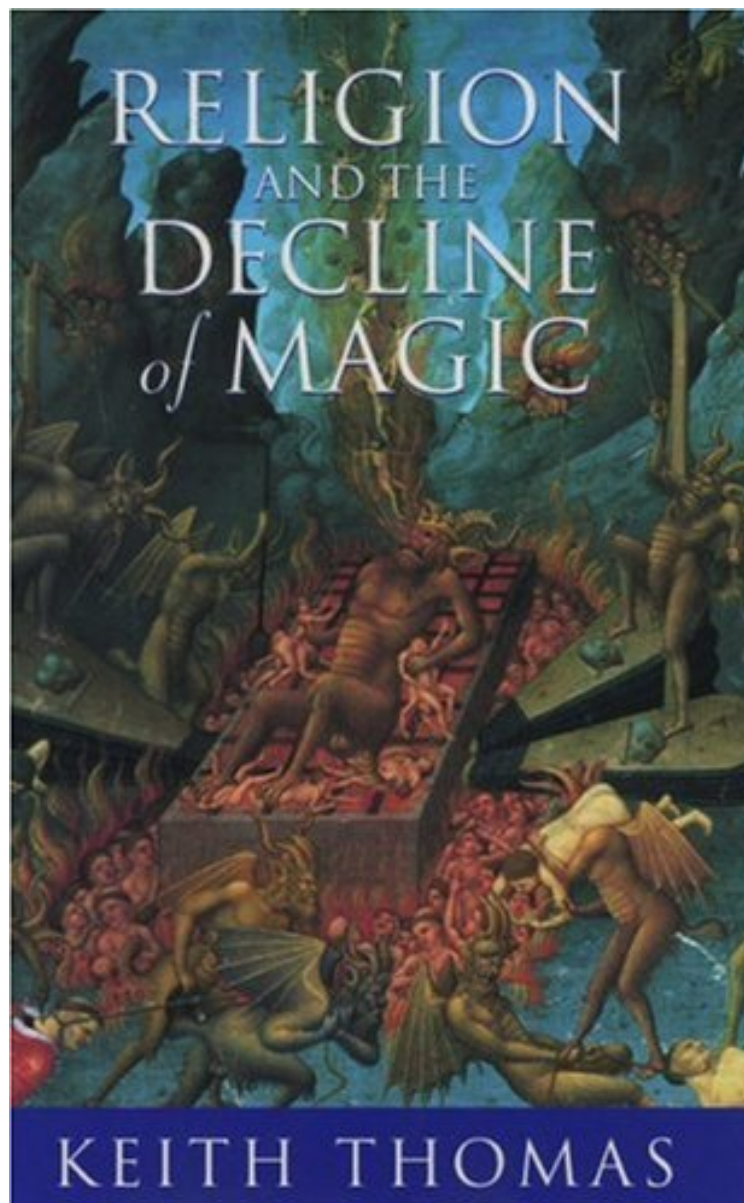


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Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England

Keith Thomas

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Keith Thomas : Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England:

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Mind-expanding! By krebsman The title of this book is intriguing, but I'm not so sure that it accurately describes the book. He doesn't really define the terms "religion" and "magic" to my satisfaction. The book's big problem is that it lumps Astrology with "magic." Astrology has never claimed to be magic. It has never claimed to have brought anything about, or to have created something from nothing. All the astrologer does is calculate the positions of the planets and stars and then interpret them according to the symbolic meanings attached to them and their relationships to each other, similarly to the way that a psychoanalyst would interpret a dream. The author admits that of all the topics mentioned, astrology was the most difficult for him to write about. The reason it was difficult is that it is not, and never was, "magic," nor has it "declined." It is practiced by millions of people all over the world. That said, this is a great work of scholarship that I would recommend to any thinking person. At the end of the book, Thomas admits that religion had less to do with the decline of magic than the changeover from a rural to an urban culture and the invention of other methods to achieve those things that magic tried to achieve. An example would be that instead of buying a magic potion to attract a lover's attention, a girl could instead invest in cosmetics and deodorants with the same intention. Oddly, Science was probably less responsible than one would think. He notes that while scientific progress was made in the 17th Century, it was to be another 3 centuries before science really made much difference in alleviating human suffering from disease, which would be a prime reason for one to seek magical aid. The parts of the book I found most interesting were those dealing with "witches." Witchcraft, I learned, was practiced by those who were powerless in the material realm. Usually they were poor old women who were dependent on the charity of the community. (In the early Protestant Church, believers were morally obligated as individuals to be charitable toward the poor.) If someone refused her food, she would tell them they'd be sorry. Then the person so "cursed," whenever any setback occurred, attributed it to her ill-will. The "curse" was really their guilty conscience. Invariably the accusers of witches were those who were morally in the wrong, not the destitute old "witches." But what relationship DID religion have with magic? For one thing, it was competition! Probably the biggest influence of religion on magic came with the Reformation. Forms of ritual magic were still practiced by Catholics, but were taboo in Protestantism, which simply said it was nonsense. Perhaps this ultimately was responsible for slowly changing the reputation of the local practitioners of folk magic. Exhaustively researched, this is a great book that applies the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and anthropology to history. Worth reading despite its 668-page length. Five Stars. 32 of 34 people found the following review helpful. An astonishing book in every way By Robert Moore RELIGION AND THE DECLINE OF MAGIC is one of the greatest works of history that I have ever read. It is one of those books that is both highly entertaining and massively informative. It is also infuriating, because it is a book that is so full of detail, that it doesn't seem as if one person could have produced it. It makes me feel as if I have been wasting my life. Thomas's subject is--as the title proclaims--the prevalence of and subsequent decline in magical beliefs in Great Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries. He surveys magic in a myriad of forms: magical elements within religious practice, village wizards and cunning men, astrology, prophecies, and--in the most famous and frequently referred to section--witches. My favorite sections were those dealing with astrology and witchcraft, as well as the beginning chapter dealing with "nasty, brutish, and short" quality of life at the time in England. The book is filled to the brim with fascinating bits of information, such as the fact that most of the caloric intake of men, women, and even children at the time came from beer, and that at sea an allotment of a gallon of beer a day was made! The inescapable conclusion was that Britain was a nation of alcoholics. I find it difficult to overpraise this book. Since reading it during the summer, I have found dozens of references to it in various works, and always with the highest praise attached. One of the blurbs on the back of the beautiful new paperback edition recently put out by Oxford University Press claims that it is one of the two or three greatest works of history in the past thirty years, and I have no reason to doubt it. As testament to how highly I esteem this book, I plan on buying a new copy, since the old Scribner's paperback I read barely managed to hold together til the end. Keith Thomas's other book, MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD, is also a work of the highest order. My one complaint with Thomas is that he has not written enough books. My hope is that he is working on another. Note: Since writing that review Keith Thomas has come out with another work that I just found out about and just ordered. Due to a very heavy reading/writing schedule I'm not going to be able to read it for a while, but I look forward to doing so with enthusiasm. The title is THE ENDS OF LIFE: ROADS TO FULFILLMENT IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND. 0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Infinite Possibilities Great. Thanks

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."

"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* 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.