



Religion and the Decline of Magic

Keith Thomas

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Astrology, witchcraft, magical healing, divination, ancient prophecies, ghosts, and fairies were taken very seriously by people at all social and economic levels in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Helplessness in the face of disease and human disaster helped to perpetuate this belief in magic and the supernatural. As Keith Thomas shows, England during these years resembled in many ways today's "underdeveloped areas." The English population was exceedingly liable to pain, sickness, and premature death; many were illiterate; epidemics such as the bubonic plague plowed through English towns, at times cutting the number of London's inhabitants by a sixth; fire was a constant threat; the food supply was precarious; and for most diseases there was no effective medical remedy.

In this fascinating and detailed book, Keith Thomas shows how magic, like the medieval Church, offered an explanation for misfortune and a means of redress in times of adversity. The supernatural thus had its own practical utility in daily life. Some forms of magic were challenged by the Protestant Reformation, but only with the increased search for scientific explanation of the universe did the English people begin to abandon their recourse to the supernatural.

Science and technology have made us less vulnerable to some of the hazards which confronted the people of the past. Yet *Religion and the Decline of Magic* concludes that "if magic is defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it."

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