luminescence. It seemed that the presence of unseen powers had been confirmed.

By all rights, Marie Curie should not have been there. She was in many respects a paragon of the period’s scientific establishment, a hardheaded and critical thinker who had made a number of stunning discoveries. The first woman to win a Nobel Prize, she is one of the very few people in history to win it twice (physics and chemistry). Curie’s presence at a spiritualist séance is a problem because a great many theorists have argued that one of the things that most makes the modern world modern is the rejection of animism— basically, that we have eliminated ghosts, demons, and spirits from the contemporary worldview.<sup>3</sup> While historians of spiritualism know different, it is widely believed that modernizers like Curie had no truck with invisible forces. Most scholars, therefore, would be surprised to learn that she was conjuring ghosts or studying paranormal manifestations as part of her physics research. This book will address not only spiritualism’s allure, but also why that account of modernity as despiritualization is itself a myth.

It is tempting to imagine that Curie wanted to believe in the spectral persistence of the souls of the dead because of her recent widowhood. After all, her husband, Pierre, had passed away in April 1906, and her diaries from the period frequently expressed her profound longing to communicate with him. But this was not the first séance Marie Curie had attended, and indeed the Curies had engaged in psychical research together before his sudden death.

For three years, starting in 1905, some of France’s most famous scientists had assembled in apartments and laboratories in Paris to study this particular Italian spirit medium— Eusapia Palladino. In addition to the Curies, others often in attendance were the celebrated physiologist Jacques- Arsène d’Arsonval, the eminent psychiatrist Gilbert Ballet, the aristocratic doctor Count Arnaud de Gramont, and three future Nobel Prize winners— the physicist Jean Baptiste Perrin, the physiologist Charles Richet, and the philosopher Henri Bergson. The French were not the only ones interested in Eusapia; from 1872 until her death in 1918, her powers were tested by teams of researchers in England, Italy, Poland, Germany, Russia, and the United States. The paranormal researchers who investigated Eusapia were not marginal eccentrics, but the cutting edge of the period’s academic establishment. Yet these researchers were exploring areas that were often marked out by their contemporaries as occult, if not downright magical. They did so not as a legacy of medieval “superstitions,” nor generally as a way to overturn science, but rather as a means to extend its borders.

Not everyone who met with Eusapia was a believer in the powers of the beyond; some were convinced she was a charlatan, but others came to grant that something extraordinary

happened in those darkened rooms. In Paris one could find the full spectrum— from skeptics to spiritualist believers to those who preferred to explain the sessions in terms of previously unrecognized forms of energy. Bergson, for example, began with serious doubts, but ended up producing a paranormally informed philosophy and even becoming president of the British Society for Psychical Research in 1913. This is perhaps less surprising for a philosopher famous for formulating *élan vital*, and one whose sister Moina Mathers (née Mina Bergson) was a cofounder of one of the period's most famous magical organizations, the Hermetic Order the Golden Dawn. But other figures whose professions were more conventionally scientific were also affected by their experiences with Eusapia.

In one of the last letters before his death (addressed to Louis Georges Gouy, April 14, 1906), Pierre Curie remarked, “We have had several more séances with the medium Eusapia Palladino (we already had sessions with her last summer). The result is that these phenomena really exist and it is no longer possible for me doubt them. It is incredible but it is so; and it is impossible to deny it after the sessions, which we performed under perfectly controlled conditions.” He added: “In my opinion, there is here a whole domain of completely new facts and physical states of space about which we have had no conception.” While Marie lacked some of her husband’s enthusiasm, she remarked in French in a letter to a friend on April 16, 1906, “We recently attended a few séances with Eusapia, some of which have seemed very convincing. It is a matter of the greatest interest.”<sup>11</sup> In a Polish letter to a friend, however, she was less guarded, declaring, “Personally, I am quite willing to accept the existence of unusual powers in mediums such as Eusapia or Ms. Stanisława [Tomczyk].” Even the psychologist William James— although he had not witnessed Eusapia firsthand— asserted, “That her phenomena probably are genuine seems to me established.”

The point here is not to mock William James and the Curies for their gullibility, much less to advocate on their authority that mediums really did once channel the dead. Indeed, our main business is not to discuss physics or spirits as such, but rather to provide a cultural and intellectual history of social scientists and philosophers. In so doing, I challenge one conventional notion of modernity and suggest that we should be less surprised than we usually are to find scientists of all stripes keeping company with magicians; that reason does not eliminate “superstition” but piggybacks upon it; that mechanism often produces vitalism; and that often, in a single room, we can find both séance and science. The single most familiar story in the history of science is the tale of disenchantment— of magic’s exit from the henceforth law-governed world. I am here to tell you that as broad cultural history, this narrative is wrong. Attempts to suppress magic have historically failed more often than they’ve succeeded. It is unclear to me that science necessarily deanimates nature. In fact, I will argue à la Bruno Latour that we have never been disenchanted. And for those readers who have already suspected the persistence of magic in modernity, I will trace the genealogy of the myth of disenchantment and how it came to function as a regulative ideal.