



Religion and the Decline of Magic

By Keith Thomas

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Religion and the Decline of Magic By Keith Thomas

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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Editorial Review

Review

"One of the three or four outstanding pieces of historical writing to have appeared in the last thirty years."--
Paul Slack, *History Today*

"Thomas's book, so formidable in its scope and so brilliant in its insights, is a major historical achievement as a result of which the period will never look quite the same again."--*Economic History Review*

About the Author

Sir Keith Thomas is President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and President of the British Academy. His works include *Man and the Natural World*, and other writings on the social and cultural history of early modern England. He is also the editor of the *Past Masters* and *Oxford Studies in Social History* series.

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