

**RATIONALIZATION, SECULARIZATION, AND THE PARANORMAL:
ON THE “ELIMINATION” OF MAGIC FROM THE WORLD**

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ABSTRACT: *Rationalization (Max Weber’s sense) and secularization reduce societies’ acceptance of paranormal (supernatural) phenomena. Rationalization involves disenchantment, i.e., the “elimination” of magic from the world. Standard definitions of magic from sociology and anthropology are equivalent to, in parapsychological terms, the intentional use of psi. Both religious and secularizing forces work to suppress and marginalize magic, but it is not eliminated. Practice of, and opposition to, magic are influenced by social position, with opponents of magic and parapsychology often found among intellectual elites. Intellectual elite culture is essentially disenchanting.*

Parapsychology remains marginal. It gets little respect, and within the U.S., it is worse off now than it has been in many decades. Its major institutions (e.g., American Society for Psychical Research, Parapsychology Foundation) are moribund. The field has almost no presence whatever in U.S. colleges and universities. Any comprehensive and effective theory of the paranormal must explicitly address the continued marginality of the phenomena as well as the scientific research into them.

The phenomena themselves have been recognized for millennia, and traditionally they have been the province of religion. Within religious studies the term *supernatural* is more commonly used. Yet *Merriam-Webster’s* is clear—the terms *supernatural* and *paranormal* are essentially equivalent.

su• per• nat• u• ral... *sf*: or relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe; *esp* : of or relating to God or a god, demigod, spirit, or devil **2 a** : departing from what is usual or normal *esp.* so as to appear to transcend the laws of nature **b** : attributed to an invisible agent (as a ghost or spirit) (2003, 1254)

para• nor• mal... *n*ot scientifically explainable : SUPERNATURAL (2003, 899)

Parapsychologists generally shun the term *supernatural*, because any explicit association with religion would only exacerbate the stigma among many scientists. Within professional parapsychology, religion has been a marginal topic, at best. But by avoiding religious scholarship, parapsychologists miss important properties of the phenomena, and they remain oblivious to reasons for their own marginality.

DEFINITIONS—Religion & Magic

Scholarly disputes have raged over the definition of *religion*, but sociologists of religion commonly, though not universally, require it to include a belief in supernatural

forces. Steve Bruce is typical, saying, “Religion, then, consists of beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose” (1996/2006, 7). Similar definitions have been given by Rodney Stark (1981, 159) and Bryan Wilson (1987, 159).

Likewise, there have been extensive debates over the definition of *magic*. Many sociologists define it as compulsion of supernatural forces, in contrast to religion, which involves supplication to the gods. Max Weber explained that “those beings that are worshipped and entreated religiously may be termed ‘*gods*,’ in contrast to ‘*demons*,’ which are magically coerced and charmed” (1922/1978, 424). Similar positions are adopted by others (e.g., Stark 2001, 110; Flint 1991, 8).

Weber accepted the magic-religion distinction, but he clearly understood, and described how, the two categories blurred together. Activities such as possession trance, animal and human sacrifice, petitionary prayer, rituals of exorcism, prayers to angels and saints, and use of relics, icons, and statues can be interpreted as either magical or religious.

Earlier cultures’ concept of magic often included an impersonal power that pervaded the world, with some humans and spirits having more access to it than others. Words used to designate that power include mana, orenda, and wakanda, among many others (Weber 1922/1964, 2; Lessa & Vogt 1958, 206). The distinctions between personal (spirits) and “impersonal” power were actually quite blurred (Norbeck 1961, 36-51). That irresolution is also seen in psychological research debates as to whether macro-PK effects in seances are best attributed to spirits or to unconscious powers of sitters, or whether mediums obtain information from spirits of the dead or by using their own ESP.

I will use the word *magic* to mean the intentional attempt to directly use, or influence, supernatural (i.e., paranormal) forces to affect, or gain knowledge of, the world. In parapsychological terms, magic can be defined as the intentional use of psi. (An operational definition of psi need not make any reference to mechanism or source and thus can include effects attributed to noncorporeal entities as well as to living beings.)

LOCUS OF THE DEBATES—Elite Culture

The supernatural, magic, and the evolution of religion are addressed in discussions of rationalization and secularization. Though the issues involve entire societies, the theoretical discussion of them resides primarily in academe, i.e., within elite intellectual culture.

As I will explain, intellectual elites are largely products of, and agents for, rationalization, secularization, and disenchantment. Their mental and social worlds are somewhat apart from more general society, and they often seem unaware of the consequences of that fact. Consider just one example—the very first two sentences of Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971). He addressed contemporary magical beliefs, claiming that they, “no longer enjoy much recognition today. Astrology, witchcraft, magical healing, divination, ancient prophecies, ghosts and fairies, are now all rightly disdained by intelligent persons” (1971, ix). As Wouter Hanegraaff points out, “Thomas wrote these words in a period when the secularization thesis was still widely accepted among sociologists and historians of religion, in spite of the fact that new forms of magic were flourishing widely in the context of the counterculture. Indeed one wonders whether he had ever left his study and his archives to take a look around in the real world” (2003, 357-358). The Thomas example is just one among countless others.

To his credit, Thomas made his view explicit and stated it immediately. It is much more common for such positions to be unacknowledged and simply assumed.

Intellectual elites' characteristics, inclinations, and assumptions are central to understanding discussions of rationalization and secularization and, consequently, to comprehending the position of the paranormal in today's culture.

RATIONALIZATION

Max Weber (1864-1920) is one of the founders of modern sociology, and his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05/1958) is a widely recognized classic. His larger work *Economy and Society* (1922/1978) is cited less frequently, but it gives important insights into the position of the supernatural in society, especially in regard to charisma.

Rationalization is a seminal concept in sociology. Weber used the term to designate a millennia-long process affecting a wide range of interrelated ideas, social relationships, obligations, practices, and institutions. As human culture becomes rationalized, political authority may slowly change from tribal chiefs, to feudal lordships, to large government bureaucracies. Written laws and legal systems are slowly developed, with a growing body of codified rules and regulations. Occupations become more diverse and more specialized.

Rationalization fosters permanent institutions that use routine, methodical processes to meet recurrent needs. Government, academe, industry, and religion become bureaucratic. Weber explained that bureaucratic departments are independent of individual persons and have an existence apart from the persons who serve in them. Bureaucratic organization typifies more rationalized cultures.

Rationalization is a broad concept, and it's best understood as occurring over the entire development of human societies, from hunter-gatherer groups to the information-based economies of the present day. It is not a steady, uniform process. Often stagnation and even reversals occur, but viewed over a sufficiently long time frame, rationalization is unmistakable.

The aspects outlined above are commonly mentioned in discussions of secularization, modernization, and rationalization, but Weber identified two serious impediments—magic and charisma. He explicitly referred to: “That great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world” (1904-05/1958, 105). He adopted the phrase *the disenchantment of the world* to describe that development. Talcott Parsons, translator of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, noted that: “This process is for Weber one of the most important aspects of the broader process of rationalization” (p. 222, note 19). Weber specifically differentiated priests from magicians, commenting on “the rational training and discipline of priests from the different preparation of charismatic magicians” (1922/1978, 425).

Michael Winkelman (1992) illuminated the process of disenchantment. He examined a representative sample of 47 cultures, analyzing magico-religious practitioners' statuses in relation to the complexity of their societies. Hunter-gatherer societies are the least complex. More complex societies are typified by agriculture and political integration beyond the local level. Winkelman differentiated the roles (among others) of shaman, priest, and medium. (His distinctions are very useful, but many writers do not make the same ones.)

Shamans use altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in which they command spirits to do their bidding. They display a variety of paranormal powers, such as divination, healing, and finding game animals through magical means. They generally hold high status in their societies and are regarded as healthy, charismatic leaders. Shamans are found in hunting and gathering societies with no social classes and with little or no political hierarchy beyond the local level.

Priests make little or no use of ASCs in their roles. Much of their work involves ritual, worship, and propitiation of the gods. They have no control over spirits. Priests are selected through social inheritance or political appointment and generally enjoy high status. Their profession typically has hierarchically ranked positions. Priests are found in agricultural societies with political integration beyond the local level.

Mediums use ASCs, specifically possession trance, during which spirits communicate. Mediums' primary functions are healing, divination, and worship and propitiation of spirits. They are found in complex societies that also have priests. Mediums have very low status and are the only category here consisting primarily of women who are often described as crazy, neurotic, or hysterical. They frequently receive no remuneration for their efforts.

A graphical summary of Winkelman's findings is presented in Figure 1.

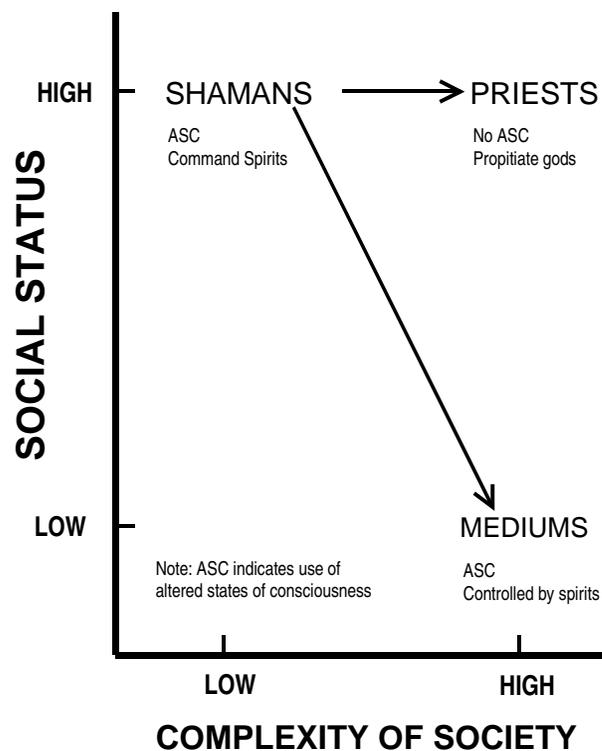


Figure 1. Status of magico-religious practitioners as a function of societal complexity (Based on Winkelman 1992).

Shamans and mediums use ASCs; they directly and intentionally engage supernatural powers. The laboratory findings of parapsychology show that ASCs can facilitate psi functioning. But our society has essentially no shamans, and mediums are lowly regarded, as is parapsychology.

Charisma

Charisma is an important part of Weber's theory of authority. In fact, he identified three types of authority: charismatic, traditional, and bureaucratic. Of particular interest is pure charisma, which he directly linked to the supernatural, saying that it is "guaranteed by what is held to be a proof, originally always a miracle" (1922/1978, 242). The leader "gains and retains it solely by proving his powers in practice. He must work miracles, if he wants to be a prophet" (p. 1114). Weber mentioned "producing certain effects in meteorology, healing, divination, and telepathy" going on to say "We shall henceforth employ the term 'charisma' for such extraordinary powers" (p. 400). He cited St. Francis of Assisi as an exemplar of pure charisma.

Weber described attenuated kinds of charisma, which allowed its accommodation by more stable, bureaucratic cultures. Some of the more rationalized versions are referred to as pseudocharisma, lineage charisma, charisma of office, and manufactured charisma. In contrast, pure charisma is opposed to permanent structures, routine, and methodical accumulation of wealth; although it's temporary and ephemeral, it is often crucial for change. (It has the properties of anti-structure and liminality. See Hansen 2001.)

The attenuation of charisma and the suppression of magic did not occur only at the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture. It was, and is, ongoing. The process did not stop. Roman authorities outlawed certain (but not all) magical practices (Graf 1994/1997); now the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expressly prohibits the practice of clairvoyance and psychic healing (1994, 513). This year Islamic authorities in Saudi Arabia decreed a beheading for psychic practices (CBS News 2010). Religion was, and is, a primary force for the suppression of magic.

The Reformation

Weber saw the Protestant Reformation as a major force for rationalization and disenchantment. Though the Renaissance and Enlightenment were also periods of rationalization, they primarily involved elites. The Reformation engaged the general culture and was thus more significant.

Protestants' and Catholics' differences regarding the supernatural, mysticism, and miracles are illuminating. Many Protestants believe in the cessation of the charismata, the doctrine that miracles ceased with deaths of the apostles. Catholics accept modern miracles; in fact miracles are among the criteria for sainthood. Protestants downplay mysticism and largely eliminated monastic orders, but among mystics and monastics are found accounts of some of the most powerful paranormal phenomena ever reported. Catholics pray to saints; Protestants typically do not. Protestant churches generally employ married ministers rather than celibate priests. Protestants give more emphasis to God's transcendence, Catholics to his immanence. In short, Protestants rejected many magical elements of Catholicism. John Cerullo, in *The Secularization of the Soul: Psychological Research in Modern Britain*, commented that "much of Protestant thought itself can be said to contain a secularizing motif" (1982, 5). (Cerullo's approach is somewhat more psychological and theological than my own, which, comparatively, is more anthropological and parapsychological.)

SECULARIZATION

The term *secularization* is generally taken to refer to a set of closely related processes and trends, such as erosion of religious practices, beliefs, and values; the lessening importance of religion in culture; the retreat of religion from the public sphere into more

private domains; reduced influence of religious institutions; and diminished church attendance. Secularization theories posit that as societies become more complex, scientific, rational, and modern, they become more secularized. During the twentieth century this view was very widely held in the social sciences (Norris & Inglehart 2004, 3).

The theories often draw from Weber, and in fact secularization is a manifestation of rationalization. Eisenstadt explains that disenchantment “denotes the demystification and secularization of the world, the attenuation of charisma” (1968, liv). Sociologist William Swatos concurs, saying that secularization was “a term of lesser importance for Weber but very popular currently, is best understood as the institutional manifestation of disenchantment” (1981/1986, 131).

The notion of secularization has become the subject of extensive, contentious debate. The growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the rise of the Christian Right in the U.S., and the flourishing of evangelical Christianity in Latin America pose powerful challenges to the theory. Rodney Stark (1999b), Jeffrey Hadden (1989), and others have mounted effective attacks on secularization theory. Sociologist Peter L. Berger, a strong proponent of it during the 1960s, has reversed his position, even publishing a book titled *The Desecularization of the World* (1999). The arguments against secularization theory are compelling, but it might be too soon to jettison the idea entirely. Some are attempting to reformulate and redefine secularization in order to salvage some part of it.

Although the secularization of the general culture continues to be debated, there is no dispute about the secularization of academe. In *The Secularization of the Academy* (1992), George Marsden describes how until about 1870 most U.S. college presidents were clergymen who taught courses in moral philosophy with applications of Christian principles. In 1939 almost one-fourth of state-supported universities held voluntary chapel services. Obviously there has been a substantial erosion of religious influence since (see also Smith 2003).

Academe is highly bureaucratized. Powerful segments of it have long held an antipathy toward magic and often toward religion. Rodney Stark (1999a) has documented how, for over a hundred years, the agenda of many social scientists has been explicitly antireligious (see also Evans-Pritchard 1959/1964).

The secularization debates themselves show the influence of rationalization and secularization. Much of the literature today makes no mention of the supernatural; in fact there are lengthy books on the topic with no index listings for supernatural, miracle, prayer, providence, magic, or charisma—thus ignoring the crucial aspect of the common definition of religion. Some major contributors to the debate do acknowledge the issue of the supernatural (e.g., Bruce 1996/2006, Stark 2001, Wilson 1987), but as a general rule it garners little attention. Likewise with rationalization, academics almost always ignore Weber’s writings on pure charisma, especially its relation to prophecy, miracles, and telepathy.

ELITE INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

Theories of rationalization and secularization have been primarily articulated within academe—the primary home of elite intellectual culture today. But intellectual elites have rarely recognized the effect of their own social positions upon themselves and their theorizing. Their social positions require they be status conscious and attentive to concerns of hierarchy. But pure charisma (as well as liminality, anti-structure, and *communitas* [Hansen 2001]) undermines and collapses status and hierarchy.

Scientific elites' anti-supernatural and anti-paranormal sympathies have been revealed in several surveys. In 1914, and again in 1933, Bryn Mawr psychology professor James H. Leuba polled physical and biological scientists about their belief in God and human immortality. He selected names from *American Men of Science*, which had designated 18.2% as "distinguished." In 1933 he repeated the study using a comparable group, and in the 1990s Larson and Witham repeated Leuba's work, polling a sample from *American Men and Women of Science (AMWS)* and also members of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), a group more elite than Leuba's "greater scientists." As shown in Table 1, the percentages of elite scientists who believed in God and immortality were substantially lower than the non-elites.

Leuba's own view of religion seemed similar to that of the elites, and the very last sentence of his *Harper's* article mentioned "discredited supernaturalism" (1934). By the way, his son Clarence was a critic of J.B. Rhine.

	1914		1933		1996	1998
	Lesser Scientists	Greater Scientists	Lesser Scientists	Greater Scientists	AMWS Scientists	NAS Members
	n ≈ 420	n ≈ 280			n ≈ 600	n ≈ 260
Belief in God	48.2	31.6	37	15	39.3	7
Belief in Human Immortality	59.3	36.9	39	18	38.0	7.9

Table 1. Percentage of lesser and greater scientists holding beliefs in God and immortality (Leuba 1916, 1934; Larson & Witham 1997, 1998).

	1973	1981
	College Professors of Social & Natural Science	Administrative Elite Scientists
	n = 533	n = 339
ESP an Established Fact	9.6	3.8
ESP a Likely Possibility	46.2	25.4

Table 2. Percentage of college science professors and administrative elite scientists with beliefs in ESP (Wagner & Monnet 1979; McClenon 1984).

James McClenon (1984) found a similar pattern in relation to ESP. In 1981 he surveyed "administrative elites" of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), specifically, Council members of the AAAS and members of section committees. Table 2 presents McClenon's data, along with that from an earlier survey of college science professors by Wagner and Monnet. The elites were decidedly less accepting of ESP. (McClenon presented the findings in his *Deviant Science: The Case of Parapsychology*, a title reflecting the status of the field.)

Though academic elites constitute a small portion of society, they are influential, and they extended their influence during the expansion of higher education in the second half of the twentieth century. Peter Berger has explained that: "There exists an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that is indeed secularized. This subculture is the principal

‘carrier’ of progressive, Enlightened beliefs and values. While its members are relatively thin on the ground, they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the ‘official’ definitions of reality, notably the educational system, the media of mass communication, and the higher reaches of the legal system. They are remarkably similar all over the world today. . . what we have here is a globalized *elite* culture” (1999, 10).

I suspect that for most of those elites, issues of religion and the supernatural have little impact on their day-to-day lives. But there is a group for whom the issues are salient. It is among self-identified, publicly vocal, academic secular humanists that we find some of the most overt opposition to claims of the paranormal. CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) was officially founded at the 1976 meeting of the American Humanist Association. In 2006 CSICOP changed its name to the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), partly to avoid the stigma of the word *paranormal* (Frazier et al 2007, 6). (Ian Stevenson, Marilyn Schlitz, and Robert Jahn have avoided using the word *parapsychology* for the same reason.) Today CSI is the most prominent institution consistently attacking claims of paranormal phenomena.

CSI strives to associate itself with intellectual elites. Its letterhead lists names of many prominent academics who are Fellows of the Committee, including Nobel laureates (though the vast majority have published no scientific research on paranormal phenomena).

Prometheus Books, founded by Paul Kurtz (former Chairman of CSICOP), is a prominent publisher of secularist, atheist, and anti-paranormal works. Gordon Stein, who became an employee of CSICOP, edited the *American Rationalist* and *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (1985). Today both CSI and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) are housed in the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Amherst, New York. CSI and CSH extensively overlap in terms of personnel, office facilities, meeting space, library, etc. (see Hansen 1992, 2001). (As a side note, although CFI and Prometheus Books are generally opposed to religion, Prometheus reprinted John Calvin’s *Treatise on Relics*, with an appreciative introduction by Joe Nickell.)

The conjunction of secularist sympathies and anti-paranormal attitudes is also seen in CSI’s constituency. During question and comment periods at CSICOP conventions, I’ve observed as people introduced themselves, and those who proudly announced their atheism were greeted with cheers. Newsletters of local skeptic groups often carry meeting notices for secularist organizations. The Amazing Meetings of the James Randi Educational Foundation and conferences of the Freedom From Religion Foundation have had prominent atheists and CSI members as featured speakers.

Elites and Margins

The secularist, antireligious tendencies of elites are nothing new. One may recall Friedrich Schleiermacher’s celebrated speeches to the cultured despisers of religion in 1799, after the philosophes of the Enlightenment had disparaged religion and the supernatural. At the time of Christ, the Sadducees opposed ideas of human resurrection and immortality. They drew primarily from aristocracy associated with the priestly classes, and culturally they were influenced by Hellenism.

Anti-supernaturalist tendencies of elites are not limited to Western culture. Rodney Stark commented that intellectual followers of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have claimed that they are godless religions. “But, it also must be recognized that Godless religions are unable to gather a mass following, always being limited in their appeal to small, intellectual elites. Thus, in Imperial China, the forms of Taoism,

Buddhism, and Confucianism practiced in various monasteries and among court philosophers and the Mandarins of the civil service, were (relatively) Godless. But the common people always associated an abundant pantheon of Gods with the Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist ideals” (Stark 2001, 108).

In contrast to elites, openness to, and manifestations of, the paranormal are more often found in the lower orders and in the margins of society. This has been true historically, and it continues today. Many examples can be cited. The Jansenists were out of favor with both ecclesiastical and political authorities of France. They produced striking miracles in the parish cemetery of St. Medard after the 1727 death of Francois de Paris; for a description see Dingwall (1947/1962). (Dingwall was a member of both the Rationalist Press Association and CSICOP.) Hasidic Judaism drew heavily from the poor and uneducated, and it had many accounts of miracles (Woodward 2000). Please note that both the Jansenist miracles and the rise of Hasidism took place during the Enlightenment. Ronald Knox’s book *Enthusiasm* (1950/1961) describes a number of cases of dissident religious groups often reviled by ecclesiastical authorities as well as by secularists, but which produced miracles. Pentecostalism began among the lower classes, and its 1906 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles generated reports of miracles. In my limited observation, as modern-day witchcraft has strived for greater respectability in the past four decades, it seems to have reduced its concern about the efficacy of magic.

CONCLUSIONS

Supernatural powers have been recognized for thousands of years. Yet when societies become complex, those who attempt to directly engage them are shunted to the margins—by both religious *and* secularizing forces. Throughout history, intellectual elites have often been hostile to paranormal/supernatural claims. Any comprehensive and effective theory of the paranormal must explain these facts.

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