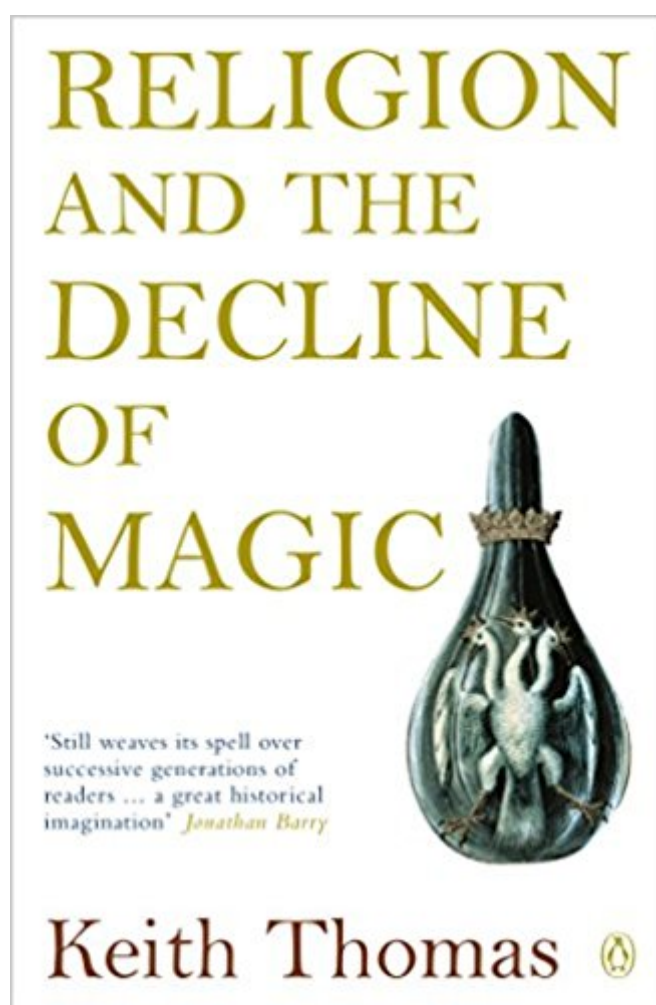


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Religion And The Decline Of Magic: Studies In Popular Beliefs In Sixteenth And Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History)



Synopsis

Witchcraft, astrology, divination, and every kind of popular magic flourished in England during the 16th and 17th centuries, from the belief that a blessed amulet could prevent the assaults of the Devil to the use of the same charms to recover stolen goods. At the same time the Protestant Reformation attempted to take the magic out of religion, and scientists were developing new explanations of the universe. Keith Thomas's classic analysis of beliefs held on every level of English society begins with the collapse of the medieval Church and ends with the changing intellectual atmosphere around 1700, when science and rationalism began to challenge the older systems of belief.

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Customer Reviews

"Monumental. . . with a living treasure on each page, and probably the book that, in my whole life, I've pressed on other people most energetically. (Selected people, of course. They have to care for history, and they need a sense of wonder and a sense of fun.)" — Hilary Mantel, *New York Times*

Keith Thomas is a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. He was formerly President of Corpus Christi College and, before that, Professor of Modern History and Fellow of St John's College. He was knighted in 1988 for services to the study of history.

Thirty-five years ago Keith Thomas made a considerable contribution to the historical literature on religion and magic in England from the medieval period to around 1700. Whether or not one agrees with all of his conclusions, historians today can no longer treat these topics without reference to Thomas. Thomas's central argument revolves around the shifting interactions between religion and magic and the emergent rationalism that displaced magic and tempered religious belief. However, no authority or sectarian group completely purged magic from English religious or popular beliefs. The vast majority of the book focuses on the epic battle waged between religion and magic. Thomas recounts attempts by the medieval Church in England to control the blurred line between religion and magic. The medieval Church's accommodation with magic gave it the image of possessing "a vast reservoir of magical power." (p. 51) He argues with persuasion that Church officials fought against magic with one hand, while accommodating--perhaps exploiting--magic with the other. Thomas details with vigor Protestant attempts to stamp out magic. The Reformers' opposition to magic was proportional to their degree of antagonism toward the medieval Church. The Anglicans' affinity for Catholic ritual left room for magic. Conversely, Protestants attacked Catholicism just as ardently as they assaulted magic. They relegated sacraments, demystified clerical powers, and eliminated popular festivals. Protestant efforts not only chipped away at magic's appeal; they also created a new concept of religion: one centered on faith rather than practices (p.88)--a feat whose significance was not lost on Thomas. Despite clerical efforts to eradicate it, magic persisted as people continued to seek answers to existential questions, such as sickness and prosperity, beyond Providence. After the Anglicans rejected Catholic paraphernalia for exorcisms and the Protestants eliminated the mechanical efficacy of rituals, only prayer remained as a viable remedy. According to Thomas, "it is no small wonder that the sorcerer's claim...proved more attractive than stern clerical insistence that all must be left" to God. (p. 314) He notes that the absence of protective ecclesiastical magic led to an increase in the number of witch prosecutions. (p. 594, 595) He also suggests that as societal tensions increased between communal generosity and individualism, witchcraft "helped to uphold the traditional obligations of charity and neighborliness." (p. 674) In the final analysis, however, Thomas concludes that "it was the general social importance of religion [not any tangible spiritual value] which enabled it to outlive magic." (p. 766) The battles between the two "practices" left them both bloodied, with rationalism as the real winner. Or as Thomas puts it, "when the Devil was banished to Hell, God himself was confined to working through natural causes." (p. 765) Neither religion nor magic has held primacy in shaping thought since the advent of mechanical philosophy. An alternate title for the book could be Religion, the Decline of Magic, and the Rise of Rationalism. Thomas advances the current understanding of

the interaction of religion, magic, and socio-economic changes through the combination of documentary research and social scientific analysis. He marshals a wealth of primary sources. However, he leans at times on Protestant clergy like Hugh Latimer (p. 51) for medieval Church descriptions and he drafts the magical sections using dismissive sceptic writers like Reginald Scot (p. 624). Thomas's method and detachment falter in certain areas. The extent to which religion reduced magic's hold on the English population remains elusive after 853 pages. Comparing medieval and post-Reformation practitioners and clients of religion and magic could have provided benchmarks by which to assess magic's decline. The lack of some quantitative measure diminished the work's evaluative value. Despite his caveat that it would "be a gross travesty to suggest that the medieval Church deliberately held out to the laity an organized system of magic" (p. 52), Thomas proposed that Church leaders did not "discourage attitudes which might foster popular devotion. If a belief in the magical efficacy of the Host served to make the laity more regular church-goers, then why should it not be tacitly tolerated?" (p. 56) He dismissed Christian prayer as thief-magic, a psychological process that "helped the client know his own mind and gave him the resolution to act accordingly." (p. 138) By the end of the book it is difficult to understand if phrases as "primitive beliefs" (p. 774) refer to magic, religion, or both. Nevertheless, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is so well crafted and its ambition so admirable that the limitations of its method and sourcing do not reduce its utility.

Reading this book is like trying to take a sip from a fire hose. The author makes his points by citing example after example, and in the process establishes in the mind of the reader the certain fact that the world prior to the 17th century - and maybe the 20th century - was completely different from the world that we who live in the First World during the 20th century are blessed to inhabit. That world was, first of all, a world of uncertainty. Diseases were mysterious, plagues were common, pain was endemic and when things got lost there was no newspaper to place "Lost and Found" ads in. People needed and wanted a solution to these problems and the solution was found in magic, which during the later Middle Ages was supported by an alternative to mechanistic philosophy in the form of NeoPlatonism. Magic in this world was unexceptional. Every town had its cunning man or woman who could provide charms against illness or help find a lost item or know what weather would come in the future or provide a love potion or any of the other sundry problems we either accept or have found a mechanistic solution for. Astrology was a kind of rival to magic, but astrologers were consulted on all matters of issues, and it was the rare figure of power who did not have his own consulting astrologer. An astrologer named Lilly was a force of propaganda for the Parliamentary

side of the English Civil War.../"All this can be learned from Lilly's Autobiography. But his unpublished case books and papers throw an even more intimate light upon the connection between astrology and the Independents, Army radicals and sectaries. The nature of these dealings amply disproves any notion that the politicians simply used Lilly as a convenient means of propaganda without believing in the truth of astrology itself. We have already seen how Lilly was consulted by Richard Overton at a crucial stage of his career as a Leveller leader"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith<http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> Magic and astrology were the technology of the age, and competitors for technology.../"The attraction of having one's horoscope cast was not unlike that of undergoing psychoanalysis today. The reward would be a penetrating analysis of the individual's innermost attributes, the qualities which he should develop, and the limitations against which he should be on his guard. Of course the astrologers insisted that the figure cast at a person's nativity could never be more than a guide to the possibilities open to him; it did not mean that he was in the clutch of an ineluctable destiny"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith<http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> Religion - Catholicism - frowned on these magical technologies and provided either formal alternatives to them - in the sacraments, blessings, holy water and other sacramentals, or folk religion was incorporated into the systems of magic. Reading the first part of the book and coming to understand how "magic-haunted" society was raises the obvious question of why witchcraft was so well-tolerated, and why the reaction against witch-craft developed when it did. Thomas offers a number of cogent explanations. The first was that the Reformation eliminated the "counter-magic" that Catholicism provided and left people feeling vulnerable to malicious magic. In addition, the Reformation heightened a concern about the power of the Devil in this world:/"The Reformation did nothing to weaken this concept; indeed it almost certainly strengthened it. Protestantism was a response to a deep conviction of human sin, a sense of powerlessness in the face of evil. Luther often spoke as if the whole world of visible reality and the flesh belonged to the Devil, the Lord of this world. 3 In the long run it may be that the Protestant emphasis on the single sovereignty of God, as against the Catholic concept of a graded hierarchy of spiritual powers, helped to dissolve the world of spirits by referring all supernatural acts to a single source. But if so it was a slow development"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith<http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> The second was that during the later Middle-Ages, the concept drifted in from Europe that witchcraft was related to the worship of Satan. Witches were not

persecuted for being witches - there were good witches everywhere - but for being malevolent and malicious. Interestingly, Thomas points out that a reputation for witchcraft was a kind of protector of the poor and outcast. Witches came from the poorer classes and bad witchcraft was felt to spring from mistreatment. The poorer classes and beggars were felt to feel mistreatment when their social betters were not generous. The tension between generosity and prudence might have left people in a sense of anxiety over witchcraft, and, also, stimulated generosity.//"

Refusal of alms was the most characteristic way in which the witch's supposed victims had failed in their obligations towards her; many of the accused persons, as Scot pointed out, were women in the habit of going from house to house, and from door to door for a pot full of milk, yeast, drink, pottage, or some such relief, without which they could hardly live. 94 But there were other possible sources of conflict. Witch cases could arise after disputes over gleaning, common land, rights of way, or trespass . 95 Witches were accused of retaliation against such local tyrants as the village constable who pressed their sons to be soldiers, or the overseer of the poor who put their children into compulsory service"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith

<http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> And: // "It was no accident that Ruth Osborne, who was lynched for witchcraft by a Hertfordshire mob in 1751, had been previously refused buttermilk by the farmer whose subsequent mysterious illness provoked the accusation against her. The majority of other informal witch accusations recorded in the eighteenth, nineteenth and even twentieth centuries conform to the same old special pattern of charity evaded, followed by misfortune incurred"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith

<http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> Also, we might look at the persecutors of witches as being crazy or ignorant, but, in fact, people believed in magic and some people attempted to make malevolent magic happen: // "The practice of maleficent magic was therefore no mere figment of contemporary imagination. The physical survival of cursing tablets and magical formulae testifies, if proof were needed, to the undoubted existence of techniques by which men tried to do occult harm to their enemies. It is also beyond doubt that a large, though unmeasurable, proportion of those formally accused of witchcraft during the period had manifested some kind of malevolence towards their neighbours, although they had not necessarily practised any actual magic. Often, as we shall see, there would be a grumble, a muttered curse, or a thinly veiled threat to provide evidence for their malignity"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas,

Keith <http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> Thomas' gives credit for the decline of belief in magic to religion. The belief in magic declined before the mechanistic revolution of the Enlightenment produced its great boons to humanity. Religion provided a belief in a single, all-encompassing providence that worked with regularity and ordinary predictability: "This brings us to the essential problem. Why was it that magic did not keep pace with changing social circumstances? Why did its sphere become more limited, even as the English economy was expanding into new domains? For the paradox is that in England magic lost its appeal before the appropriate technical solutions had been devised to take its place. It was the abandonment of magic which made possible the upsurge of technology, not the other way round. Indeed, as Max Weber stressed, magic was potentially one of the most serious obstructions to the rationalisation of economic life" *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (Penguin History) by Thomas,

Keith <http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> "The technological primacy of Western civilization, it can be argued, owes a sizeable debt to the fact that in Europe recourse to magic was to prove less ineradicable than in other parts of the world. 61 For this, intellectual and religious factors have been held primarily responsible. The rationalist tradition of classical antiquity blended with the Christian doctrine of a single all-directing Providence to produce what Weber called the disenchantment of the world. The disenchantment of the world, the conception of an orderly and rational universe, in which effect follows cause in predictable manner. A religious belief in order was a necessary prior assumption upon which the subsequent work of the natural scientists was to be founded. It was a favourable mental environment which made possible the triumph of technology" *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (Penguin History) by Thomas,

Keith <http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> This had the effect of creating a space for the rise of science and, later, technology. Thomas also provides insights into many areas that I found interesting. Here are two: The first had to do with the ghost in Hamlet. Catholicism, apparently, did not have a conceptual problem with the idea of ghosts as being those in purgatory with some obligation on Earth to work out. Protestantism strongly opposed the notion and possibility of ghosts, chalking up ghostly apparitions to demons. I had previously heard that the Ghost in Hamlet reflected an English discomfort with the forgotten dead in Purgatory, but Thomas points out that the Ghost in Hamlet easily fits into the demonic apparition motif: "The same dilemma is brilliantly shown by Dr Dover Wilson to have been posed by the ghost of Hamlet's father. Much of the drama of the play's first act hinges on the uncertainty of the ghost's status. Marcellus regards it as a demon. Horatio begins as

an out-and-out sceptic. Even Hamlet himself is uncertain. 11 Despite the truth of the tale the ghost had to tell, every firm Protestant in the audience would have been justified in regarding the apparition as a devil in human form; and, in view of the ultimately catastrophic results of his appearance, we might add that this could have been Shakespeare's own view"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith <http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E> Second, not surprisingly, it seems that numbers of witches burned - hundreds of thousands, by some accounts - has been overstated:/"The most acute period was 1645-1647, when the campaign led by Matthew Hopkins and his associates resulted in the execution of several hundred witches in Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and neighbouring counties. There were other notable trials, in Essex in 1582 (involving fourteen persons), and in Lancashire in 1612 (twenty-one persons) and 1633 (twenty). Such causes attracted great attention at the time, for contemporaries, like some modern historians, were dependent for their knowledge of the subject upon the chance appearance of a pamphlet account of a notable trial, and unacquainted with the routine prosecution disclosed by the assize records"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith <http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9E>/"There were five other assize circuits in the country as well as a large number of independent jurisdictions, so these figures must be multiplied considerably if total figures for the whole country are to be inferred. C. L'Estrange Ewen, to whose pioneering investigations all students are permanently indebted, guessed the total number of executions for witchcraft throughout the period to be something under 1,000. 44 It is difficult to suggest an alternative figure"

Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England (Penguin History) by Thomas, Keith <http://www..com/dp/B002RI9L9EA> high number - the number of Catholic martyrs was around 264 during the same approximate time period - but not the kind of numbers one would expect if millions or hundreds of thousands were killed in Europe. This book was written in 1974, but it is excellently well-sourced and footnoted and very well organized. On the Kindle, the text portion takes up 44% of the book, with the balance being footnotes.

Be prepared for a long, difficult read if you start this book and read it to its conclusion. However, if you pay attention and finish it you will know more about the temper of the times of the 16th and 17th century and the surrounding times in England than you ever thought possible. The value to your future analysis of contemporary society is substantial. Not a book for the faint of heart.

This is one of those few books that come along in your life time that can truly be termed a Classic and Indispensable. Learned, profound, wise and meticulous to a fault. Every page contains a nugget of knowledge that made me rethink my understanding of England and gave me confidence in my poor ability to articulate my thoughts in a confident, reasonably informed manner. I'm in awe of the author's research and knowledge base and grateful that he had the time and the writing skills to communicate such a diverse, complicated subject in so easily digestible a manner.

Furnished info that I had never really thought about in this context. Reading this as a Catholic, it opened my eyes to the Reformation and the way people looked at religion and what they thought about it in their daily lives.

A lot of historic information that will surprise you when you compared against superstitions you heard in your family or are still practiced. Also you will learn a lot about the pagan roots of the largest religions today. Finally you will confirm that our ancestors set basic customs that have evolved with times and you can end up knowing that nothing is new under the sky.

A classic of the historiography of early Modern England that should read by those interested in the history of popular religion and scientific thinking...

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