



Democracy and Crisis Response

By WALKER CUMMINS
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

This summer was an eventful one in the laboratories of democracy. With the unrest that continues to flare up in cities and the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had passenger's views of a governmental train wreck. A sense of mortality, and of the harsh reality of radically disruptive change and chaos, tend to be elusive to us as Americans, to varying degrees depending on such factors as class and our degree of engagement with mainstream culture. But it is always good to be shaken

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from your slumber, no matter how unpleasant the experience. Now is the time to be real about our political systems and their functionality.

For the past four years or so, we have all been subjected to a lot of talk about "democracy in crisis." Most of this talk from mainstream, academic, and institutional voices has boiled down to what might be called "securocratic" pearl-clutching about an apparent general decline of institutional authority and privilege. If we want to see things more clearly, we ought to get concrete.

An odd situation arose over the summer when district attorneys in Portland and Seattle pledged to not prosecute any protesters arrested for nonviolent and nondestructive offenses. In those cities, hundreds of people were released without bail, in the midst of violence and unrest which had been paralyzing these cities for weeks. These decisions came

with rationalizations about the courts being months behind schedule due to the pandemic. But it seems clear that political pressure from the community and the ideological views of these officials were much of the reason. It is also likely that hundreds of rioters, who were arrested for clashing with police, blocking highways and intersections, and accosting pedestrians and motorists, were released -- which continued to make these cities unsafe and put law enforcement resources under even more duress.

Without getting too far into the political weeds, what does this mean? That elected city governments, partly due to their ideological and political priorities, undermined an essential, life-preserving function of government. Intersections and highways must be clear and safe. Police should be available, and able, to respond to emergencies and conduct investigations. Pedestrians and motorists should be able to go about their city safely without being accosted by a mob. The police could not provide an effective deterrent against,

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or punishment for, behavior which has resulted in loss of life and serious injury in cities all across the country. Faced with an explosion of criminality and disorder, elected officials looked at the situation and decided it was best to let

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Review: *Religion and the Decline of Magic*

By ANDREW JUCHNO
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* is a standard in early modern European history. This wide-ranging study examines both the tensions and the congruences between the established church's teachings and popular belief.

Generally, Thomas offers a functionalist interpretation of Christianity. That is, in explaining a belief's traction, he stresses its usefulness to believers. If a practice fills a need, it will likely endure, even against prevailing reactionary or reformist impulses. Thomas begins with what he calls "the environment," a list of the potential needs of early modern Europeans—especially things they needed protection against. He cites the plague and fire as the primary threatening conditions, but also gives due attention to high child mortality rates and wealth disparity, among other factors. In England's early modern era, magic, religion, and science all had their days.

Thomas's method is similar to that in Euan Cameron's more recent *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750*, which interprets religious life in the era partly as a function of the types of harm that "people could expect to suffer." For Cameron, religion and magic responded to, and offered some control of, the dismal circumstances of late medieval and early modern life. Like Thomas, Cameron sees the woes of life in early modern England as strong elements in, if not entirely shaping, people's belief in the supernatural.

In his section on religion, Thomas argues that the early medieval church was the "repository for supernatural power" for the faithful, providing common people with a kind of magic that offered control over ordinary life through the

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the rabid dogs run loose. It is hard to say what the calculation was. Was this an attempt to buy votes by allowing agitated, until-recently quarantined constituents a sort of catharsis carnival? Was it an attempt to curry the favor of an organized, predatory mob? The implications are the same either way: politics before public safety.

As we have seen this year, one possible outcome in a democracy is that those in power may opt not to use, or even to cripple, society's mechanisms for responding to an ongoing crisis because that is considered the politically advantageous or ideologically "right" thing to do. The term "anarcho-tyranny" – referring

generally to a condition wherein the government infringes upon the rights of citizens while failing to put down violence and chaos – has been thrown around to describe the situation across the country. It is a compelling concept, but likely premature and not entirely accurate. It seems more accurate to say that the relationship between public opinion, or accountability to the public, and good government may be weaker than we would like to assume. That voters understand what good and bad situations look like, that they recognize a major mistake or failure by government, and that they know which political forces or officials to blame, all seem like questionable

assumptions in an age of exploding complexity and an exploding volume of contradictory media.

We should think seriously about the troubling possibility that the democratic process can cannibalize government by allowing, for example, many voters' perceived sympathy for violence to override even the most basic public safety obligations when that seems politically advantageous to elected officials. The sense that greater crises lie just ahead is widespread. And this intuition seems to come without any of the self-aggrandizing or opportunism that should arouse our suspicion.

THOMAS REVIEW... cont.

ritualistic repetition of certain prayers and the potency of consecrated holy objects. He then discusses what he describes as the competing storehouse of supernatural power: the set of beliefs and practices that he collectively calls "magic."

In his section on magic, Thomas charts popular healing practices, especially as they related to psychosomatic conditions, and details the place of those who engaged in them (known as "cunning folk") in English society—generally, that the laity both feared and respected them.

in the process. As the century wore on, increased levels of skepticism brought about the end of witchcraft prosecutions, but only social changes that made the world more impersonal and urban would lead to the virtual end of magic. Urbanization and the growth of insurance as an economic practice, among other seventeenth-century projects, had more to do with magic's fall than did changes in knowledge production and the rise of science.

Almost fifty years after its publication, the legacy of *Religion and*

have justifiably challenged. When, for instance, Thomas posits that "The Reformation took a good deal of magic out of religion," he sets the stage for a larger historical interpretation that errantly pits the forces of science and religion as necessarily conflicting against one another. Only recently have scholars begun to grapple seriously with the implications of such an interpretation, arguing that the Reformation and later the Enlightenment did not "disenchant" the West (deprive it of spirituality or magic) as much as the social theorist Max Weber

Whatever its faults, "Religion and the Decline of Magic" ought to remain a standard work in early modern European religious history.

He finds that religion provided a "rival system of ecclesiastical magic" to take the place of folk magic. But despite religion's ascendancy as a means of protection from life's hazards, folk magic persisted to some degree. In contrast, astrology apparently "ceased, in all but the most unsophisticated circles, to be regarded as either a science or a crime." Whereas magic could sustain competition from Christianity, astrology could not.

Later in the early modern period, however, magic's decline accelerated. With seventeenth-century thought's "emancipation from the past," Thomas writes, the "possibility of infinite intellectual progress" led many to break from the traditions of the ancients, creating a discontinuous modernity

the Decline of Magic seems unclear. On the one hand, Thomas undoubtedly paved the way for many social and religious historians interested in popular beliefs and the occult in the early modern period. Within this field of history, he identified enough significant topics that hadn't yet been sufficiently studied that he can be considered one of its founders. Historians of both sides of the Atlantic owe him a scholarly debt, and for general readers *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is a praiseworthy introduction to a fascinating world.

On the other hand, the general arc of Thomas's account—from magic to religion, then from religion to science—tends to result in a secularizing narrative that students of history and religion

and his disciples supposed they did.

Whatever its faults, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* ought to remain a standard work in early modern European religious history. Both newcomers to the field and specialists will delight in Thomas's easy prose, quick wit, and commendably approachable intellectual style. For the undergraduate, this book is a useful and highly recommended primer. For graduate students of early modern Europe, it belongs on the study list for one's oral exams. *Religion and the Decline of Magic* has stood the test of time. Reviewing Thomas's magnum opus for *The New York Review of Books*, Hilary Mantel said it best: "It is not just about magic, but also, in its mercurial agility, it is a magical work in itself."

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