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The epigraph that Keith Thomas places at the head of his chapter on witchcraft is from John Selden's *Table Talks:* "The Reason of a Thing is not to be inquired after, til you are sure the Thing itself be so. We commonly are at *What's the Reason of it?* before we are sure of the Thing."[1] Selden pursues the point with an anecdote about Sir Robert Cotton who was exclaiming over the strange shape of a shoe which was said to have been worn by Moses, or at least by Noah, when his wife, apparently a much more simple soul, asked: "But Mr. Cotton, are you sure it is a Shoe?"

Lady Cotton's question might be put to the central subject matter of Thomas' book: magical beliefs. What could be meant by "magical beliefs"? Do the ideas or attitudes that he groups together in this way form a unitary "Thing" with a definable "shape"? Is "magic" a distinct type of belief or practice or attitude that can be studied for its prevalence, persistence, or decline? For its uses and consequences?

The nature of "the Thing itself" is a conceptual as well as an empirical problem. We want to know whether cultural particulars can be placed into general categories or types such as "magical" and "religious," and whether these types are such that they can be compared across time periods and continents. In the actual situations in which living men contend with one another and, in contending, speak about such entities as "fairies," "witches," and "stars," and about such activities as "conjuring," "blessing," and "cursing," what can an outsider, an inquisitive scholar, mean by such concepts as "belief" and "skepticism"? These are pressing, unsettling, and unsettled questions which go to the heart of both of the disciplines of cultural anthropology and history.

This paper deals mainly with the view of the nature and function of magical beliefs as it appears in Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971). In his continuous and rather open search for relationships among his data, Thomas picks up and examines an

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1 (London, 1689; 1856), 139.

extraordinary number of different social and psychological theories, but does not commit himself to the whole of any single approach. Nonetheless, running through most of his discussion is a conception of "magic" as set off from "religion," a distinction which carries with it certain theoretical implications concerning the study of social life, popular conventional notions, and psychological motivations. His reliance on this particular way of classifying English cultural ideas predisposes him to framing certain questions about the data in a misleading way. We need to see whether "magic" is indeed "the Thing itself" that requires explanation.

Early in the volume there is a reference to "primitive religion," and elsewhere we read that the English of Tudor and Stuart times were "primitive peoples."[2] For Thomas, the term "primitive" is almost a synonym for "magical" and both words, for him, have to do with a kind of attitude toward the supernatural, one which assumes the possibility of human access to spiritual power for the purpose of advancing mundane personal fortunes, for fulfilling private wishes, promoting partisan causes, or at any rate promoting matters of immediate solid everyday physical and social well-being. He contrasts this type of orientation with "religion." "Religion" is a term that covers the kinds of beliefs and practices that are comprehensive, organized, and concerned with providing general symbols of life (636–637), as against "magic" which is a label for those beliefs and practices which are specific, incoherent, and primarily oriented toward providing practical solutions to immediate problems and not referable to any coherent scheme of ideas. The distinction as he makes it is quite clear, and the terms "religion" and "magic" stand for two separable cultural complexes which can be in competition and whose fortunes may sometimes rise and fall separately. Lawrence Stone, in his review of Thomas' book, presses this opposition even further—perhaps beyond a point that Thomas would accept—and speaks of the conflict

2 "Nearly every primitive religion is regarded by its adherents as a medium for obtaining supernatural power. This does not prevent it from functioning as a system of explanation, a source of moral injunctions, a symbol of social order, or a route to immortality; but it does mean that it also offers the prospect of a supernatural means of control over man's earthly environment. The history of early Christianity offers no exception to this rule. . . . The claim to supernatural power was an essential element in the Anglo-Saxon Church's fight against paganism, and missionaries did not fail to stress the superiority of Christian prayers to heathen charms." (25–26). "Like other primitive peoples, contemporaries believed that curses worked only if the party who had uttered them had been unjustly treated" (506–507).

between "the counterculture of magic" and "the official culture of Protestant Christianity."[3]

Another characteristic of "magic" in Thomas' usage is that, as a means for overcoming specific practical difficulties, it is necessarily ineffective. This is so important a distinguishing characteristic, for him, that it can almost be said to be part of the definition: "If magic is to be 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 of it" (688). Here the contrasting category cannot be "religion," for who is to say whether a given religious practice is effective or not? Instead, "magic" is now being set over against rational empirical technology.[4] However, effectiveness would not be an important issue if magic had not been defined initially as being pragmatic in orientation—as an alternative method for solving technical problems.

My first comment on this set of definitions may sound like simple common sense, but in fact it reflects a concern which many anthropologists have not found to be merely obvious—a concern the theoretical implications of which continue to be uncovered. There is a significant difference between the ways of conceptualizing experience (or ordering, or describing, or explaining events) that the people under study use in living out their lives, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ways of conceptualizing experience that the scholar brings to his investigation of these people and their lives. The first—the beliefs, preferences, and so on held by the members of the society and historical period under scrutiny—consists of ideas which are for the most part unexamined, taken for granted, and expressed directly in action. The second group of concepts—those of the researcher himself—are, we

3 Stone, "The Disenchantment of the World," *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 2, 1971). See Thomas (267): "But even in the years after the Reformation it would be wrong to regard magic and religion as two opposed and incompatible systems of belief. There were magical elements surviving in religion, and there were religious facets to the practise of magic."

4 "But it was above all in connection with the sacraments of the Church that such beliefs arose. The Mass, in particular, was associated with magical power. . . . In the actual miracle of transubstantiation the 'instrumental cause' was the formula of consecration. Theologians refined this doctrine considerably, but their subtleties were too complicated to be understood by ordinary men. What stood out was the magical notion that the mere pronunciation of words in a ritual manner could effect a change in the character of material objects." (33). "It was this affirmation of the potentialities of human labor which was to encourage men to seek a technological solution to their problems rather than a magical one" (278).

hope, not taken for granted, and are subjected to the rules of discursive logic. These are his own frameworks for grouping the data, his own language into which, for better or worse, he translates his material. Their source is often, but not necessarily, from within his own cultural tradition. Such imposed frameworks are indispensable, else how would we discuss and compare alien beliefs? But we need to know always when we are speaking in our own conceptual language and when we are speaking in theirs. When the everyday language of our subjects is also English, we may easily become confused.[5]

Thomas employs the terms "magic" and "religion" in various ways. Often they are his own words for classifying the beliefs and practices that he has unearthed. Certainly, as he shows, many Elizabethans would not have accepted his characterization of the nature of magic. Those who performed the various rituals that he calls magical, or those who were convinced that some malevolent neighbor was overspeaking them, did not consider the techniques ineffective, or mere placebos to quell anxiety.[6] Nor would they have felt that their

5 Within the field of cultural anthropology, most discussion of this methodological problem has centered around social organization and, to a lesser extent, ethnoscience; that is, in developing categories for distinguishing kinds of social relationships and institutions, and features of the natural world. The literature generated in this area alone has been enormous. A few recent discussions are: Ward Goodenough, *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology* (Chicago, 1970); David M. Schneider, "What is Kinship All About?" in Priscilla Reining (ed.), *Kinship Studies in the Morgan Centennial Year* (Washington, D.C., 1972), 32–63; Stephen A. Tyler (ed.), *Cognitive Anthropology* (New York, 1969). Regarding the distinction between magic and religion itself, the debate is even older, more diffuse, and often less sophisticated. A typical statement in this regard, with which I agree, is by D. F. Pocock: "If categorical distinctions of the Western mind are found upon examination to impose distinctions upon (and so falsify) the intellectual universes of other cultures then they must be discarded or, as I have put it, dissolved. I believe 'magic' to be one such category . . ." ("Foreword" to Marcel Mauss [trans. Robert Brain], *A General Theory of Magic* [London, 1972]). A lucid disentanglement of the varieties of senses that these two Western categories carry, senses which are frequently in contradiction with one another, as they appear in anthropological writings alone, can be found in Dorothy Hammond, "Magic: A Problem in Semantics," *American Anthropologist*, LXXII (1970), 1349–1356.

6 A passage by Thomas regarding the attitudes of the late medieval theologians toward the efficacy of ritual shows what I mean by his projecting onto them an interpretation which cannot possibly be theirs: "Many later medieval theologians were strongly 'rationalist' in temperament, and preferred to stress the importance of human self-help. They had inherited rites from a more primitive era and they viewed them cautiously. They regarded the sacraments as symbolic representations rather than as instruments of physical efficacy." (47). Although they may have rejected the use of sacraments for satisfaction of immediate desires, they could not have thought of them as merely "symbolic."

ideas were fragmentary and without basis in a coherent view of the universe. Since these were ordinary and unsophisticated people, they had no organized and systematic doctrine to which to refer but they probably felt no need for one since they did not identify religion with doctrine. At any rate, all intellectual efforts at doctrine-building of the period were apparently confined to those very camps which were engaged in creating the definition of "magic" as practices which were impious, heretic, demonic, or fraudulent.

In many other passages, of course, Thomas uses the terms "religion" and "magic" and allied words in the meanings that the people themselves give to them. He makes abundantly clear that these terms were used in many different senses, depending on the point of view of the speaker. For the attack on certain beliefs as "magical," in the senses of "not-religious" or "not-reasonable" or "not-practical," was a constant part of English religious rhetoric from at least the fourteenth century on. The common core of meaning was always disapproval, but what was not so stable, from person to person and from era to era, were the grounds upon which these beliefs were to be dismissed. Thomas' data show that throughout the period which he studied, and even into our own time, the notion of magic was a weapon in the religious battles that were destroying the peace both of society and of the consciences of its members.

Whether or not a particular idea or attitude was said to be magical by the people of Tudor and Stuart England depended mainly on who said it, and the persuasiveness of the label depended mainly on the weight of authority behind it. Speaking of magical curing techniques, Thomas says at one point,

> In the last resort the only means of telling whether a cure was magical or not was to refer it to the authorities—the Church, the Law, and the Royal College of Physicians. If they permitted its employment then no scruples need be felt by laymen. [92][7]

Thomas traces in stunning detail how the distinction was a virtually meaningless one for the people of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and how, during the ensuing period, the semantic domains of magic and religion and science were gradually being marked out in an increasingly distinct and standard way. The meaning of the term

7 See also 200, where Thomas demonstrates that the healing of illness by touching was considered legitimate when it was the king's sacred person which was the mediating body, but illegitimate and diabolic when a cunning man employed the same means.

"religion" shifted from signifying "piety" in thought and ritual to "doctrine" or "creed," and the issue of belief versus skepticism in regard to the ideas themselves became more and more salient. Religious skepticism is a complex phenomenon, and it is by no means entirely Western or recent. What is unusual in the modern world view is the possibility of skepticism in regard to the truth-value of one's own received cultural ideas. Religious doubt in other times and places concerns rather a man's capacity for true piety, or the strength of his claimed control over the powers that be or over the potency of particular kinds of culturally defined forces—but not whether any of these could really exist or whether they made sense.[8]

What the Reformation and Enlightenment added up to in the end—to simplify outrageously—was the climb in intellectual status of a conception of the nature of religion which stressed the central necessity of a coherent doctrine and the emptiness of ritual. At the same time, in other circles, there was an increase in the market value of a view of the pursuit of knowledge which was empiricist and experimental. The result was an across-the-board downgrading of alternative views of religion and knowledge. The concept of "magic" as Thomas uses it when he himself is speaking is a direct descendant of these controversies, as a term for some of these downgraded alternatives. It is not the "decline" of the practice of magic that cries out for explanation, but the emergence and rise of the label "magic."[9]

My criticism of Thomas' formulation of what it was that needed explanation rests on this: It is not that he has imposed his own manner of categorizing the verbal statements and events which he describes, for that is unavoidable, but rather that the categories which he uses when attempting to develop causal hypotheses are those of some of the

8 Cf. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York, 1962), which shows that the concepts of "religion" and "a religion" as "doctrine" were developed only since the Enlightenment and questions their cross-cultural applicability. See also Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience* (Chicago, 1972), which addresses itself to the concept of "belief" and its appropriateness in comparative studies of human experience. For an empirical example of religious doubt and skepticism as it appears within a non-Western framework, see Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967).

9 "The Protestants were helping to make a distinction in kind between magic and religion, the one a coercive ritual, the other an intercessionary one. Magic was no longer to be seen as a false religion, which was how medieval theologians had regarded it; it was a different sort of activity all together." (76). "At the end of our period we can draw a distinction between religion and magic which could not have been possible at the beginning" (640).

subjects themselves. In doing so, he takes part in the very cultural process that he is studying. What is perhaps even more important, this particular way of labeling beliefs carries with it a whole philosophy, a point of view toward the nature of man and workings of society which influences Thomas' sense of what seems obvious and what seems puzzling in his data. The implications of the notion of "magic" as "not-religion" and "not-reasonable" and "not-effective" for a picture of what was going on in Tudor and Stuart England need to be spelled out.

One of the early winners in the theological and philosophical debates of that period was the utilitarian view of the nature of human social forms. For all his perceptive discussion of other points of view, Thomas sees his own world and that of the Elizabethans in essentially utilitarian terms. He takes as the motto for his book a sixteenth-century statement by George Gifford: "For this is man's nature, that where he is persuaded that there is the power to bring prosperity and adversity, there will he worship." [10] The difficulties in a theory of religious change that sees such a statement as worthy of serious consideration are complicated. I want to discuss only one. The main objection to a utilitarian approach is not, as Gifford's quotation might suggest, that man might be seen as crass and materialistic, but that beliefs are to be understood primarily in terms of the needs which they serve, and that these needs are assumed to be individual and, in the final analysis, psychological.

Given my own scholarly discipline, it is easier for me to discuss this point in terms of the theories of Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the few anthropologists whose general theoretical approach—as against their scattered specific hypotheses—Thomas puts to use.[11] The reason is that Malinowski's philosophical orientation appears to be essentially similar to his, though Thomas does not, by any means, accept this early anthropologist's ideas uncritically and wholeheartedly, and in fact raises some important arguments against them. Malinowski's great contribution to the study of religion was methodological rather than theoretical. He stressed, and rightly, that the semantic burden of specific practices must be sought through the study of the social context in which they appear, their consequences in daily life. This focus on actions observed in ongoing everyday life, and on verbal statements in their behavioral context, has become a powerful procedure for

10 *A Discourse of the Subtill Practices of Devilles by Witches and Sorcerers* (1587), sigs. B4^{v}-C1.

11 Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays (1925)* (Boston, 1948); *idem*, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (London, 1935), 2v.

discovery of the underlying principles of those cultural systems whose basic tenets remain unverbalized, whose essential ideas have never been articulated into discussable philosophical concepts.

The fact that the meanings of a custom can be illuminated through a study of the range of situations in which it is carried out does not necessarily imply that performances and meanings should not be separated analytically. For Malinowski, however, they were joined: Religious conceptions and ritual acts were almost identical, and magic referred not to certain kinds of ideas, but rather to certain kinds of procedures and attitudes. What distinguished magical from religious acts was not primarily their ideational content, but the purposes toward which they were directed and their effects. Magic was, for him, those procedures aimed at achieving short-term tangible goals such as bringing rain or defeating one's enemy, and religion referred to those behavior patterns which were concerned with long-term, abstract ends such as prosperity and salvation. The failure to distinguish the meaning of an action from the action itself blinded Malinowski to the recognition that many different motivational purposes can be served by the same customary performance, and that the distinction between acts informed by ultimate concerns as against those directed toward immediate goals is constantly blurred when achievement of a tangible good is made to stand symbolically for a more general one. The only way one can know whether or not one is blessed is through concrete signs in one's daily life, even if these are not material signs of prosperity, but rather the more subtle but no less experiential ones of personal mood.[12]

For the Pacific islanders among whom Malinowski lived, those acts which he labelled magical were, like almost all of their actions, usually directed toward dealing with or preventing specific difficulties. But he assumed the saying of spells and the like can never have direct practical results, despite what the natives think. Thus Malinowski accepted one part of the natives' interpretation of their actions but rejected another part. The resulting paradox then posed the following question: Why were these ineffective magical procedures tried over

12 "The fact remains, of course, that for the devout the sacred value, first and above all, has been a psychological state in the *here and now*. Primarily this state consists in the emotional attitude *per se*, which was directly called forth by the specifically religious (or magical) act, by methodical asceticism, or by contemplation." Max Weber (trans. Hans Gerth and C. W. Mills), "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1958), 278 (his italics.)

and over again? Malinowski's answer was that they fill a need of the actor, one which the actor himself does not recognize.

Among these ocean fishermen, magic was a resort taken only when other means failed, when their technical capabilities were felt to be inadequate to deal with the task at hand. They never used magic to attempt the impossible, such as flying through the air, nor did they ever use magic for tasks that could be handled simply and directly. However, for dangerous and problematic enterprises, such as deep sea fishing, they would employ charms, incantations, and the like. Malinowski argued from these facts that the magical acts must give the fishermen a feeling of added confidence, and that one outcome of their renewed assurance was, indeed, more efficient fishing.[13]

Thomas appears to hold a position similar to that of Malinowski. It is difficult for the reader to pin down his precise theoretical orientation, partly because he attempts to maintain his freedom from the limitations of any particular approach by indicating objections to each theory as he discusses it, and partly because his own assumptions about the workings of human societies and minds remain unexamined. I am aware therefore that the following formulation of Thomas' views about the relationships among beliefs, behavior, and motivation may not be accurate. He seems to assume that, although the origin of specific practices is historical in that we inherit each assemblage of customs and beliefs from our predecessors, their continued enactment and transmission to the next generation is to be explained in terms of the satisfaction of needs, either psychological or sociological. Since in this view societal "needs" are mediated by individual agents—responding, holding attitudes, and acting—such a need-fulfillment theory reduces to a psychological one. Every important custom has its pragmatic or emotional value for some members of the society, or else it falls into disuse and is forgotten.

In this light, certain of Thomas' discussions make sense. He suggests, for instance, that before the Reformation the Church was "a limitless source of supernatural aid, applicable to most of the problems likely to arise in daily life." The theologians of the early Reformation attempted "to dispense with this whole apparatus of supernatural assistance." But, he points out, "the problems for which

13 E. R. Leach, "The Epistemological Background to Malinowski's Empiricism," and Talcott Parsons, "Malinowski and the Theory of Social Systems," both in Raymond Firth (ed.), *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski* (London, 1957), 119–137, 53–70.

the magical remedies of the past had provided some sort of solution were still there—the fluctuations of nature, the hazards of fire, the threat of plague and disease, the fear of evil spirits, and all the uncertainties of daily life" (77). Thomas asks,

> How was it that men were able to renounce the magical solutions offered by the medieval Church before they had devised any technical remedies to put in their place? Were they now mentally prepared to face up to such problems by sole reliance upon their own resources and techniques? Did they have to turn to other kinds of magical control in order to replace the remedies offered by medieval religion? [77]

His answer is a carefully qualified yes, and in the ensuing chapters he traces the pervasiveness and popularity of "non-religious" practices for healing and divination which persisted through the fifteenth, sixteenth, and the first part of the seventeenth centuries, despite the continuing attack on them by the Protestant clergy (151).

Thomas is not entirely convinced, however, that the dearth of technological remedies in itself is a sufficient explanation for the continuing faith in the efficacy of magic (although he clearly considers it a necessary precondition). He suggests that if it were the case that magic was an alternative practical technique which quelled anxiety even though it solved no problems, then the decline in its use after the sixteenth century should have been accompanied by or, better, preceded by increasing human control over the physical world. And he demonstrates that the men of the seventeenth century were not at all more capable of preventing such disasters as sickness, crop failure, or fire until a period long after that in which the prestige and practice of magic had dropped. That finding, he says, shows that shifts in the popularity of reliance on magic cannot be accounted for by any increasing or decreasing degree of controllability or predictability of physical disaster and that other explanations must be sought (656–663).

The other explanation that he proposes is that in the seventeenth century there occurred a profound shift in the attitudes of the populace in regard to the efficacy of human efforts to improve their material conditions.

> The appeal of magic could only be decisively eclipsed when people found a more attractive alternative to the practical aids which the cunning man provided for his clients. It was here that the post-Reformation religion made its great contribution. . . . The people were now

> taught that their practical difficulties could only be solved by a combination of self-help and prayer to God. [277–278]
>
> We are, therefore, forced to the conclusion that men emancipated themselves from these magical beliefs without necessarily having devised any effective technology with which to replace them. In the seventeenth century they were able to take this step because magic was ceasing to be intellectually acceptable, and because their religion taught them to try self-help before invoking supernatural aid. [663]

This was the message that theologians had been attempting to get across to the people for centuries, but why it happened at that time and not before, remains, as Thomas says, "mysterious" (253–279, 663). He believes, however, that he has described what happened, that this new attitude of "sturdy self-reliance" (278) developed and diffused through most of the population, with the result that magical practices lost their popularity, and that only subsequently did the new technologies for dealing with the catastrophes and sufferings of daily existence appear. It was this new attitude, which made magic no longer seem to be a sensible course of action, and which stimulated efforts to find more empirically adequate solutions.

Thus the crucial shift for Thomas is attitudinal. During the seventeenth century, he suggests, a growing number of people adopted a new stance toward the problems of practical life, a "frame of mind" of independent and practical optimism, and they relinquished an older psychological orientation of dependence on the aid of superhuman powers. Magical practices are based on the latter attitude. In fact, in Thomas' view, they are an expression of it.

To take the problem of witchcraft accusations, which are a special case of the belief in magical influences on material fortunes: Why did some people persist in believing themselves or those close to them to have been bewitched, while others, in the same period, found the idea of bewitching improbable? The anthropologist Robert A. LeVine has discussed at length the theories put forward by Thomas and by Alan MacFarlane in this regard.[14] LeVine points out that the reasons which they give are essentially psychosocial hypotheses. LeVine attempts to supplement their arguments by building a hypothetical model of the personality dynamics of the accusers and of the contemporary skeptics. In so doing, LeVine does not question Thomas' basic assumption that

14 LeVine, *Culture, Behavior and Personality* (Chicago, 1973), 254–270; Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1970).

magical beliefs are a distinct type of conventional notion to which a distinct type of motivation is attached. In LeVine's recasting of Thomas' suggestions, the context of this particular kind of belief is such that it can be felt to be persuasive only to persons for whom the reality-testing capacities of the ego are not developed enough to counteract the daily and immediate pressures of anxiety and guilt. In other words, those Elizabethans who rejected as incredible the effectiveness of witchcraft and other magical acts must have had stronger egos and more individuated personalities than the rest. Carried to its logical conclusion, such an argument would mean that the population of fifteenth-century England had very few members with what in psychoanalytic terms are mature personalities, while by the twentieth century strong egos would be in the majority. This I find a little difficult to accept.

Conceivably, we might define certain kinds of thinking processes as "magical," that is, as a way of orienting oneself toward the facts of one's experience in an unrealistic and ineffective way. Properly defined, this concept would then stand for a universal psychological mode, one which could be engaged in by all human beings in different degrees. It might even prove to be an empirical fact that some populations, in certain epochs and certain social situations, used "magical thinking" more than others. But for a person to employ a certain procedure that is conventionally considered by all around him to be the acceptable thing to do in his situation, does not necessarily indicate that he is motivated by an attitude of self-deception and wishful distortion of reality, even though others, contemporaries or historians, may term that procedure "magical."

Anthropological research to date has been unable to prove that public customary actions and private motivations are necessarily and directly connected. The range of psychological needs which lead individuals to perform a certain ritual has proven to be broad, and it is impossible to classify rituals or any other cultural practices according to their psychological uses. I do not intend to deny the relevance of personal motivation to the understanding of social and cultural patterns, their persistence and change, but rather to stress the complexity of the connections between them, and the need to keep them analytically distinct, rather than to define one in terms of the other.[15]

15 The classic paper in this regard is Alex Inkeles and D. J. Levinson, "National Character: The Study of Modal Personality and Sociocultural Systems," in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass. 1954, 1968), 418–506, which was based on extensive consideration of Russian and German materials.

If the performance of a "magical" act is understood by the historian as evidence that the actor has a certain orientation toward experience, and the assumption is made that this disposition is one which any human being is likely to adopt in moments of weakness when other practical solutions have failed, then such magical performances would certainly become more frequent in historical populations when their life-situations are out of their own control. The reasons that such a correlation of levels of technological capabilities with rates of magical performances could not be established was that there could be no such simple and direct connection, because the nature of the magical acts themselves had been misunderstood in the first place. They are neither misguided "technical remedies" (656), nor expressions of a "frame of mind" in which the self is seen as helpless (278).[16]

The force behind faith in astrological predictions or in curing by spells lies not in the severity of danger in the situation, nor in an anxious need to believe in an illusory solution to it, but in a conviction of their truth. These practices are comprehensible within the framework of a historically particular view of the nature of reality, a culturally unique image of the way in which the universe works, that provides a hidden conceptual foundation for all of the specific diagnoses, prescriptions, and recipes that Thomas describes. The common linking element is not a psychological attitude but an ontology. The particular beliefs continued to be immune to the skeptical or empiricist onslaught as long as the more general, unarticulated view of reality remained undisturbed. And conversely, those beliefs that we today consider magical apparently began to lose their popularity when this deeper

LeVine's survey of current anthropological views on the subject, cited above, despite the specific shortcomings in his interpretation of Thomas' data, is one of the clearest and most useful statements of the intricacy of the interconnections among psychological, social, and cultural processes.

16 The *a priori* binding together of a specific set of conventional concepts with a certain attitude leaves in question why that particular attitude is part of the content of that particular cultural belief. For instance, a serious argument could be made that the attitude of "spirit" that supports the acceptance of magic is not one of dependent self-deception, nor faith that other beings will come to one's rescue in adversity, but exactly the contrary, that employment of magic implies an attitude of confidence in the taking of direct personal action. The assumption behind spell-saying might be that one's own efforts will have important effects, that the forces of the natural world can be made to do one's bidding. In this view the saying of a spell is no less self-reliant than the switching on of an electric light. Such a direct association of custom and attitude would be equally plausible, but equally in error.

substratum of convictions about the nature of the universe began to fall apart. The studies of witchcraft trials show that when the plausibility of the crime began to waver among the educated classes—the clergymen, the lawyers, and the jurymen—then the number of convictions and later the number of persons brought to trial began to drop (452).

A specific accusation of witchcraft may in fact be a response to the conflicts within a particular social situation, and often may also be an expression of a person's deep psychic anxieties and wishes, but it is always a statement about the nature of a particular experience—one which makes cognitive sense within a received structure of ideas about reality. For a ritualized action to be able to allay anxiety, or to express the socially taboo, or to increase feelings of social solidarity, or whatever other effects it may have, it must first appear plausible. Plausibility derives not so much from empirical testing but from the fact that a particular notion is set within a general pattern of cultural concepts, a conventional cognitive map in terms of which thinking and willing, being anxious and wishing, are carried out. It is this characteristic of embeddedness in covert, closed systems of ideas about reality that made the particular beliefs about fairies and unlucky days and the like so resistant to change.[17] They did not draw their main support from the

17 This, essentially, was the burden of Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937), the single most influential study in the field of magic and witchcraft. Thomas drew on this volume in a different manner than I would have, tending to focus on Evans-Pritchard's more peripheral remarks and to read a psychological theory into it. He mentions those passages in the book in which Evans-Pritchard demonstrated how Azande diviners fooled their clients, how the clients fooled themselves, and how thinking and reacting in terms of witchcraft diverted people's inclinations from more serious active forms of aggression (Thomas, 216, 339, 566, 644). The central thesis of Evans-Pritchard's book was not that the Azande people have a collection of secondary beliefs by means of which they can explain away magical failures and prevent the subversion of their received medical theories through the onslaught of counterfactual evidence (642), nor that the consequences of maintaining this belief system were so valuable for the well-being or equilibrium of the society and the individual that it persisted. Rather, Evans-Pritchard was trying to explore the inner coherence of a complex system of ideas, one in which the peculiar, culturally specific conception of "magic" as an Azande notion forms one of three mutually interrelated concepts (the other two being "oracles" and "witchcraft"). These English terms were adopted by Evans-Pritchard for want of better translations of what he proves to be untranslatable ideas. It is the systematic character of Azande thought which makes it untranslatable, and it is this aspect of Evans-Pritchard's presentation that Thomas ignored. At one point Thomas discusses the terms "sorcery" and "witchcraft" as used by Evans-Pritchard to gloss Azande terms, and shows that this Azande distinction is of little use in analyzing English culture. The reason is obvious: Azande concepts taken out of context are not exportable, just as Elizabethan ones are not. For an interpretation of Evans-

intensity of psychological needs to believe them.[18]

I do not have the scholarly background to draw the cultural map that guided Elizabethan practitioners of conjuration, divination, and exorcism. Thomas has set forth a number of elements in their outlook: The universe was alive, teeming with active, intelligent, and purposeful agents who were both human and non-human. The line between non-human and human energy was not clear, for a witch and a powerful curer partook of both. The contrast between natural and supernatural that many of us take as self-evident may not have been drawn at all. There were no morally neutral matters nor were there any impersonal forces moving in the world. Causal arrows were reversible, as when a dangerous spell damaged the wizard himself. Time was not linear, inexorably moving in one direction, but rather a pulsating arrangement of auspicious and inauspicious occasions. What it means to know and to gain knowledge ("cunning") has a peculiar connotation in such a cosmos, having much more to do with participation and influence than our terms signify.[19]

My description lacks the compelling quality of one which might be derived from a historian's circumstantial acquaintance with the details. It is indistinct and negatively stated, stressing the differences from modern world views rather than the unique qualities. Because of that I may seem to be making a simple contrast between modern and non-modern cosmologies, when what is really needed is a highly specific picture which sets off the early English popular image of reality from those of other societies and other times.[20] More than that,

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Pritchard's accomplishment which sees it essentially as the elucidation of a world-view, see Mary Douglas, "Thirty Years after Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic," in her *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (London, 1970), xiii–xxxviii.

18 For a sophisticated modern version of Malinowski's functionalism which, however, asserts that cognitive plausibility is a psychological prerequisite for the use of cultural practices in need-satisfaction, see Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, 1966), 85–126.

19 This paragraph has been pieced together from Thomas' suggestions, scattered through his book. Thomas gives us many probing analyses of the implicit assumptions behind various specific practices, but he tends to equate logical coherence with explicit intellectual formulations, and either to stress the contradictory nature of these cultural premises or to lump them together too simply as "magic."

20 For an interesting example of how a superficial resemblance between a European belief element (the witch who transforms herself into an animal) and an apparent non-Western version of the same thing reveals itself to be totally misleading, when the two systems of ideas are given more careful study, see Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Spiritual Power in Central America," in Douglas, *Witchcraft Confessions*, 183–206.

what is needed is a set of pictures, for the Englishmen of the Reformation were developing a whole range of different world views of varying degrees of generality and conscious elaboration. Some of these were fundamentally different from the others; some were merely variations on basic agreements. Controversy and choice were characteristic of the time. Much of the controversy, ostensibly about minor details, concerned profound issues about the nature of reality.

It is a mistake to assume that an attempt to discern the inner structure of cultural systems can only be undertaken in simple societies marked by cultural unity, homogeneity, and stability.[21] Situations of competing world views are much more common that we would like to think. Much of contemporary anthropological work is an attempt to develop concepts which, while recognizing the systematically interwoven nature of cultural patterns, can at the same time handle the facts of internal variation. Even in a small traditional community we find people making personal reinterpretations of public concepts and attempting to persuade others of their rightness.[22] In more complex societies, especially those which are undergoing a process of increasing social differentiation, as was happening in England, the cultural forms are constantly undergoing diversification and modification.[23]

One of the most important dimensions of variation and change in

21 See 627, 185. Here Thomas assumes that a structural analysis of the sort carried out by Claude Lévi-Strauss can only be applied to materials from homogeneous and stable societies with single coherent cultural systems. Thomas reduces Lévi-Strauss' complex theories to a sort of cryptography. There are many other "structural" approaches besides that of Lévi-Strauss, but few if any of them necessarily entail as a logical precondition a homogeneous culture. See, for a few rather diverse studies which attempt to discern covert dimensions or culturally conventional models of reality within complex materials: Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1966); Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbol," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 126–141; Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962; 1970); David M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968); Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, 1967).

22 For an example of how a traditional cosmological system can be given an idiosyncratic interpretation by a thoughtful native, see Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Spiritual Power," 192.

23 On variation in the quality of belief within a population see, for example: Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*, Part II; Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960); R. G. Willis, "Pollution and Paradigms," *Man*, VII (1972), 369–398; Michael Ames, "Buddha and the Dancing Goblins: A Theory of Magic and Religion," *American Anthropologist*, LXVI (1964), 75–82; Robert LeVine, "Witchcraft and Sorcery in a Gusii Community," in John Middleton and E. H. Winter (eds.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London, 1963), 221–276; Robert LeVine, *Culture Behavior and Personality* (Chicago, 1973), 270–281.

cultural world views relates to the way in which magic and religion have been contrasted. As Thomas sees them, magical beliefs and practices do not present or derive from a coherent, comprehensive, and general view of the world, although religious ones do. If the argument that I have been presenting holds—that the ideas which he terms magical have underlying premises which proceed from such a whole outlook which was, however, neither consciously articulated nor critically elaborated by intellectuals of the time—then our difference lies mainly here. Contemporary discussion of these beliefs tended to see them as independent notions, and their philosophical underpinnings were, by and large, left unattacked and undeveloped. In contrast, religious dogma was an object of complex argumentation and explicit systematization.

The process of social differentiation of the period produced, among other things, an increasingly larger segment of the population that was educated. The fact that these genuinely literate people were drawn from all levels of the society is significant here, for it meant that they were in regular interaction with the uncultivated population. An illiterate may live in a much more narrowly limited cultural world than his cultivated neighbor. For him the world of ideas may often be been as finite and unquestioned. He is presented with few ideas that differ from his own, and these are simple reversals of accepted formulations. Change in ideas is hard for him to conceive of, for he is not pressed to consider broad alternatives. An educated man inhabits a quite different cultural situation in which ideas appear as discussable objects. He has access to theories beyond the reach of his ingenuity and experience, and of his own personal memory.[24]

Literacy and education affect the nature of the cultural map which defines a man's world, for it brings larger portions of that map into question and therefore into awareness. Ideas begin to have an objective external existence; they become discussable, testable, systematizable. How these two segments of the populace—the educated and the illiterate—see each other is an interesting question (666). The illiterate sector is not unchanged by its experiences with the cultivated people in its midst, for it develops a set of standard notions about knowledge and thought on the basis of those experiences. The intelligentsia, on the other hand, entertain conventional images of the unsophisticated folk. It is in this context of mutual miscomprehension and disapproval that

24 Cf. Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," *Africa*, XXXVII (1967), 50–71, 155–187; Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London, 1970).

develops between sectors of the populace who have contrasting views of the nature of knowledge and learning, that our contemporary cultural concept of magical beliefs as a hodgepodge of unempirical illusions must have emerged.

The writing of histories, just as much as the exorcising of demons, is a cultural activity. Recognition of the culturally specific sources of our own sorting categories is a first step in evaluating them. I have tried to indicate that the construct "magic" as used in much of today's thinking about exotic belief systems draws its aura of factualness from its place in our own culture and its legitimacy from the social prestige of the cultivated groups who employed the construct as an ideological weapon in the past. The same is true for the notion that "primitive ways of thought" contrast with "modern," a dichotomy which reduces the complexities of human life to a simple negative of one's presumed self, in which black is replaced by white and dark grey by light grey.

The task confronting students of what is currently referred to as "popular culture" of the past has been considerably advanced by Thomas' wide-ranging and ingenious research. Before causal links and chains can be established among the thoughts and actions of the men of a particular time, however, we must first thoroughly understand the special meanings that they held for them. The underlying patterns of assumptions, the cultural conceptions of reality, aspects of which are outside of the awareness of the actors themselves, constitute a framework within which each person normally makes sense out of his experience. Such a cultural construction contains within it ready-made specifications of the various alternative meanings that the person may place on his experiences, and choices for action that he may conceive of. In complexly differentiated societies, the traditional frameworks are constantly being challenged, in part by the lack of fit between actual experience and the ready-made concepts at hand for dealing with it, and in part by the presence of contrary frameworks. Many individual actions, ritual or otherwise, can be seen as defensive or holding efforts to bolster up a threatened world view, while many other actions may entail an abandonment of central presuppositions, and an innovative adoption of new ones. For us to begin to understand what was going on at any particular time, we need first a circumstantial understanding of the hidden structure of ideas of the time, one which recognizes to the full their historical specificity, uniqueness, and multiplicity.

The overall strategy of Thomas' work, and his extraordinary

achievement, show the way to meet this challenge: by casting as wide a research net as possible over the life of the period, by studying a broad range of activities, by examining thousands of specific events and statements, by following out the connotational ramifications of every salient cluster of ideas. The issues are broad—the nature of man, of thought, of morality, of effort, of society, of time, matter, energy, and causation—but the cultural answers given at any one moment are highly particular, and this particularity of the "Thing itself" must be given its full due before our attempts at explanation can make sense.