

# ***Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality***

By Stanley Tambiah

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Reviewed by Geoff Gilpin

In 1877, the eminent anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan published a book called *Ancient Society: Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism, to Civilization*.

Such were the Victorian verities. Professor Morgan and his scholarly audience viewed life as a great evolutionary chain: from protoplasm to beast to Indian to Hun to Roman to Victorian gentleman, preferably in top hat and tails.

Morgan's more famous contemporary Sir James Frazier, author of *The Golden Bough*, applied a similar evolutionary scheme to the study of religion. According to Frazier, the earliest humans lived in superstitious dread and placated the spirits through magic. As time passed, the more thoughtful savages realized that magic didn't work. They gave up on the spirits of river and wood and turned to a more abstract world: the realm of the gods. Magicians gave way to priests who could interpret the will of the gods and perform the appropriate rituals of sacrifice. As priestly metaphysics grew in sophistication, the many gods yielded to one God, a divinity of sufficient grandeur for Victorians.

Frazier was timid about following his scheme to its logical conclusion. He implies, but doesn't state openly, that religion must succumb to reason and science as surely as magic did to religion. Secular moderns are not so modest.

A hundred years later, Frazier's scheme is still with us. It may well be the "conventional wisdom" of our age concerning the topics of magic, religion, and science. It may be popular, but is Frazier's scheme accurate?

No, says Stanley Tambiah, an anthropologist at the University of Rochester, New York. Tambiah, speaking on the occasion of the Lewis Henry Morgan lecture series (in four talks that are the source of this short book) firmly debunks the conventional wisdom.

For one thing, Tambiah notes that the evolutionary viewpoint contains a built-in class bias.

“In plotting the history of the demarcation between magic, science, and religion in Western thought we ought to remind ourselves all the time of the necessary gaps between the elite conceptions of the intelligensia – scientists, theologians, dogmatists – and the masses at large for whom intellectual hairsplitting was less important than the tasks of practical living and of everyday realities.”

If elites are the “early adopters” of new movements like monotheism or science, the great unwashed are often reluctant to give up the old ways. Tambiah suggests that one reaction to the Enlightenment was a popular “counterculture” of paganism and folk magic.

Even for the elite, the distinction between magic, religion, and science isn’t necessarily clear. There’s ample evidence that some of the great names of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment – Giordano Bruno, Kepler, Copernicus, Isaac Newton – had one foot (at least) firmly planted in the irrational.

Here, Tambiah relies heavily on the scholarship of Dame Frances Yates. According to Yates, “The great forward movements of the Renaissance, all derive their vigor, their emotional impulse from looking backwards.”

The men who ushered in the age of science and reason did not see their work as an evolutionary leap into the future. Instead, they were trying to recapture the ancient wisdom of occult sages like Pythagoras and Hermes

Trismegistus. The magical textbooks attributed to the latter, supposedly an Egyptian contemporary of Moses, were tremendously influential. According to Tambiah:

“The most illustrious of our cases is Giordano Bruno. ... Bruno was presented some decades ago as an enlightened Renaissance philosopher who defended Copernicanism [the ‘heliocentric’ theory that the sun is the center of the solar system] against reactionaries. But it transpires that he quoted at length from the *Asclepius* [one of the Hermetic books] on magic reform and that his defense of heliocentricity was influenced by Hermes Trismegistus...”

Most people today automatically assume that science and reason are superior to magic and the occult, but the distinction wasn’t at all clear to the men who gave us the scientific age. Kepler studied astrology. Newton studied alchemy. Our heroes of enlightenment weren’t schizophrenic; they used whatever tool they deemed right for a particular job. One day it might be a telescope, the next day a talisman inscribed with astral charms.

Tambiah finds a modern parallel in the world of the Trobriand Islanders. Again, he turns to the recognized expert in the field, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.

“I consider as one of Malinowski’s foremost contributions... his descriptions of how the separate strands of magic and practical activity were interlaced to form the braid of Trobriand life.”

Malinowski lived in New Guinea among the Trobrianders during World War I. He observed their sophisticated agriculture and architecture, their skill in boat-building and navigation, and their powerful magic rituals.

To the Trobriand Islanders, magic and technology were equally important, and they often joined to accomplish a practical goal. For example, the

cultivation of sweet potatoes – a big part of the Trobriand diet – involved equal parts of gardening and ritual. To the Trobrianders, the agriculture and the magic were part of one thing: “growing sweet potatoes.” As Malinowski put it:

“The association between technical pursuit and its magical counterpart is... very close, and to the natives essential. The sequence of technical stages, on the one hand, and of rites and spells, on the other, run parallel.”

For the enlightened heroes of the Renaissance and the Trobriand Islanders in their loincloths, magic and science are two equally important ways of interacting with the world.

To emphasize their relative equality, Tambiah classifies magic, religion, and science as three “orderings of reality.” There is no sequential or hierarchical relationship between the three. Instead, they are like a crowbar, a hammer, and a screwdriver; three different tools for different purposes. In particular, Tambiah thinks that religion and magic are useful when the individual wishes to *participate* in the workings of the universe. Science is good for observation and understanding.

Tambiah’s book is valuable but flawed. He provides a thorough survey of work addressing the common ground between science, religion, and magic. His own contributions are largely of the compare-and-contrast sort, although he does offer important insights such as the notion of participation.

Unfortunately, his work is hampered by a verbose, rambling style that makes his ideas hard to follow. The organization of the book itself – perhaps as a result of its origins in a lecture series – is scattered and confusing. It’s hard to find what you want without a lot of page-turning.

Still, for those with an interest in the subject, this is a very worthwhile book.