MAGIC, nonrational practices believed to influence man's relation to his environment, both human and nonhuman. Magic is often contrasted with religion. Magic is said to be material rather than spiritual in nature. It does not depend on supernatural assistance, as religion does. It is believed to work automatically if performed correctly and to be compelling in character, whereas religion is propitiatory. That is, magic is believed to compel a desired result, whereas in religion a higher power is asked for help. These differences, however, are not clear-cut, as a few examples will demonstrate. Medieval magic involved belief in a spiritual agency, the devil. Magic spells—as used in the Trobriand Islands, for example—often contain references to ancestors. Tibetan prayer wheels, used in religious ritual, are believed to be automatic in effect. Religious sacrifices in ancient Babylon were believed to be compelling in effect.

Anthropologists have formulated a number of theories of the origin and functions of magic. Sir James Frazer held that magic was primitive man's science because of its materialistic, mechanical conceptions. In opposition to this theory is the fact that science represents a body of method and theory which primitive man lacks. It can be pointed out, too, that nonliterate peoples do not confuse magic with whatever empirical knowledge of life processes they do possess. That is, spells and rites may be considered necessary conditions for success, but they are not sufficient conditions. In gardening, spells are used in the belief that they are needed to make plants grow, but they do not replace planting and weeding.

Bronislaw Malinowski, on the basis of studies of Pacific islanders, stated that magic tends to be invoked in those areas of life where natural controls are weak and dangers great, but to have less use where risks are few. While fishing in the lagoon men do not bother with spells for protection, but on the dangerous sea outside the reef magic is invoked. According to Malinowski magical rites and religious rituals differ in their social functions. Magic assists people in concrete situations which can be changed, but which people do not understand well enough to change by ordinary means. Growing plants and curing diseases are examples. Religion, on the other hand, is called upon in social crises such as death. These are upsetting, but people do not expect to change the physical fact of what has happened. Science has replaced magic in many areas but not all, for science has not learned to cure all diseases, to control the weather, or to ward off all calamities.

Sir James Frazer distinguished between homoeopathic (or imitative) magic and contagious magic. Homoeopathic magic attempts to produce results by imitation—for example, trying to kill a man by sticking pins into a doll representing him. Contagious magic attempts to affect the whole person by working on one part, such as nail clippings or hair. Magic that involves carrying out specific harmful actions is associated with sorcery, and that which involves avoidance (as of the number 13) is associated with the concept of taboo. Magic may have positive as well as negative aims—for example, to produce rain.
Belief in the effectiveness of magic is found in many nonliterate societies, and is by no means unknown in literate cultures. Magic may appear to work for a number of reasons. (1) Sometimes the means used are in themselves effective but are understood in magical terms, as when poison is used but the results are attributed to supernatural powers. (2) Magic may be used along with empirically productive actions: the work of gardening makes plants grow, but credit is given to spells. (3) Coincidence accounts for the apparent power of some magic. Moreover, people tend to remember striking coincidences and to forget times when nothing happened. (4) Magic does have psychological effects. The belief that he is being helped by a spell may enable a man to perform a difficult feat. Or the belief that he has been doomed by magic may cause a man's death. (5) Magic is often used as an ex post facto explanation: a cow has become sick; her owner finds a sorcerer to blame for the trouble.


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See also CARGO CULT; RELIGION, PRIMITIVE; SORCERY; TABOO OR TABU; WITCHCRAFT.