

Religion and the Decline of Magic

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What is it in religion for the average person? Does not religion have to have applications to be interesting? And if so what kind of applications?

Every organism is thrust into an hostile environment. The sole purpose of existence is existence itself. It is referred to as survival. It does not need to be conscious. The test of survival is survival itself. It is tautological. With man the struggle to survive is conscious, or at least some aspects of it are. Some aspects of his environment he has control over. That means he can proceed in what we would call a rational manner. Other aspects are beyond his grasp, but nevertheless he has to handle them. We are talking about the mysterious, seemingly random events that are thrown in his way and obstruct his progress. We are talking about the weather, which influences his crops, diseases which hamper him, maybe even kill him. We are talking about stolen and lost goods that need to be retrieved. Those are practical issues that make up the everyday life of most people throughout the ages. True modern man has even more things to worry about, surrounded as he is by mechanical and electronic gadgets, of which in general he has no understanding, but whose smooth functioning has become essential for him in order to smoothly survive the day.

What to do with the things and events beyond your control? To man there is an obvious sensual and palpable world, in short a world of the senses, a world he may manipulate and move around in. But the inexplicable forces him to posit another world, an invisible one, which nevertheless influences his quotidian. This is a world of spirits, to be feared and to be appeased and maybe even manipulated. To deal with that world yonder is to engage in magic. The machinations of magic are inexplicable and beyond reason and hence they cannot be fathomed and constructed by man, they need to be handed down to him. They do not appeal to reason but to authority. And the great authority is the past out of which we have all sprung, the source of everything. The magic world is inscrutable and powerful, able to transcend the laws of the sensual world. Such transgressions are known as miracles, powerful shortcuts to effect desired ends. Thus Religion and Magic are closely related, some would even say that they are identical, and thus ultimately nothing but superstition. This is a natural but also a somewhat simplistic view, because as the title of the book indicates, there seems to be an opposition between them, through which the ascension of one means the decline of the other. Should we instead talk about a triad of science, religion and magic, and to posit intricate relations between them?

Christianity is an amalgam of an intellectually sophisticated approach to the world of the spirits, namely that of Plato's world of forms, and Pagan traditions. To be more precise, instead of talking directly of Platonism, we would do better to talk about Neoplatonism, a more accessible vulgarization of the original Platonism. And as Russell remarked Catholic theology was more influenced by Aristotle than by Plato, although the latter would have been a more congenial authority. Catholicism is double-faced. There is a fairly sophisti-

cated theology with a very abstract concept of God, and a very practical, down-to-earth institution replete with rituals and quotidian applications. The former is only intended for an intellectual elite, the latter for the masses. The Pagan element in mass Catholicism is very obvious. The Godmother is obviously an idol to be worshipped and appealed to, made manifest by innumerable likenesses. The proliferation of saints make the analogies with classical polytheistic religions very striking. Hinduism is a complicated religion with a sophisticated, if seemingly contradictory theology¹ able to accommodate and digest other religions². It is tempting to attribute the success of Christianity (i.e. Catholicism) to this flexible and tolerant attitude³, maybe due partly to the fact of it being for some centuries a marginal and persecuted creed, although of course it ending up being state sponsored had a larger impact on its development. An interesting contrast is that of Islam, which as a religion may be seen as even more successful than Christianity. With its purity and militant monotheism with its concomitant iconoclastic stand it appears far less accommodating to vulgar taste.

Science, like Christianity, is rooted in Platonism, something which tends to be obscured by an unnecessarily narrow view of Platonism which is prevalent. Science is however not mentioned in the title, although in fact it plays as crucial a role as Religion in the book, if not even more, albeit not as visible a one. Science too thrives on magic in ways which are not as obvious as they ought to be.

The author narrows his attention to England, and to the 16th and 17th centuries, and thus the transition from Catholicism to Reformation plays an important role, as does the Interregnum, the political and religious chaos that eventually resulted in the so called glorious revolution and the birth of Modern Britain. From a point of view of philosophy and the history and explanation of ideas this is obviously a disadvantage, many topics discussed, such as witchcraft would benefit from a wider palette. But the author does not write as a philosopher but as a historian. The serious historian is empirically grounded. He systematically browses through the documents and reports on his findings ostensibly to buttress his arguments, but more importantly to evoke the complexity of the past as well as its tenor. How much easier and more pleasant is it not to dispense with getting dirt under your fingers and instead expound on the general, giving birds-eyes views and present underlying ideas. To survey the land being air-borne, rather than trudging along on dusty paths. The inevitable and regrettable consequence is that the book becomes thick and somewhat tedious to read. There are too many similar facts thrown at the reader, too many names, too many anecdotes, making for a disjointed picture of seemingly unrelated facts. However, when read rather quickly and with a sustained effort (as the last half of the book was read in a few days), the isolated tidbits glue together into a narrative of sorts and you can see the wood for all its trees. From a scientific point of view you can

¹ Sen, the economist, explained to his grandfather who was writing a book on Hinduism, that he was an atheist. No problems, his grandfather explained, atheism is just one of the many aspects of Hinduism.

² Christianity has a very long tradition in India, longer than in most of Europe, although always being very marginal. Entering an Indian church you become very much aware of Jesus being just one of the many Hindu gods, and the depiction of him has a very Indian, i.e. Hindu touch.

³ To think of Christianity as tolerant may strike many as offensive, but we are not thinking about later political developments, but its founding phase.

prove any thesis by a judicious selection of facts. There are so many, and they tend to be contradictory, that anything seems possible. From the point of a reader you can only read what is presented, what is neglected or suppressed, you normally have no inkling of. But this is of course inevitable, not only in history. The reader can always keep his skeptical attitude and be directed to the weak spots, those that can potentially be falsified, in the terminology of a Popper. Any reader has the duty to be skeptical, to be aware of the pitfalls, but not every reader has the obligation of being a historian himself, to challenge by setting up alternative interpretations and theories, producing the corresponding evidence.

What strikes the reader most in wading through all the examples is the invariance of human nature. In fact it is this invariance that makes history interesting and instructive, because it makes it possible to identify with the actors of the past, and hence, according to Collingwood, make the reconstruction of history possible, meaning its reconstruction in the present, because human history, as opposed to natural history, is ultimately grounded in human thought with which we all in principle are able to share.

The main thesis of the author is that Religious practices and Magic ones were in competition, thus the clergy frowned upon the latter trespassing on their turf. For the common man there was little difference in praying or using some traditional magic formula, and the meldings of old-fashioned traditional magic and church practices were common, making it hard to make the distinction between them. A blurring of the borders, which the church must have noticed with a certain ambivalence. On one hand a degrading of the practices of the church, on the other hand, true to the traditional pragmatism of the church, an opportunity to include even more of the magical activities into the fold. Thus in a rather trivial sense, magical practices being redefined as religious ones, the progress of religion would automatically lead to a shrinking of the domain of magic. More interestingly though was the direct opposition between religion and magic. It is then natural to think of the Reformation as being a purifier of religion, after all that was its purpose, and to see the reformed Anglican church as wanting to shed much of the magic along with the rest of Pagan luggage of the Medieval Church. To some extent this is correct, but as the author points out, by doing so, the church created gaps in the fabric, gaps that had to be filled, and thus ending up as much reviving magic as suppressing it. Protestantism (and once again a broader view would have been helpful to the discussion) shared many of the purifying features of Islam, Iconoclasm also being a feature of at least Lutheranism and Calvinism, and was much more intellectual and individualistic than mass Catholicism. After all at the center lay the direct unmediated relation between the individual and God, and the nature of this relation was of course far more important than merely quotidian matters of living⁴. With the Reformation the social fabric of the Catholic church was severely ruptured. Before, as in Medieval times, the spiritual needs of the population were well taken care of, with a kinds or rituals and procedures (such as exorcism) in place. With Protestantism, those needs became the responsibility of the individual to shoulder, with no explicit guidance, only principled thought to work it out. It is tempting

⁴ The intricacies of the basic tenets of Protestantism were no doubt above the heads of most people. One is reminded of Th. Fontanes fictional reconstruction of 'Grete Minde' and the minister cornering the hardly teenage woman on her faith to make sure it was not contaminated by her mother's Catholicism, a procedure incomprehensible to her.

to see the Reformation as the trail-blazer that broke down the mental barriers set up by the Catholic Church and thus paved the way for Science. In fact one may even see Protestantism in secret league with the scientific revolution. It is true that Protestantism had at least initially something heroic about it, that it was indeed a revolution encouraging the critical approach of the individual, to take nothing for granted but to try it with your conscience. On the other hand Protestants were more liable to be bigoted than the traditional Catholics, and the most vicious denunciations of the burgeoning science stemmed from Protestants. Yet the eventual secularization which would come with the modern age was more pronounced in Protestant countries, no doubt because the intolerant Protestants failed to meet the public halfway and withdrew from religion much of what made it work socially and answered to the basic needs of the many. It was anathema to the Protestant creed to profane God by manipulating him and ask him to take the short-cut of miracles. So called natural explanations were to be the norm, and any deviation from those, was considered to be truly exceptional. Furthermore, once you start to question dogma there is no stopping and in the end what is left? Thus we end up with a very watered-down religion, and the modern Protestant pastor does hardly dare to proclaim a belief in God, at least not in any literal sense, This is fine with intellectuals, and as noted above, the Catholics were careful to uphold the distinction between sophisticated theology and daily ministrations, while the Protestants refused to do so. From an intellectual viewpoint admirable, but from a social one disastrous. To a Catholic, religion is the water in which he swims, and he may take it for granted. To the Protestant, religion is something that has to be continually recreated as an individual effort, consequently it usurps a lot of intellectual energy, without necessarily providing corresponding rewards. Although, with the appropriate intellectual temperament, the effort may be its own reward.

One obvious concern was disease, how to prevent it and how to cure it. Great was the prestige accorded those who could effect cures. At the time medical knowledge was scant and disconnected, there was common practice and experience, but no real understanding. Most diseases cure themselves, then as now, so cures were common. What was not to clear was who would take credit for them? The machinations of a doctor may not have been more efficient than a prayer or the magic of a healer, although the distinction between quacks and legitimate doctors started to come early on, the source of it was more political than factual. Still today the power of medicine is limited and where modern medicine cannot effect a cure the field is open to any quack and charlatan and people, even educated (or especially educated ?) are not adverse to trying alternative techniques, no matter how far-fetched they may seem nor how scantily supported by previous experience, at least as long as there seems to be based on some preferably ancient tradition, desperation knows no bounds. Besides for most people the cures of modern medicine may seem as magic and the trust in their efficacy is derived from the prestige of the giver, thus in short on authority. Trust alone, as the modern medical man knows, may go a long way, as illustrated by the placebo effect.

Astrology is a very interesting phenomenon, with truly ancient roots, although the author basically restricts himself to the 16th and 17th centuries - the heyday of astrology, and draws most of his empirical material from English sources, especially the case of three particularly well-documented practitioners. One thing to keep in mind is that,

unlike magic, it is proto-scientific. While magic seems haphazard, consisting of disconnected practices without any internal unity, astrology is systematic and based on some not unreasonable assumptions. If astrology today should be dismissed as a pseudo-science, this is unfair with respect to the classical one. Originally it was a unique outlet for the scientific temperament and ambition, thus the prefix of 'proto' catches its classical nature far better than 'pseudo'. How can something be 'pseudo' meaning a degeneration of a practice not yet in existence, while it certainly can be 'proto' in making the first steps towards something still in the making. In classical time there was a natural distinction between the celestial world and the sub-lunar one, the psychological effects of which are still present. The celestial world was only known by sight alone, there was no way of manipulating it, nor of moving inside it. It produced no sounds, you could not touch it with your hands. For all people knew, it could be infinitely far away, thus truly separated from the physical world below. It is also systematic that the Old Greeks distinguished between spherical geometry and planar (Euclidean) geometry. In fact spherical geometry is the one most intimately known to man by sight, as the field of vision makes up a sphere, while planar geometry is actually only made tangible by movement. This division of worlds is truly a crucial factor in the intellectual development of man. Astronomy is the first science⁵ and of course astrology is intimately related to it, be it a deviation and a deformation, caused by the pressure that disinterested curiosity should be justified by applications. That the stars should influence the fates of men (and man) is no more unreasonable than that the genes should do the same. Thus the worth of a scientific theory cannot be judged solely on its a priori reasonableness. And as with modern medicine, for the public, genetic counseling is no more understandable than astrological prediction, and in specific cases, to be honest, about as precise in general⁶. What was impressive about astrology was the involved computations that had to be resorted to. A computation is an objective procedure (unlike its interpretation) and its outcome is unpredictable, otherwise there would be no reason to perform it. Thus we have the mystery (and magic) of a mathematical model. A mystery that can be pervasive enough to view, and thus to condemn, those computations as black magic. The idea that something can be computed, an idea that pervades much of modern science, is a very potent one. Astrology was driven by its applications, which were manifold. Once again man wants to be instructed on how to make momentous decisions when not all the necessary components for an informed one are available. When is a propitious time for doing this and that? The astrologer had a lot of clients who went for consultations. It is also noteworthy that most of those demands were met not by astrological computations but by common sense. When somebody asks for your advice you have to walk a precarious balance between giving out what you sense the client wants to hear and what may be good for him. This takes tact, and human intuition, what is known as sociability, as well as a certain cleverness in systematic observation and

⁵ The scientific status of mathematics is an interesting topic of discussion.

⁶ The movement of celestial bodies may not directly effect single individuals but it has tangible effects on long-range climate. The periodic recurrence of glaciations in the most recent geological period can convincingly be attributed to changes in the shape of the orbit of the earth around the sun, and how they change in respect to the rotational plane of the earth. Changes that are easily seen to be direct and computable consequences of the movements of the two most massive planets of the solar system.

adding two and two, what you look for in a general practitioner; but has nothing to do with so called astrological expertise per se. Although of course the astrological practice lends authority to the advice and thus forms the basis of the trust which is necessary for the whole thing to get off ground.

As noted astrology was practiced by people who in a later age would be scientists, (and of course Kepler was both a scientist, as good as they come, and an astrologer, although it is unclear what status the latter had in his mind apart from being a source of financial support⁷) and they exhibited typical scientific instincts, such as systematically looking for correlations. However, astrology did in the end fade away, although it was immune to falsifications. A failed prediction could always be blamed a faulty computations, casting aspersions on the astrologer not on astrology per se. Just as the efficacy of prayer need not be daunted by the desired outcomes not becoming manifest as the ways of God are inscrutable, and that he consequently would have good reasons not to grant your wish. And of course wishes of different people may very well conflict, so they cannot all be granted, a fact that ought to have been obvious to anyone taking an objective view, but in your reaction to a hostile environment, you are bound to take a subjective view.

Astrology was, as science is today, fully compatible with religion, as long as it confined itself to the natural world. However, when it proposed to enter the domain of human action and destinies, it clearly overstepped encroaching on the turf of God. We may feel something similar today, when mechanical neurological explanations are provided for phenomena which we feel are in the realm of the human spirit, such as consciousness. However, the astrologers of the day, tended to play down the actual influences of the stars when pressed. After all they made no claims for exact predictions, but recognized that those were at best approximate and merely suggestive. Something similar may be claimed for modern day economists, whose approaches in many ways have the same flavor as that of classical astrologers. After all, would one be sarcastic, economics as all social sciences, are at best proto-sciences.

Witchcraft is a common phenomenon with widely acknowledged psychological roots, while veritable witch hunts seems to have been something peculiar not only to the 16th and 17th centuries but also to Protestant countries, the witch hunts of New England at the time being notorious⁸. As noted initially, a wider perspective would have been helpful to put it into perspective.

The religious connection to witchcraft is the belief in the Devil and in Hell. From a religious point of view, what is wrong with witches is not their malefaction as such, but being in concert with the devil. This is similar to condemn pedophiliacs not for their sexual abuse of the under-age, but to their having such desires in the first place⁹. However, the persecution of witches, at least in England, was not due to religious authorities, but to the

⁷ As noted above, there was pressure to produce applications, something in connection with Kepler I have already noted in print many years ago. Incidentally witchcraft also touched Kepler, as his mother was accused of it and he had to take steps to save her.

⁸ One thinks of the zealot Cotton Mather

⁹ There was a distinction between witchcraft and sorcery. To perform the former you needed to be a witch, to have some intrinsic qualities of a witch; while to perform the latter, you needed only to be instructed in the technique.

machinations of the legal system, and witches were not executed because of their supposed congress with the devil, but because of their curses which could most effectively be undone by their killing. The church being reformed thus absolved its responsibility. According to the author, the Catholic church provided resources for counteracting curses, the lack of them forced people to resort to the legal system. How did witches occur? Almost all witches were old poor women at the bottom of the social ladder. Typically a poor wretched woman asked for relief and was turned down. Traditionally in a Medieval village, everyone took responsibility for the most needy in the small close-knit society, with the 16th and 17th century there was an influx of wealth, and hence a more individualistic attitude and a greater diversity of material standing. To turn down the appeal of someone needy because of the greed which came with material betterment created a feeling of guilt and hence a realization that the neglected person had a right to curse you. And cursing is a natural psychological reaction towards people you bear a grudge but are powerless to right¹⁰. From this impetus it is not a long way to engage in so called magical thinking. Believing that if you wish ardently enough your wishes may come true. Thus having wronged someone you become well aware of being subjected to a curse, and as noted, being subjected to a curse is more or less tantamount to being stricken by one. Thus the source of your troubles, never mind they being self-inflicted by being brought upon you by your own actions, has to be brought to trial and punished in ways that would lift the curse. (As noted above, it does not need to be death, drawing blood may have the same effect). One consequence in the belief in witchcraft was the reluctance of people to commit acts of discharity lest they be cursed, and thus, if you want, served a useful function in society.

Connected to magic was the belief in fairies, ghosts and other mythological beings. Those creatures are part of folklore and are to be found in many, appropriately called, fairy-tales, and did survive, if tongue-in-cheek in many rural communities into the 20th century, although of course they had long since lost any credibility along the educated and urban classes¹¹.

So why did magic eventually subside, even if people in principle are as susceptible to it as they were in the past, human nature being invariant? According to the author it was the advance of science, hardly a surprising conclusion. But his main point is that magic did not disappear because it was replaced and rendered superfluous, as many people have argued, because the decline of magic antedated the time it did indeed become superfluous. The advances of science did not bear fruit as far as ordinary lives were concerned until the 19th century as a result of the concomitant industrial revolution, but its prestige was established long before that. The mechanistic conception of nature developed in the 17th century, during what is usually referred to as the scientific revolution, and the results trickled down to the masses, or at least become firmly established by the intellectuals.

¹⁰ Most readers must be familiar with the feeling grown out of the desperation of impotence to wish evil on those who have wronged you.

¹¹ My mother growing up in a rural community in northern Sweden in the late 20's and early 30's imbibed those beliefs during her childhood, and never definitely shed them even after she became educated and urban. Obviously they made a deep impression on her, and no doubt enriched her appreciation of her environment. A forest bepeopled with various creatures becomes enchanted and stimulates your imagination far more than just a collection of trees, whose only purpose is to provide firewood or planks,

Gradually a conviction emerged that things were liable to a mechanistic explanation, at least in principle, making magic a incongruent feature of a world view that showed more and more coherence.

The sources for those evolutions of thought, which started early enough and which the end of the 16th century showed many examples of, Francis Bacon maybe being the most explicit, were the rationalistic attitudes of the the classical world, revived during the renaissance, but in some perverted form at least, kept alive throughout the scholastic medieval tradition. As noted before Protestantism may have helped bringing about a change of mind making this change possible, although as also noted, the zealots of the Reformation may have been as hostile, or more likely, even more hostile to scientific exploration as the Catholic establishment, whose hostility was political, and not primarily intellectual as that of the Protestant fanatics, After all if an individual relation to God is encouraged, nay expected, the same is natural to follow when it comes to nature itself. The search for certitude, which is also a religious project, took the form of active experimentation and a desire for intellectual understanding. The scientific approach is saddled with mistakes, but unlike the case of magic, those mistakes play an active role and are occasions for instructions, not merely something to be ignored or explained away. This leads to the next issue of the scientific revolution.

Maybe the most important aspect of the scientific revolution was the changed notion of time, from being something cyclic and thus basically unchanged, to a linear one with its notion of progress, and also the implicit implication of a beginning and an end. Of history becoming a narrative of irreversible changes, and maybe of finite duration. And one in which originality takes on a meaning, as there will be things which are unprecedented. While a cyclical view of history is potentially not only eternal but also making the past a living thing always present, always about to be repeated and reenacted in the future; a linear progressive view on the other hand, sees the past as something to be discarded, and hence its influence on the present is weakened¹². We no longer look to the past for guidance and a source of authority, and with that the appeal of magic loses much of its strength, because, as already noted, the basis of its authority is from being rooted in the past. This transformation the author declares as one of the great mysteries of intellectual history.

With the decline of the belief in the Devil, after all the Devil plays almost no part in the Old Testament¹³, and hell is not mentioned as far as I am aware of, much of the belief in witches lost its sting, although the witch herself may survive in folklore and fairy-tale becoming a mere ghost of the imagination. Astrology lost much of its intellectual appeal when the excitement of true science opened up more fertile grounds for the scientific imagination, not because being discredited as much as being felt as sterile.

With the loss of magic much was undeniably gained, but every gain comes with a loss. A transparent world devoid of magic may be psychologically barren, after all magic is a

¹² The author brings up the example of funerals and the observance of wills. In a society in which the past becomes less important, so do the funerals, thus becoming less and less ostentatious, and our willingness to respect the statues of wills, although in the latter, there is still a fair amount in modern society.

¹³ Apart from the temptation of Eve of course

projection of the imagination. On the other hand much that surrounds us humans today are truly magical, such as say the wire-less communication by cell-phones, which to most people is a mystery, to which, however, they give scant though simply taking it in stride. In fact ordinary lives are in many ways becoming more opaque to the majority of people than it was in a more ignorant world. People may have been kept in the dark, but what they did they had some intimate understanding of. Nowadays we are basically consumers, and our work is often so abstract as to have no real tangible relation to our actual living. Different in the past when the majority of people lived literally off the land manufacturing their own implements. Science may differ profoundly from religion and magic, but to the great majority of people it seems to play the same role. As the author concludes his work. Magic will always be with us, as long as there are going to be a lack of effective techniques to control and allay our worries. When it comes to war and peace, we seem as ineffectual as always to handle them, although the stakes are far higher, and thus we still resort to measures, such as international conferences, which have proved themselves over and over again worthless in real danger. But what is the alternative?

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