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Magic, science and religion in Western thought: anthropology's intellectual legacy

As a Victorian it was natural, in 1877, for Lewis Henry Morgan to give the following subtitle to *Ancient Society*: "Researches in the lines of human progress from savagery, through barbarism to civilization." I feel that it is equally natural for me in 1984, over a century later, to want to affirm this statement of Morgan's: "The History of the human race is one in source, one in experience and one in progress,"[1] not by insisting as he did on the ladder of progress and evolution as the key to that history, but by affirming the continuities in experience and the generality of existential problems that constitute the psychic unity of mankind. If I do honour to Morgan then, I do so by pitting myself against that great evolutionary scheme that he helped construct as the major paradigm of his time.

My presentations are from the standpoint of a social anthropologist who has studied religions and social phenomena in the field, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, and who at the same time is interested in the intellectual origins in Western thought of the concepts of religion, magic and science, and the bearing that that history may have on their valid application as general analytical categories in comparative studies.

Magic, Science and Religion is the title of a famous long essay published by Bronislaw Malinowski in 1925.[2] These three categories or domains, their demarcation, differentiation and overlap, have been the subject of a vigorous polemical dialogue among a number of scholars who are invariably included in any genealogy of anthropological theorists. My genealogy as well as itinerary begins with late British Victorians like Sir Edward Tylor and Sir James Frazer, passes on to the French *Année Sociologique* school of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, and others who interacted with them such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Maurice Leenhardt, then returns to Britain to its Functionalists, principally Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and finally leads to moderns: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Robin Horton, John Beattie, Ernest Gellner and many others.

This lively dialogue that has extended for at least eleven decades, since in fact Morgan's time, is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it accepted the

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categories of magic, science and religion as meaningful domains prevalent in virtually all societies, and therefore as generally useful analytical categories for comparative study. Secondly, the long dialogue consisted of polemical exchanges in which the theorists took different positions regarding the three domains: their substantive contents, their boundaries, their developmental stages, and the quality of the "rationality" they portrayed. Indeed the debate inevitably led the theorists to ask whether the mentalities and modes of thought of men and women everywhere were the same or different. If the same, what were their common features, and where were we to locate them? If there were universal features, how did we explain cultural diversity? If the mentalities were different, were the differences decisive, qualitative, and discontinuous between "us" moderns, and them "primitives," or were all human societies merely occupants of different positions on a single developmental continuum, whose bedrock was the "psychic unity of mankind"?

In this first chapter I wish to present a few historical backdrops as illustrative of the West's intellectual, epistemological and even ontological legacy, that has influenced, oftentimes unconsciously, the anthropological discourse of the past, and continues to influence it in the present. The anthropological debate which I have mentioned as stretching from the 1870s to the 1980s will derive its maximum value only if we locate it in the stream of Western intellectual history which again was inflected by cataclysmic social, political and economic developments. When we have acquired some appreciation of these historical and contextual circumstances, we shall not only better understand the epistemological and philosophical debates of the past, but also comprehend why we have to confront today the question whether or not the categories of magic, science and religion may be "tendentious" and their analytical value rendered suspect by their historical "embeddedness."

Although Max Weber (and certain others) pronounced that the historical conditions which give birth to certain ideas and concepts need not affect their objective status and truth value, there are powerful questionings and disavowals of this thesis from other directions. Let me mention some. Karl Marx, and his successors, particularly the Frankfurt School of Critical Sociology (Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, *et al.*), have relentlessly sought the critique of ideology, and to deconstruct "ideology" as serving and legitimizing "interests". Ideology as distorted discourse not only masks the ambitions of powerful interests, it can also actively produce practices and policies that constitute social reality. "Science" too has not escaped this taint of being tarred by interest groups and by political power. Recently, from another intellectual tradition Foucault, in popularizing the equation of Power/Knowledge, has sought to unveil "the political status of science and the ideological functions it could serve,"[3] and the interventions in society that it stimulates. Onslaughts on the universal applicability of the notion of economic man and economy as defined by neo-classical economics, the notion of economy as a differentiated and separate domain of behavior in which individuals act to maximize returns in a price-forming market situation,

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conceptions perhaps best descriptive of the classical capitalist bourgeois economy, have been mounted by Karl Polanyi and the so-called "substantivists" in economic anthropology.

Louis Dumont, in spirit sympathetic to Polanyi, in his *Homo Hierarchicus* confronts the same problem in a different context. He has striven to convince us that Indian society and civilization are constructed on a conception of hierarchy, in which the domains of religion, polity and economy are arranged and weighted differently from their manner of interaction in modern individualist capitalist societies. In such a hierarchy, moreover, the relevant criterion is how the different parts contribute to the whole rather than how atomistic units as basic reference points add up to make a whole. Similarly, Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *The Meaning and End of Religion* has made suspect the general application of a narrow rationalist definition of religion, born of the European Enlightenment, which has construed it primarily as a doctrine of beliefs and a system of intellectualistic constructs.

Once we raise these comparative epistemological and sociological issues, our discussions will inevitably lead us to the grand problem, which is at the heart of the anthropological enterprise: How do we understand and represent the modes of thought and action of other societies, other cultures? Since we have to undertake this task from a Western baseline so to say, how are we to achieve "the translation of cultures," i.e. understand other cultures as far as possible in their own terms but in our language, a task which also ultimately entails the mapping of the ideas and practices onto Western categories of understanding, and hopefully modifying these in turn to evolve a language of anthropology as a comparative science?

In some measure this task of understanding and translation has been the increasing self-conscious concern of us moderns. To give just one example in the study of religion: the Dutch phenomenologists of religion (such as G. van der Leeuw and W. Brede Kristensen) have been exemplary in urging students of religion to adopt an attitude both of "distancing" and "sympathy" toward alien faiths; to refrain from attempting to judge the ultimate truth value of other religions (the attitude of *epoché*), especially from the standpoint of one's own religion, for this is properly the task of a theologian and not a student of religion; to avoid easy and superficial reductionism of religion to some level of social structure or individual psychic conditions; and not to resort to biased evolutionary schemes by which some forms of religion are considered lower and others superior. These phenomenologists have at the same time held before us the comparative prospect of establishing common meanings and structures in a number of different events and manifestations both within and between religions.

One must see then that the daunting double task of translation of cultures and their comparative study raises not only the question of the mentality of us and other peoples, but also ultimately the issue of "*rationality*" itself, and the limits of western "scientism" as a paradigm.

As a sequel to this preamble, let me now sketch in some historical

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backdrops. The historical origins and derivation of the concepts of religion, magic and science bear relevantly on the question of using them as general analytical categories for the understanding of the modes of thought and action of non-Western societies.

In order to fully understand the concept of *religion* as taken for granted in the modern West it is necessary to have some idea of its vicissitudes and trajectory in the history of Western thought.

A thumbnail sketch of the history of "religion" as a concept

My main source for this thumbnail sketch is Wilfred Cantwell Smith.[4] Although Smith does not use Kuhn's or Foucault's language, we may construe his account as showing paradigmatic shifts in the European's concept of religion. Since "religion" in English ultimately derives from the Latin word *religio*, we should begin with Roman times. *Religio* carried a double meaning: the existence of a power outside to whom man was obligated; and the feeling of *piety* man had towards that power. By and large, religion as a generic concept still carries these meanings though they do not exhaust it. But in Roman times the reification of a religion as a great objective phenomenon or as an entity of speculative interest did not exist. Religion was something one felt and did, so to say.

In early Christianity the following emphases and attitudes were developed. An integral component of religion was the sense of an "organized community," a *church*. So was the concept of *faith*. The early fathers interpreted the new *faith* as ramifying with every aspect of a believer's life. Religion was all inclusive, a "total phenomenon" to use Marcel Mauss's twentieth-century words, which included both the subjective orientations of the worshippers and the hierarchical organization of the Church. Finally, early Christianity had a definite conception of true versus false religion (*vera et falsa religio*), was strongly exclusive with regard to other faiths and was intolerant of them.

In the Middle Ages, St. Augustine carried further this claim of Christianity as the one true religion. He emphasized the personal relationship to the one and true transcendent God. In the Middle Ages "faith" not "religion" was the great word. *Religio* in fact was a special designation for the monastic life, a heritage we still continue when we refer to the members of the monastic orders as "the religious."

The main message, as it issued during the Reformation from the mouths of Zwingli and Calvin, was that men should not put their faith in any external institution, the Church, or in any religious system as embodying the divine. Instead *religio* designated something personal, inner and transcendentally oriented.

It is essentially in the modern period, since the Enlightenment, that a particular conception of religion that emphasizes its cognitive, intellectual, doctrinal and dogmatic aspects, gained prominence. From the seventeenth

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century onwards European thought progressively showed interest in the intellectual constructs, systematic and abstract, that were elaborated in the religious realm. As Smith says, the leaders of European thought "gave the name 'religion' to the system, first in general but increasingly to the system of ideas, in which men of faith were involved or with which men of potential faith were confronted."[5] So a century after Calvin, men were calling by the name *religio* not their personal visions of God and their relationship with Him, but all the beliefs and practices that Calvin regarded as vehicles to that end. By the later seventeenth century, the consideration of religion as a system of ideas and beliefs, as a doctrine, had become regnant. (I must here draw your attention to this intellectualistic attitude of the Enlightment to religion, which, as primarily composed of "doctrine" or "beliefs," was a legacy inherited by our Victorian fathers of the anthropology of religion such as Sir Edward Tylor, whose minimum definition of religion was "the belief in Spiritual Beings." Tylor will engage us in detail later.)

It is also relevant to note that the Enlightenment tendency to produce an intellectualist and impersonal schematization of religion was extended and universalized in terms of the concept of *natural religion* as a generic phenomenon. It was claimed that beliefs about God were common to all mankind and were attainable by man by virtue of his natural reason. At the same time, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the religious wars and conflicts that raged in Europe made the subject of religion a matter for polemical and apologetic labelling and disputation.

So in the nineteenth century, despite the return to the more personal and moral aspects of religion by John Wesley and the Methodists and by the German pietists, the dominant trend in the study and exposition of religion was to infuse the static quality of the Enlightenment's rationalism with an increasing sense of history and historical knowledge. The subject of religion now included the theme of the historical development of religion over the centuries. A comparative focus with an evolutionary framework developed, making use of the new information on other religions reported by travellers and missionaries. This process of "objectification" of religion had by now been taken to its furthest point. Religion had become an object of study and it had been substantialized. Individual religions were regarded as phenomena with their distinctive histories, and scholars sought to compare them, and some even to grade them into higher and lower.

Moreover by the beginning of this century, Western scholars had already labelled the great religions as *isms*: such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc. In this labelling and delineation the so-called doctrinal texts, the beliefs and tenets, of the religious *virtuosi* and intellectuals were given prominence as the core of the *ism* under study.

One legacy from the Enlightenment's rationalist emphasis that influenced the dominant defence of Christianity by its theologians was the framework of "historical realism," which was seen as entailing the reconstruction of the past

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"as it actually was" in terms of methods compounded of biblical criticism, Greek rationalism, and the scientific method. The characterization of religion, its "justification" by adherents (or its "denigration" by its opponents), had to be done in a way that took cognizance of the extant scientific discourse and philosophical argumentation. There has been a felt need to provide a cognitive account of religious belief that made the intellectual exercise a parallel to a kind of objectivist scientific description. In our discussions hereafter I shall try to argue that from a general anthropological standpoint the distinctive feature of religion as a generic concept lies not in the domain of belief and its "rational accounting" of the workings of the universe, but in a special awareness of the transcendent, and the acts of symbolic communication that attempt to realize that awareness and live by its promptings.

The early Judaic religion: true religion and false magic

In order to fully understand the current Western conception of magic it is best that we take note of two legacies – one deriving from the early religion of Israel (which became later a part of the broader Judaeo-Christian religious tradition) and the other deriving from Greece, which is usually credited with the origination of systematic "science," and whose principal ideas are said to have influenced later European thought from the Renaissance onwards.

The early biblical religion, say from its beginnings to the Babylonian Exile has, according to Yehezkel Kauffmann[6] who is my principal authority here, made a sharp distinction between the monotheistic worship of YHWH and pagan idolatry, which went as follows:

YHWH was Israel's "living God" as opposed to the pagan gods who were worshipped in the form of images, constructed out of wood and stone by man.

The distinctive feature of Israelite monotheism was not merely that there was one God, but also that there was no realm, primordial or otherwise, to limit his sovereignty. Such a supreme God therefore cannot be the focus of any mythology. There are no myths – indeed there cannot be any myths – about YHWH's origins or his pedigree.

Moreover this monotheistic sovereign God of Israel created the universe *ex nihilo*; there was no pre-existent stuff he used, he simply created it by fiat, and the processes of nature were established by his divine decree.

This means that there is no natural bond between God and nature, for nature did not share in any of God's substance or body (that is, nature was not "iconically" connected with God). Similarly, there was also a great chasm between God and man as his creation. There was no bridge between the God and the created universe.

In line with this absolute divide was the conception that morality was God-imposed. Sin is rebellion against the will of the creator and its punishment is God-willed. There is thus no automaticity or mechanical causality about this conception of man's sinful acts and their results. It follows therefore that the

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Bible places a relentless ban on "magic" (as a form of causal action to manipulate God) under pain of death, and that it should also regard prophecy as God directly speaking to a prophet who relays the message to the people. That is, the prophet is not conceived as possessed by God or as being a "vessel" filled by God.

Now in Kauffmann's account the worship of idols is credited with practically all the opposite implications. The Bible describes the idols as bearers of occult powers, and therefore as having powers to act. Pagan worship is directed to appeasing them and receiving benefits from them. It is these attitudes and ritual transactions that are denounced as magic and sorcery. (I am reminded at this point of a famous hymn of Bishop Heber's which expressed the same sentiment in these lines: "The heathen in his blindness/Bows down to wood and stone)." Be that as it may, I must underscore the point that the Bible accepts the reality and efficacy of pagan magic. It however condemns it as false religion not in the sense of its not producing empirical results but in the sense of being anathema to the Jewish people bound to YHWH by a special covenant.

The pagan cosmology in contrast to the early Judaic is pictured as accepting the existence of a primordial realm and primordial stuff anterior to, or parallel with, or even independent of the gods. Thus pagan gods do not transcend the universe but are rooted in it and bound by its laws.

The existence of a primordial realm with its pre-existent autonomous force thus allows for, nay stimulates, the operation of ritual action of the type branded as "magic," and the elaboration of a rich mythology about gods and men. Gods as well as men are subject to the order of the cosmos (Hindu *rita*, Greek *moira*, Persian *asha*). There are no fixed bounds between gods and men so that men can aspire to be gods, and are open to the benefits of apotheosis.

Magic comes into its own in this cosmology as a distinctive kind of ritual action. In its quintessential form – and this is the early Judaic legacy that has coloured subsequent Western thought – magic is ritual action that is held to be automatically effective, and ritual action that dabbles with forces and objects that are outside the scope, or independent, of the gods. Magical acts in their ideal forms are thought to have an intrinsic and automatic efficacy. This is one strand in the Western conception of magic, and a lot of sophistry and special pleading has gone into preserving this definition over time.

Now, I want to suggest to you that the Hindu cosmology, a product of high civilization, has structural features similar to those attributed by early Judaism to early paganism, and that in this Hindu scheme we are able to see some startling implications for comparative study and for the translation of cultures.

Judaeo-Christian monotheism is in spirit totally antagonistic to the cosmology of Hindu polytheism and non-dualism. Judaeo-Christian monotheism is honour bound to declare any conception of a cosmos, in which man and transcendental entities share certain similar properties and capacities, and

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can have relations of reciprocity, exchange and even coercion, and in which objects and forces that exist apart from and anterior to them can be employed, as not only polytheistic but also magical and pagan.

Moreover the Hindu-type "pagan" cosmology highlights entirely different problems and generates different puzzles to solve from those of early Judaism as its central religious questions, and advances entirely different solutions to general existential problems like the origins of evil and the justification of theodicy (explanation of the distribution of suffering in this world).

Wendy O'Flaherty writes in *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*[7] these words that are impossible to admit in Judaic monotheism:

"The gods are responsible for the creation of evil for various reasons: in orthodox Hinduism, because *dharma* is only possible, and valuable, when *adharma* also exists to balance and contrast with it; in asceticism mythology because the gods fear that men will become too peaceful and overcome the gods; and in devotional mythology because God wishes to descend to the level of evil, and to participate in it, to help or free mankind."[8]

Thus Hindu mythology in certain contexts entertains these "heresies" and these "magical" activities as judged by the canons of Judaic monotheism: that God is not good or does not wish man to be without evil; that not only is evil inevitable, it is desirable; that men can acquire power through ascetic practices (*tapas*) to challenge the gods. When a sage asked why Bṛhaspati, the guru of the gods, told a lie, the reply he received was: "All creatures, even gods, are subject to passions. Otherwise the universe, composed as it is of good and evil, could not continue to develop."[9]

The origins of Greek science

In this second backdrop relating to the rise of Greek science (the period up to the fifth century B.C.) we are particularly interested to discern why classicists and Western intellectual historians point to Greece as the womb of "science," in the sense science is recognized today.

If we look at traditional discussions of science we are faced with several definitions among which one has increasingly won out. J. G. Crowther (in *The Social Relations of Science*)[10] defined science as "the system of behaviour by which man acquires mastery of the environment." The trouble with this loose definition is that by this criterion no society whatsoever has lacked the rudiments of science. Another definition that has been advanced (Charles Singer, *A Short History of Scientific Ideas to 1900*)[11] is that science is the "active" process of "knowledge making," and "no body of doctrine which is not growing, which is not actually in the making can long retain the attributes of science." By this criterion we have to acknowledge as science the great developments over stretches of time in medicine, metallurgy, geometry and astronomy in the Near East to which Greece was heir, and also the technical achievements of Ancient China that preceded Greek science.

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But the classicists seem to have more restrictive criteria in mind. M. Clagett (in his book *Greek Science in Antiquity*)[12] enumerates these: first "the orderly and systematic comprehension, description and/or explanation of natural phenomena," and second "the tools necessary for that undertaking, including, especially, logic and mathematics."

By far the most useful writing on early Greek science I have encountered is G. E. R. Lloyd's works, who in his *Magic, Reason and Experience,*[13] uses three criteria that establish that Greece produced the first philosopher scientists:

(1) The demarcation of nature as separate from the domain of the supernatural. Together with this go these conceptions: laws of nature, regularity of nature, and causation in a physical and mechanical sense.

(2) The development of the tools of logical argument and of mathematics, and the systematic deployment of them to formulate a mode of demonstration and proof. This discourse is furthered by the practice of rational criticism and debate, the presence and encouragement of lively academies and disputing schools of thought, and a general climate that tolerates a general skepticism.

(3) The increasing guidance of these methods and canons of demonstration and proof by empirical observation and research in order to extend the empirical base of knowledge.

Now, it cannot be said that the early Greeks developed this scientific mentality all at once or in a widespread manner. The Greeks had no conception of "science" that can be considered equivalent to our own notion of science that developed in the seventeenth century (and became current, say, in the Royal Society of London around 1645). But the Greeks in question did possess terms such as *philosophia* (love of wisdom, philosophy), *episteme* (knowledge), *theoria* (contemplation), and *periphyseos historia* (inquiry concerning nature) as in part overlapping with, even rough equivalents of, what came to be labelled later as science. And most interestingly and importantly, early Greece was familiar with the category of magic: *μάγοι* [*magi*] meant magicians, and *μαγεία* [*magea*] meant the religion of the *magi*). We ought thus to pay close attention to the contents of these terms and how they related to each other in a semantic field.

Of the many features of early Greek science, I wish to draw your special attention to this point. The first time in extant Greek – indeed, it is claimed, in extant Western literature – when a body of beliefs was explicitly declared to be magical was in a medical text from the latter part of the fifth or the early part of the fourth century B.C. The text in question was *On the Sacred Disease*. It belonged to the Hippocratic Corpus and its subject matter was epilepsy.

The text is a landmark for these reasons: it rejected this disease (and certain others) as being the result of divine intervention; in other words, it rejected a certain kind of explanation and action that was labelled "magical" or occult. It proposed as a substitute explanation a naturalistic explanation of disease, which itself was tied to a doctrine of the uniformity of nature and the

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regularity of causes (we are tempted to say, using Kuhn's celebrated phrase, that this text represented an intellectual "paradigm switch").

Now, while this text does have some kind of momentous significance, equally significant for us is the fact that the umbrella of "naturalistic explanation" sheltered in early Greece many fanciful explanations, which had a weak empirical base and were grounded in doubtful inferences. It is true that certain empirical studies were being made at the time in the form of astronomical and clinical observations – for instance, all seven books of the Hippocratic Corpus titled *Epidemics* reported case histories (a representative sample of which numbering forty-two cases are to be found in volumes 1 and 3) – and it is also true that the concept of dissection was known before Aristotle's time but only occasionally performed at that time. By and large, however, the medical doctors of the Hippocratic School appealed to naturalist causes without possessing a real positivist methodology or an efficacious technology of curing, including pharmacopeia. Thus we may note that "nature" as the ground of explanation was accepted theoretically before an efficacious medicine and medical technology were developed.

This state of affairs provides an occasion for me to underscore a point which is equally true now in our time as it was then. A commitment to the notion of nature as the ground of causality, of nature as a uniform domain subject to regular laws, can function as a belief system without its guaranteeing a verified "objective truth" as modern science may define it. In other words, the appeal to "nature" or "science" can serve as a legitimation of a belief and action system like any other ideological and normative system. (I need only remind you of how today the laity at large is frequently called upon to use medical drugs, or assent to industrial and chemical and nuclear projects, on the basis of alleged "scientific" reasoning and evidence: medical tragedies such as thalidomide babies and nuclear reactor accidents such as that which happened at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, and the horrors of Love Canal in upstate New York, are stark reminders of our victimization on the altars of innocent belief in science, technology and economic growth.)[14]

Next we ought to bear in mind that despite the development of a "scientific" mode of thought in early Greece, early Greece knew the co-presence of many types of healers and healing systems which both competed with one another and also overlapped as regards therapy. Hippocratic doctors, herbalists, temple medicine priests practiced simultaneously, and there was a general belief in the efficacy of drugs, amulets, spells and prayers. Terms like "purification" and "cleansing" carried both "natural" and "moral" meanings, much as they do in many parts of the world today.

Thirdly, we should also bear in mind that both pre- and post- Aristotelian science exhibited mystical aspects. For example, the Pythagorean sects cultivated esoteric doctrines and practices, including a mystical number theory and astrology. Geoffrey Lloyd notes that several of the writers and

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