History of magic in Western worldviews

The Western conception of magic is rooted in the ancient Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman heritage. The tradition took further shape in northern Europe during the medieval and early modern period before spreading to other parts of the globe through European exploration and colonialism after 1500. The view of Western civilization as a story of progress includes the magic-religion-science paradigm that traces the "rise" and "decline" of magic and then religion, along with the final triumph of science—a model now challenged by scholars. Moreover, the very origins of the word *magic* raise questions about ways in which one person's religion is another person's magic, and vice versa.

Ancient Mediterranean world

The root word for *magic* (Greek: *mageia*; Latin: *magia*) derives from the Greek term *magoi*, which refers to a Median tribe in Persia and their religion, Zoroastrianism. The Greco-Roman tradition held that magicians possessed arcane or secret knowledge and the ability to channel power from or through any of the polytheistic deities, spirits, or ancestors of the ancient pantheons. Indeed, many of the traditions associated with magic in the Classical world derive from a fascination with ancient Middle Eastern beliefs and are concerned with a need for countermagic against sorcery. Spells uttered by sorcerers and addressed to gods, to fire, to salt, and to grain are recorded from Mesopotamia and Egypt. These texts also reveal the practice of necromancy, invoking the spirits of the dead, who were regarded as the last defense against evil magic. Greco-Egyptian papyruses from the 1st to the 4th century CE, for example, include magical recipes involving animals and animal substances, along with instructions for the ritual preparations necessary to ensure the efficacy of the spells. Divination took many forms—from the Etruscan art of haruspicina (reading entrails of animal sacrifices) to the

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Roman practice of augury (interpreting the behaviour of birds)—and was widely practiced as a means of determining propitious times to engage in specific activities; it often played a role in political decision making. Ancient Roman society was particularly concerned with sorcery and countersorcery, contests associated with the development of competitive new urban classes whose members had to rely on their own efforts in both material and magical terms to defeat their rivals and attain success.



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Ambivalence toward magic carried into the early Christian era of the Roman Empire and its subsequent heirs in Europe and Byzantium. In the Gospel According to Matthew, the Magi who appeared at the birth of Jesus Christ were both Persian foreigners of Greco-Roman conception and wise astrologers. As practitioners of a foreign religion, they seemed to validate the significance of Jesus' birth. However, *magus*, the singular form of *magi*, has a negative connotation in the New Testament in the account of Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–25), the magician who attempted to buy the miraculous power of the disciples of Christ. In medieval European Christian legends, his story developed into a dramatic contest between true religion, with its divine miracles, and false demonic magic, with its illusions. Nonetheless, belief in the reality of occult powers and the need for Christian counterrituals persisted, for example, in the Byzantine belief in the "evil eye" cast by the envious, which was thought to be demonically inspired and from which Christians needed protection through divine remedies.

Medieval Europe

During the period of Europe's conversion to Christianity (*c.* 300–1050), magic was strongly identified with paganism, the label Christian missionaries used to demonize the religious beliefs of Celtic, Germanic, and Scandinavian peoples. Church leaders simultaneously appropriated and Christianized native practices and beliefs. For example, medicinal remedies found in monastic manuscripts combined Christian formulas and rites with Germanic folk rituals to empower natural ingredients to cure ailments caused by poisons, elf-attack, demonic possession, or other invisible forces. Another Christianized practice, bibliomancy (divination through the random selection

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of a biblical text), was codified in the 11th-century *Divinatory Psalter* of the Orthodox Slavs. Although co-opted and condemned by Christian leaders of this period, magic survived in a complex relationship with the dominant religion. Similar acculturation processes occurred in later conversions in Latin America and Africa, where indigenous beliefs in spiritual forces and magical practices coexist, sometimes uneasily, with Christian theology.

In high medieval Europe (*c.* 1050–1350), the battle between religion and magic occurred as the struggle against heresy, the church's label for perverted Christian belief. Magicians, like heretics, were believed to distort or abuse Christian rites to do the Devil's work. By the 15th century, belief in the reality of human pacts with the Devil and the magical powers acquired through them contributed to the persecution of those accused of actually harming others with their magic. Also in the high Middle Ages the demonization of Muslims and Jews contributed to the suspicion of the "other." Marginal groups were routinely accused of ritual baby-killing. In lurid accounts of the "blood libel," Jews were charged with stealing Christian children for sacrifice. Similar accusations were made against witches by Christians and against Christians by the ancient Romans.

Although magic was widely condemned during the Middle Ages, often for political or social reasons, the proliferation of magic formulas and books from the period indicates its widespread practice in various forms. Richard Kieckhefer has identified two major categories of magic: "low" magic includes charms (prayers, blessings, adjurations), protective amulets and talismans, sorcery (the misuse of medical and protective magic), divination and popular astrology, trickery, and medical magic through herbs and animals; and "high," or intellectual, magic, includes more learned forms of astrology, astral magic, alchemy, books of secrets, and necromancy. There is also evidence of courtly interest in magic, particularly that involving automatons and gemstones. Moreover, magic served as a literary device of the time, notably the presence of Merlin in the Arthurian romances. Although medieval European magic retained its sense of

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otherness by borrowing from Jewish practices and Arabic scientific sources such as the astral magic manual *Picatrix*, it also drew from the mainstream Christian tradition. Necromancy, for example, used Latin Christian rites and formulas to compel the spirits of the dead to obey.

Late medieval and early modern Europe

By the late Middle Ages (*c.* 1350–1450) and into the early modern period (*c.* 1450–1750), magic was regarded as part of a widespread and dangerously antisocial demonic cult that included the condemned practices of sorcery, necromancy, and witchcraft. Accused heretics, witches, and magicians were subject to inquisitions designed to uncover these cult connections and to destroy the means of transmission (e.g., the burning of condemned books and/or the "guilty" parties). The influential manual *Malleus maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches," 1486) by Jacob Sprenger and Henry Krämer describes witchcraft in great detail (e.g, the witches' sabbath, a midnight assembly in fealty to the Devil); moreover, this oft-reprinted volume is responsible for the misogynist association of witchcraft with women that becomes the dominant characteristic in the early modern period. This conspiracy theory of demonic magic contributed to the early modern "witch craze" that occurred at a time of growing tension between magic, religion, and nascent science.

Nonetheless, despite the persecution of "black" magic and its alleged practitioners, forms of "white" magic persisted in Europe on the boundaries between magic, mysticism, and emerging empiricism. During the Renaissance there was renewed interest in ancient Middle Eastern practices, Neoplatonic mysticism, and Arabic texts on alchemy and astrology. Pico della Mirandola sought hidden knowledge in Jewish Kabbala, a mystical practice for unlocking the divine secrets contained in written and unwritten Hebrew Scriptures. Marsilio Ficino studied astral magic and the power of music to channel cosmic influences, while Giordano Bruno explored the mystical traditions of Hermeticism, based on works of the legendary Alexandrian prophet of the

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1st–3rd century Hermes Trismegistus. Although generally tolerated because their practices were perceived to be within the main Judaic and Christian Hermetic tradition, practitioners of alchemy were sometimes considered to be evil magicians who acquired their knowledge through a pact with the Devil (as in the Faust legends). When magical activities of intellectual dilettantes proved, or appeared, to be antisocial, the results were more often put down to simple trickery—as in the case of the 18th-century charlatan Alessandro, conte di Cagliostro (Giuseppe Balsamo).

European traditions and the modern world

The European fascination with the magical traditions of the ancient Middle East was extended to those of East and South Asia when Europeans made contact with these regions in the early modern period. Orientalism, as literary and cultural critic Edward Said labeled this phenomenon, has its roots in the sense of the "other" found in the earliest definitions of magic (notably the Magi as Persian foreigners) and in the Renaissance penchant for Egyptian, Hebrew, and Arabic materials. Intrigued by the exotic otherness of Eastern societies, modern European philosophers experimented with the progressive model of magic-science-religion. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for example, viewed 19th-century India as an immature civilization, in part because Hindu consciousness lacked the categories of logic Hegel valued.

A popular “scientific” worldview prevails in modern Western societies that suggests the triumph of human reason. Enlightenment rationalism and the scientific revolution—ironically rooted in Renaissance experiments in magic and motivated in part by Reformation pragmatism—led to the modern triumph of scientific reasoning over magic, evident, for example, in 19th-century exposés of magic tricksters as charlatans. Notably, spirit rappers, mediums who “conversed” with spirits who replied by knocking on a table, were easily exposed as the ones doing the knocking. Modern popular magic has appeared in the realm of entertainment, generally as a plot device in stories and movies, as tricks aimed at children, and as mysterious sleight-of-hand

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illusions in magic shows that delight the audience's sense perceptions and challenge their reasoning ability. The fascination with occult knowledge and mystical powers derived from nonmainstream or foreign sources persists in the West in astrological charts in newspapers, theories of interplanetary aliens and government conspiracies to hide them, occult rituals in some New Age religions, and interest in traditional practices that have an esoteric flavour, such as *feng shui* (geomancy, the traditional Asian practice of aligning graves, homes, and temples with cosmic forces). This persistence suggests, in part, the impact of globalization on postmodern worldviews challenging the dominance of a strictly scientific mode of rationality.

Globalization of the magic concept

Western conceptions of magic, religion, and science were exported to other parts of the globe in the modern period by traders, conquerors, missionaries, anthropologists, and historians. European travelers in the 16th–19th centuries functioned as primitive ethnographers whose written observations are invaluable historical resources. However, their accounts, often coloured by their Judeo-Christian assumptions about religion versus magic, illuminate how indigenous peoples were treated as "children" to be educated or, in the case of some conquerors, as subhuman races to be enslaved. During the latter part of the 19th century, anthropologists began to analyze magic and its part in the evolution of the world's religions. Their work was characterized by a fundamental distinction rooted in the magic-religion-science evolutionary model: the world is divided between historical, literate urbanized cultures, or "civilizations" (for example, the ancient traditions of East and South Asia) and nonliterate, tribal archaic, or "primitive," societies (such as those found in parts of Africa, the Americas, and Oceania). Historians viewed complex societies characterized by urbanization, centralization, and written traditions as more advanced and measured their progress as civilizations according to the evolutionary model. Nomadic, tribal, agricultural, or nonurbanized societies with strong oral traditions were often perceived by early European observers as

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developmentally stagnant people without history. While these views are no longer accepted, their residual effect is still felt in the way magic, religion, and science are conceptualized. Anthropologists of religion traditionally distinguished between the "religion" practiced by the world's main faiths, which often marginalize magic as superstition, and the beliefs of small nonliterate societies in which "magic" may in fact be central to religious belief. Here the distinction between religion and magic seems unfounded. Indeed, as some postcolonial societies endeavour to distance themselves from Western logic, ancient religious traditions are pivotal to the reassertion of cultural identity and autonomy. West African Vodun (Vodou), which spread to the Caribbean, the Americas, and elsewhere, is one example of an indigenous religious practice that is tied to cultural identity in art, music, and literature and used subversively as a rallying point for postcolonial resistance to Western modes of rationality.

World cultures

The Western concept of magic as a set of beliefs, values, and practices that are not fully religious or scientific does not find its equivalent in non-Western languages and cultures; conversely, concepts found in other cultures may be untranslatable into English or a Western framework. For example, Hawaiian historian David Malo (*c.* 1793–1853), discussing Christianity and traditional Hawaiian religion, found *ho`omana* (to make, to do, or to imbue with supernatural, divine, or miraculous power) the closest translation for English *religion*, contrary to its characterization by Westerners as a magical component in Polynesian beliefs. Furthermore, a modern Japanese dictionary uses a transliteration, *majikku*, for the English word *magic*. It also uses the English word *magic* to translate several Japanese words beginning with *ma-*, the kanji character representing a vengeful spirit of the dead (in East Asian folk belief, an ancestor not cared for properly; in Buddhist cosmology, an evil demonic figure). While superficially similar to the Christian notion of magic as demonic, the cosmologies regarding these demons differ significantly. Moreover, *ma-* does not have the range of meanings that *magic* has in Western thought.

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On the other hand, specific practices identified as magic—e.g., divination, spells, spirit mediation—are found worldwide, even if the word *magic* is not. For example, in China various practices such as divination through oracle bones, offerings to dead ancestors, and *feng shui* can be classified as either magic, religion, or science, but it is questionable whether these categories have any validity in Chinese thought; rather these so-called magical practices are an intrinsic part of the worldviews expressed in China's main religious and philosophical systems (ancestor worship, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). In modern China, some communities deal with crisis by combining seemingly contradictory practices—including supplication and coercion of gods, appeals to ancestral spirits, folk cures, and modern inoculations. Such syncretism has been common in East Asia; notably, in 6th-century Japan the native nature worship of Shinto blended with imported forms of Buddhism without the kind of conflict that occurred during the conversion of Europe to Christianity. In modern East Asia, conflict between magic, religion, and science introduced by Western concepts of magic occurs alongside a strong tradition of syncretism that blends empirical science with practices that Westerners often perceive as unscientific magic or religious superstition.

Asian religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism teach that material life is illusory. This mode of rationality focuses on understanding the principles and spiritual forces that lie behind physical experience. Consequently, adepts in these traditions who have achieved a level of understanding of these cosmic forces often appear to have the ability to manipulate physical reality in ways that seem magical. The point of demonstrations by street magicians and snake charmers in India is to show the illusory quality of material reality in order to draw attention to the universal, timeless, and cosmic. Purposeful deception in magic is thus used to illustrate the deceptiveness of human apprehensions of reality. The mystical component of magic is also clear in Tantra and other esoteric and nonconformist sects of Hinduism or Buddhism, which use mystical words, symbols, and diagrams in their rituals. Whether these practices are magic or religion depends upon one's point of view.

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Postcolonial points of views

Anthropological and sociological studies of modern nonliterate societies in the Americas, Oceania, and Africa have given rise to new global terminology. Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, some sociologists and anthropologists turned the tables on earlier scholarship by applying the methods used for examining extant nonliterate ("primitive") societies to literate, urban societies of the past, which previously had been evaluated by the criteria reserved for the study of "civilizations." For example, the phenomenon of shamanism and the word *shaman*, as defined by Mircea Eliade (1907–86) in his exploration of ecstatic states, has been applied not only to "primitive" cultures but to premodern Christian Europe. Likewise the term *mana* ("power"), appropriated from Melanesian and Polynesian cultures by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), has been widely applied to magical practices in historical civilizations, including that of Classical Rome.

History of magic theories

Foundations

Because of the impact of anthropological theory on the study of magic, its development and history bear reviewing. The first important figure in this line of inquiry was Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, whose *Primitive Culture* (1871) regarded magic as a "pseudo-science" in which the "savage" postulated a direct cause-effect relationship between the magical act and the desired outcome. Tylor regarded magic as "one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind," but he did not approach it as superstition or heresy. Instead he studied it as a phenomenon based on the "symbolic principle of magic," a scheme of thought founded on a rational process of analogy. He also realized that magic and religion are parts of a total system of thought. Although he believed that magic and animistic beliefs became less prevalent in the later stages of

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history, he did not view magic and religion as alternative stages in the evolutionary development of mankind.

That conclusion would be left for Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890), in which he ordered magic, religion, and science in a grandiose evolutionary scheme. Magic preceded religion because, according to Frazer, the former was logically more simple. This notion, however, was a based on his erroneous assumption that the Australian Aborigines, examples of a "primitive" people, believed in magic but not in religion.

Sociological theories

Another line of theorists, including sociologists Durkheim and Mauss, widened the discussion by defining magic in terms of its social function. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim argued that magical rites involved the manipulation of sacred objects by the magician on behalf of individual clients; the socially cohesive significance of religious rites proper (by priests) was therefore largely lacking. Durkheim's views were furthered by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown in the *The Andaman Islanders* (1922) and to a lesser extent by Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and *Magic, Science and Religion* (1925). Radcliffe-Brown posited that the function of magic was to express the social importance of the desired event, while Malinowski regarded magic as directly and essentially concerned with the psychological needs of the individual.

Subsequent studies of the working of systems of magic, especially in Africa and Oceania, built upon the work of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown along with that of Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (1937). In his seminal book, Evans-Pritchard demonstrated that magic is an integral part of religion and culture used to explain events that cannot otherwise be understood or controlled. The Zande of South Sudan accept magic, together with witchcraft and oracles, as a

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normal part of nature and society. These phenomena form a closed logical system, each part of which buttresses the other and provides a rational system of causation.

Psychological theories

These anthropological and sociological approaches focused on magic as a social phenomenon, but the role of individual psychology was implicit in the views of Tylor and Frazer and brought out more in the work of Malinowski, who frequently offered psychological explanations for belief in magic. Sigmund Freud's influential view of magic as the earliest phase in the development of religious thought (*Totem and Taboo*, 1918) followed Frazer's model and posited an essential similarity between the thought of children, neurotics, and "savages." According to Freud, all three assumed that wish or intention led automatically to the fulfillment of the desired end. This reductionist view, based on outmoded notions about "primitive" cultures, was revised as the result of new field research. Although Claude Lévi-Strauss also initially equated these three groups, he later modified this view in his analysis of the work of Mauss, which focuses on the structural linguistics of terms such as *mana* that are deployed in the study of magic. His work, therefore, laid the foundation for later deconstructions of the concept of magic.

Comparative religions

The rise of the study of comparative religion led to new theories that accounted for both world religions and localized belief systems. The work of Eliade, including his study of shamanism, is an important and influential example of this approach, as is that of Ninian Smart, who devised a seven-dimensional (experiential, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, ritual, social, and material) worldview analysis for cross-cultural comparison that can be applied to different belief systems, whether called magic or religion. Likewise, Judaic scholar Jacob Neusner suggested the neutral rubric "modes of rationality" to avoid pejorative comparisons between systems of thought otherwise classified as magic, religion, science, or philosophy. The broader base established by the comparative

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religions approach avoids the difficulties of distinguishing urban literate from nonurban nonliterate societies and the perils of the magic-religion-science progression.

Postmodern dialogue

Postmodern scholarship continues to challenge older anthropological notions. The work of such anthropologists as Victor Turner (1920–83), Clifford Geertz, and Marshall Sahlins has had a wide impact on the social sciences and humanities. Central to the challenge to the traditional magic-religion-science paradigm was *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (1990), in which Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah deconstructs the European history of the progress model and the work of anthropologists from Tylor forward. Other anthropologists have questioned the model of the rise and decline of magic in European thought articulated in Keith Thomas's groundbreaking *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), a study of early modern England, and Valerie Flint's *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (1991). Notably, anthropologist Hildred Geertz challenged Thomas's universalized conceptions of religion and magic, and scholars have questioned the rise and fall model by suggesting that the terminology is culture-specific and the historical circumstances much more complex than the simple pattern presented. These cross-disciplinary debates, along with the rejection of the Western magic-religion-science paradigm, have contributed to more sensitive treatments of magical practices in diverse societies.

Conclusion

The study of magic as a distinct cultural phenomenon has a long history in anthropological, sociological, and historical studies. Although some distinctions between magic and other religious or scientific activities may be useful, magic cannot be studied in isolation as it once was. Practices classified as magic represent essentially an aspect or reflection of the worldview held by a particular people at a particular point in

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their own historical development. Magic, like religion and science, is thus a part of a culture's total worldview.

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