

All of hostility in  
western belief  
systems toward



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All societies and human beings have a set of beliefs for ordering the world.

Religion and magic are belief systems used by many societies. This essay will discuss the function and moral dimensions of both magic and religion, and focus on the need to explore human beliefs and behaviours in the context of the society in which they occur. I will also discuss the way in which magic and religion use various processes to provide psychological reassurance to individuals, leading to the conclusion that both belief systems incorporate equally rational ways of dealing with problems. Religion can be seen as an overarching controlling force in the universe that sustains the moral and social order of the people, serving to validate people's lives. The main purposes of religion function to set a moral code and sense of community and security, to explain misfortunes in life and most importantly, to help people through crisis and problems, providing hope and faith. There is some evidence of hostility in Western belief systems toward magic, with magic tending to be understood as an erroneous and unreliable belief knowledge system. Some anthropologists believe it is necessary to distinguish between religion and magic, seeing religion as a rational belief system and magic as irrational.

Many evolutionist anthropologists maintain the belief that magic and religion equate to different stages of social evolution, holding that the deeper minds may be conceived to have made the great transition from magic to religion' (Frazer, J 1890). This phrase is misleading because it suggests that some societies are less complex, rational or primitive than other advanced' societies, enhancing the common misconception that religion is a more rational way of dealing with problems than magic is. Religion is generally

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associated with developed cultures and magic is associated with undeveloped, so-called primitive cultures, hence encouraging the idea that magic belongs to superstitious, irrational individuals with limited intellectual abilities. Magic, through various forms including activities and rituals, provides a means to influence the supernatural. It is a way of gaining information about the unknown, and also gives a sense of control over events and happenings of life. Magic, like religion, provides meaning and purpose, reducing uncertainty, effectively counteracting the forces of fear and providing the means for the re-establishment of solidarity and morale of a community facing or touched by crisis. Magic embraces a system of values which regulate human conduct' (Evans-Pritchard 1976 1937: 18. It is in fact a very complex, regular and consistent form of belief.

Azande people resolve problems using a logical belief system of witchcraft. All events and circumstances are not invariably and unanimously attributed to magical forces, and witchcraft is used solely to explain the unexplainable. Evans-Pritchard states in his analysis of the Azande people, that magic and witchcraft has its own logic, its own rules of thought, and that these do not exclude natural causation. Belief is quite consistent with human responsibility and a rational appreciation of nature' (Evans-Pritchard 1976 1937: 30).

Azande people say that witchcraft and magic is the second spear' (Evans-Pritchard 1976 1937: 25). This depicts that they recognise the plurality of causes, and that witchcraft is not used to explain every misfortune. This philosophy can be linked to what Westerners would call accident' or fate', what Hindus would call karma' and what Christians would call God's Will'.

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There is no evidence to suggest that some societies contain individuals more rational or better equipped to employ logic and reason than other societies.

Every community is in possession of a considerable store of knowledge, based on experience and fashioned by reason (Malinowski 1954: 26).

Individuals of all societies have equal scopes of rationality and intellectual capacities however, differ in the method used when dealing with problems.

Religion and magic are both used to cope with the domain of the unpredictable, adverse influences and misfortune.

For example, the Trobriand Islanders do not utilise magic when fishing in the inner lagoon, where a man can completely rely on his skills and knowledge.

However, when fishing in the open-sea in an environment of danger and uncertainty, the fisherman will resort to magic for safety. This shows that the Trobriand Islanders use magic only when confronted by situations they cannot