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Magic and the British Middle Classes, 1750–1900

Thomas Waters

Abstract This essay explores the attitudes of the British middle classes towards witchcraft, ghosts, and other so-called superstitions from the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. Conventional historiographical wisdom maintains that belief in magic among middle-class Britons declined gradually between the early modern and modern eras. Grounded in the study of newspapers, antiquarianism, public lectures, and literary fiction, this essay proposes a more precise chronology for the decline and subsequent resurgence of magic. It argues that it was only from the 1820s that the middle classes, the media that served them, the police, and certain politicians put popular superstitions under significant duress, and examines the agendas and anxieties underlying this temporary cultural shift away from magic. The later Victorian period saw the emergence of greater tolerance towards witchcraft and ghost beliefs, allowing them to be reinterpreted as picturesque folklore or fitting subjects for the enquiries of psychical science.

Towards the close of his classic study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas qualified his thesis about magic's eroding appeal in the modern era. Even as late as the nineteenth century, Thomas conceded, rationalism was only "for the few," while magic was "for the many."[1] In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has reinforced the point that Victorian Britain was far from a disenchanted place. Not only did mesmerism, spiritualism, occultism, and psychical research flourish,[2] but belief in witchcraft remained fairly widespread, cunning-folk and fortune-tellers plied their mystical trades, and the publishers of

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[1] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (1971; repr. London, 1991), 798, quoting Jacob Burckhardt.

[2] Karl Bell, "Breaking Modernity's Spell—Magic and Modern History," *Cultural and Social History* 4, no. 1 (January 2007): 115–22; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2004); eadem, "'Borderland Forms': Arthur Conan Doyle, Albion's Daughters, and the Politics of the Cottingley Fairies," *History Workshop Journal* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 48–85; eadem, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago, 1989); Shane McCorristine, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750–1920* (Cambridge, 2010), 218–28; Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1985); Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and the English Plebeians, 1850–1910* (London, 1986); Michael Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographical Review," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006): 692–716; idem, "'Clap If You Believe in Sherlock Holmes': Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c. 1890–c. 1940," *Historical Journal* 46, no. 3 (September 2003): 599–622. For spiritualism's early twentieth-century apogee, see Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society between the Wars* (Manchester, 2000).

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prophetic almanacs marketed astrological knowledge to a wide audience. Even in towns and cities, rumors about apparitions drew large crowds to reputedly haunted places.[3]

Although some of its limitations have been underlined, the thesis of the decline of magic survives with respect to the middle classes and their stance on what we might term "customary magic." According to the dominant scholarly view, by the nineteenth century, the middle classes had come to disown belief in witchcraft, ghosts, and other so-called superstitions. James Obelkevich's seminal account of rural popular religion, for instance, asserts that the "educated classes rejected" magic. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall likewise suggest that "superstition" was a totemic issue for the early nineteenth-century English middle class, who attacked it in their quest to disseminate a "rational and scientific worldview." Robert Lee offers similarly terse remarks about the "nineteenth-century elites" who strove to counter "popular and superstitious belief systems" through mass education. Owen Davies and Karl Bell both observe that, in comparison with the detached elites of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth-century middle classes were more actively hostile to popular magical belief.[4] However, neither of these authors probes the exact nature or precise chronology of the phenomenon they so confidently assert.

In this essay, I take a closer and more chronologically sensitive look at attitudes to customary magic among Britain's middle classes from the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. Here, I define the middle classes as those whom contemporaries described as "respectable"—men and women who did not live by the sweat of their brow, who occupied positions of at least modest authority, and who enjoyed polite pursuits such as attending public lectures, taking provincial newspapers, and engaging with amateur scholarship.[5] This rather broad definition encompasses

[3] Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture: 1736–1951* (Manchester, 1999), esp. 56–60; idem, *A People Bewitched: Witchcraft and Magic in Nineteenth-Century Somerset* (Wiltshire, 1999); idem, "Cunning-Folk in England and Wales during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Rural History* 8, no. 1 (April 1997): 91–107; Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford, 2001), 84–111; Karl Bell, *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England 1780–1914* (Cambridge, 2012), 69–76, 201–2; Katherine Anderson, *Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology* (Chicago, 2005), 55–58; Roy Porter, "Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic and Liberal Thought," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, Brian P. Levack, and Roy Porter (London, 1999), 193–274, at 221–22, 241–42; Owen Davies, *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* (Basingstoke, 2007), 90–94; S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c. 1880–1939* (Oxford, 1999), 80–83.

[4] James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976), 262; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London, 1987), 25–26, 286–87; Robert Lee, *Rural Society and the Anglican Clergy, 1815–1914: Encountering and Managing the Poor* (Woodbridge, UK, 2006), 32, 146; Owen Davies, "Newspapers and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic in the Modern Period," *Journal of British Studies* 37, no. 2 (April 1998): 139–65, at 164; Bell, *Magical Imagination*, 119.

[5] On defining the middle class, see Richard H. Trainer, *Black Country Elites: The Exercise of Authority in an Industrial Area, 1830–1900* (Oxford, 1993), 63–75; K. T. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation: 1846–1886* (Oxford, 1998), 33–37. On the use of the term "respectable" to denote social position, see Angelina Parker, "Oxfordshire Village Folklore (1840–1900)," *Folklore* 24, no. 1 (March 1913): 74–91, at 74. For the cultural pursuits of the middle classes, see M. J. Peterson, "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 677–708; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, esp. chap. 10.

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humble clerks, apothecaries, and tenant farmers and their families, as well as wealthy rentiers, businesspeople, professionals, squires and ladies, and all manner of clergymen. The later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are said to have witnessed the making of distinct social classes out of the old, infinitely graduated social hierarchy. I hope to contribute to the debate about the chronology and cultural dimensions of class formation by showing when and why attitudes to magic acquired strong social connotations. At the same time, I stress the limitations of relying on class alone to map or account for changing attitudes to magic.

An investigation into the occult mind of the middle orders is challenging because the conventional ethnographic sources—newspapers, antiquarian studies, and folklore reports—tend to have a voyeur's preoccupation with the mores of poor, illiterate, and rustic people. Yet on closer inspection, these sources, through their self-justifications, editorial conventions, and changing subject matter, also reveal much about the outlook of their well-to-do authors and audiences. Novels and short stories about ghosts and witches (and reviews of such works), as well as public lectures, are similarly indicative of changing attitudes towards customary magic among the cultivated and the literate.

These sources suggest that neither the Enlightenment nor modernization gradually freed the middle classes from the grip of customary magic. Rather, larger numbers continued to endorse its reality for much longer than we might imagine, before rapidly, dramatically, but also temporarily, disowning it. Not until the 1820s and 1830s was belief in witchcraft, ghosts, and divination perceived as scandalous, both in polite literature and in "respectable" society. Redefined as "popular superstitions," from the 1820s to the 1860s customary occult beliefs generated particular alarm and were subjected to unprecedented opprobrium. This drive against "popular superstition" served a variety of agendas and succeeded in curtailing some of the more violent and raucous public expressions of magical belief. During the late Victorian period, the sense of success that followed from those achievements, combined with the dissipation of anxieties and interests that had powered the drive against "popular superstition" in the first place, allowed beliefs about ghosts and witchcraft to once again be reinterpreted as picturesque folklore or as fitting subjects for the enquiries of psychical science. However, to appreciate the Victorian middle classes' shifting and complex attitudes to customary magic, we will need to first revert further in time to explore the thinking of their Georgian predecessors.

MAGIC AND THE MIDDLING SORT, 1750–1820

During the eighteenth century, Britons of all backgrounds were amenable to customary magic. Granted, in 1736 the state caught up with the thinking of most judges and lawyers, who for several decades had been doubtful about the possibility of proving witchcraft according to the exacting standards of the law.[6] With little parliamentary opposition, statutes against witchcraft were repealed and replaced with others prohibiting pretenses to sorcery.[7] Around the same time, childrearing and household

[6] Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 198, no. 1 (February 2008): 33–70.

[7] Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations c. 1650–1750* (Oxford, 1997), 185–91.

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manuals began to warn the servant-employing classes about the influence that "superstitious" matrons and nursemaids were having on their charges.[8] In the appendix to his *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777), the antiquarian John Brand condemned "superstitions" like witchcraft belief as ridiculous and castigated the former laws against it as a "disgrace."[9] Some evangelists wrote tracts and delivered sermons to similar effect.[10]

Despite those important developments, many middle- and upper-ranking Georgians continued both to believe and to admit as much publicly. James Boswell, for instance, told Jean-Jacques Rousseau that he was so terrified of ghosts that he had refused to sleep alone until he was aged eighteen. In adulthood, too, Boswell's journals reveal, he continued to be plagued by a fear of them.[11] The idea of ghosts troubled other celebrated writers, among them Robert Southey, John Varley, and William Blake.[12] But this was not only an artistic disposition. According to Sasha Handley, even those who moved in the networks of "gentlemanly science were not uniformly hostile" to the notion that ghosts might exist.[13] The question of their reality was an open one, and as late as the 1790s it was still being disputed on London's debating circuit.[14]

Such distinguished scholars as Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson, and William Blackstone refused to deny the existence of witchcraft, but conceded that they were unable to point to credible and recent instances of its influence.[15] Such distinctions between the reality of historical or biblical witchcraft, and the implausibility of contemporary cases, were important for Tories and Anglicans, who were anxious not to undermine the testimony of the scriptures.[16] Others clearly thought that the occult was still operating even in the sophisticated environs of Enlightenment England. The fact that the imposture known as the "Cock Lane Ghost" was carefully scrutinized by members of London's literary and social elite rather than being ignored or dismissed out of hand suggests that individuals at all levels of society took the

[8] Celestina Wroth, "'To Root the Old Woman out of Our Minds': Women Educationalists and Plebian Culture in Late Eighteen-Century Britain," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 48–73.

[9] John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities: Including the whole of Mr. Bourne's Antiquitates Vulgares* (Newcastle and London, 1777), 318–20; Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford 1989), 281.

[10] Susan Pedersen, "Hannah More Meets Simple Simon: Tracts, Chapbooks, and Popular Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1986): 84–113, at 91, 102.

[11] F. Pootle, ed., *Boswell's London Journal, 1762–1763* (London, 1950), 3, 201–14, 253–54, 284. For Boswell's superstitious mind, see also Peter Martin, *A Life of James Boswell* (London, 1999), 24, 35–36.

[12] Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus." With Selections from his Poems and Other Writings* (London, 1863), 1:128, 249–256.

[13] Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2007), 3.

[14] Ibid., 129–30, 204–5, 214. Owen Davies, ed., *Ghosts: A Social History,* vol. 2*, Cock Lane, Common Sense, and Morality* (London, 2010), vii–viii; Jonathan Barry, *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England, 1640–1789* (Basingstoke, 2012), 231.

[15] Davies, *Witchcraft*, 7; Porter, "Witchcraft and Magic," 207; Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland and The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. Peter Levi (London, 1984), 164.

[16] Davies, *Witchcraft*, 7–8.

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idea of supernatural appearances seriously.[17] An alleged case of possession caused by witchcraft in Bristol during 1761 and 1762 reinforces the point. One might well have expected that twenty-five years after the repeal of the witchcraft statutes Bristol's intelligentsia would have rejected such an explanation as credulous. While there were indeed some vocal skeptics, others were convinced that this was a genuine instance of the supernatural at work. The apothecary William Dyer, for instance, who kept a diary account about his involvement in the affair and supplied the family with advice and medicines, oscillated between belief and doubt.[18]

Recalling a childhood in rural Northamptonshire, a correspondent to the *Times* reported that during the first decade of the nineteenth century, people from right across the social spectrum still feared witches. Such "popular errors" were apparently "not confined to the lower classes; many persons of the middle class, of a fair amount of education and intelligence, entertained them."[19] Contemporary evidence confirms that recollection. In a treatise entitled *A Belief in Witchcraft Unsupported by Scripture* (1815), for instance, an exasperated clergyman complained that the middling sorts of people were often as wedded to a belief in the reality of sorcery as were the lowly. It was not possible, he noted, "to converse, concerning Witchcraft, with those in the lower walks of life, or, even, with the majority of those who have received a better education, and whose opinions are more consonant with reason, without observing the rooted conviction of its existence in their minds."[20] Presumably he would have been appalled to discover that even some of his clerical colleagues still thought occult forces were at work in the world. The diary of the Reverend William Ettrick, the vicar of Affpuddle and Toner's Puddle, in Dorset, shows in detail that "respectable" people still occasionally drew on witchcraft beliefs to explain personal crises.[21] This, again, may have been an unusual case, but it was not entirely exceptional. In 1810, for instance, a "respectable Clergyman" from Stampford, in Devon, wrote to his local paper to declare "upon oath" his conviction that ghostly disturbances, which had recently occurred at a house in his parish, were not the result of imposture or foul play.[22]

Newspapers reported of farmers—"respectable," "wealthy," or otherwise—fighting witchcraft and witches in Kent in 1809, Cumbria in 1810, South Lanarkshire in 1812, Suffolk and Devon in 1825, Perth in 1826, Monmouthshire in 1827, and Devon again in 1828.[23] As one might expect, this sort of vigilantism

[17] Thomas Seccombe, "Parsons, Elizabeth (1749–1807)," rev. Heather Shore, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21456 (accessed June 2014).

[18] Barry, *Witchcraft*, chap. 6; W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), 118–19; Davies, *Witchcraft*, 19.

[19] *Times*, 25 March 1858.

[20] James Paterson, *A Belief in Witchcraft unsupported by Scripture* (Aberdeen, 1815), 4.

[21] Davies, *Witchcraft*, 17; Christina Hole, *Witchcraft at Toner's Puddle* (Dorchester, UK, 1964).

[22] Reported in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (hereafter *JOJ*), 1 September 1810; *Examiner*, 2 September 1810.

[23] *Hampshire Chronicle*, 9 January 1809; *Chester Courant*, 22 May 1810; *Lancaster Gazette*, 19 May 1810, 18 August 1810; *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 14 June 1810; *Manchester Mercury*, 28 April 1812; *Morning Chronicle*, 18 July 1825; *Coventry Herald*, 22 July 1825; *Examiner*, 24 July 1825; *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 1 December 1825; *Glasgow Herald*, 19 June 1826; *Inverness Courier*, 21 June 1826; *Morning Chronicle*, 11 April 1827; *Western Times*, 13 September 1828.

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often led the perpetrators into confrontations with the law. Most justices of the peace, when sentencing defendants who had assaulted supposed witches, tended to admonish them or else patiently explain that the idea of sorcery was nothing more than a delusion.[24] Some magistrates, however, took a very different line and thereby gave the impression that accusations of witchcraft had some basis in reality. Thus in 1826, a correspondent wrote to an Edinburgh paper to complain about the treatment of an old housekeeper—"one of the most harmless and inoffensive creatures alive"—who had been lacerated about the face on account of being a witch. When the case came to court, the magistrate bound the assailants over to keep the peace. But "strange to tell," the justice also bound over the alleged witch and her employer "although they never in one instance can be proved to have infringed."[25] That judgment *implied* that the justice of the peace thought the "witch" had done something wrong, but occasionally his colleagues went even further. When, in 1812, a petitioner asked the Southwark magistrates to arrest an alleged witch, "the magistrate promised to comply with his request." Far from remonstrating with the complainant or deriding his foolish convictions, the presiding justice instead advised him to "rest satisfied, that no effort in his power should be wanting to prevent the evil spirit from troubling him in the future."[26]

Were those the words of a busy magistrate who humored a complainant in order to quickly be rid of him? Perhaps, but another possibility is worth entertaining. In the view of some people who did not themselves believe in witches, there was a case for preserving witchcraft belief among others—especially among the poor. This line of thinking emerged from the middle and upper classes' anxieties about the dreadful potential of popular revolt when it combined with secular outlooks (as in the French Revolution). One proponent was the Reverend John Anderson, Presbyterian minister to the parishes of Stronsay and Eday (Orkney).[27] "The common people of this district," Anderson observed in his chapter of the *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1795), "remain to this day so credulous" as to practice "an inferior species of witchcraft," and give credit to fairies and ghosts. He had come across many striking and recent examples of this "credulity," but was in no rush to banish it. Its negative consequences, he felt, were "small and unimportant" in comparison to its positive effects in sustaining a supernatural cosmology that was conducive to religious belief. "Atheism and irreligion" were the real dangers. They gave "a new and totally different direction to the understanding," by fostering freethinking sentiments that were "dangerous to our happy establishment in church and state."[28] For the Reverend Anderson, vivid supernaturalism, orthodox Christianity, and political loyalty went together, and so likewise did rationalism, infidelity, and sedition. The wisest course, therefore, was to leave the people to languish in their superstitious ignorance.

[24] *Morning Chronicle*, 8 April 1823; *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 10 April 1823; *Chester Chronicle*, 21 November 1828.

[25] *Morning Post*, 17 November 1826; *Inverness Courier*, 22 November 1826.

[26] *Kentish Gazette*, 4 September 1812.

[27] The fact that he made this point in a publication designed to give helpful advice to ministers and their families tells us something about his perception of its public interest.

[28] John Anderson, "United Parishes of Stronsay and Eday," in *The Statistical Account of Scotland: Drawn up from the communication of the ministers of the different parishes*, ed. John Sinclair (Edinburgh, 1795), 15:430–32.

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Some clerics and magistrates thus thought that "credulity" ought to be humored, indulged, and sustained. Their attitude cannot be easily located within the model of eighteenth-century culture proposed by Peter Burke, which although criticized in other areas, still figures in the latest historiography on customary magic. This scholarship portrays Georgian elites as remote, disdainful, and detached—a result of their deliberate withdrawal from the culture of the population at large.[29] Regarding beliefs in witchcraft and ghosts, however, we have seen evidence of shared outlooks, of sympathetic engagement, and even of encouragement. There were certainly strains of disbelief and doubt, too, but the evidence we have encountered here does not, in my estimation, suggest that skepticism was widely adopted among middle- and upper-class people. Rather, witchcraft and ghost beliefs were contested, deemed worth defending, thought by some to have positive religious and political associations, and on this account espoused by people from across the entire social spectrum.

CHANGING ATTITUDES, 1820–1860

By the 1850s, commentators noticed that the outlook of "respectable" people had shifted markedly. "The upper and middle classes have shaken off their belief in heathenish superstition," summarized the historian George Roberts.[30] For many, this was cause for celebration. Journalists, especially, welcomed the "dissipating [of] … superstitions which marked the age of ignorance,"[31] though they were keenly aware that the spirit of incredulity had made scant impact upon the "popular mind."[32] Literary figures also noticed that a new, rational mentality had flowered among the middle classes. In a commentary on his poem *The Parish* (ca. 1820–27), John Clare, the so-called peasant poet, came close to lamenting the disappearance of "Old School" farmers and parsons who "always quoted the witch of Endor as a knockdown to unbelievers in witchcraft."[33] In his dialect poems of 1861, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, likewise, ruefully compared northern farmers of the boggart-fearing "Old Style" with their property-obsessed "New Style" successors.[34]

Of course, Clare and Tennyson were dealing in stock characters: their witch-believing parsons and ghost-fearing farmers were stereotypical figures of nostalgia, if not fun. Nonetheless there is evidence that, in pointing to the disappearance of such people, the poets grasped a genuine movement in bourgeois culture. For this cultural development had other markers, too. The growing sense that supernatural credulity was a distinctly proletarian trait was expressed, for instance, in the currency of the evocative phrase "popular superstition," which was entering middlebrow usage. The term itself was not new. Antiquarians John Brand and Francis Grose, for

[29] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham, UK, 2009), 56, chap. 9; Bell, *Magical Imagination*, 119; Davies, "Newspapers and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic," 164.

[30] George Roberts, *The Social History of the People of the Southern Counties of England in Past Centuries* (London, 1856), 528–29.

[31] *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 21 August 1824, 147.

[32] Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (London, 1995), xv.

[33] Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, eds., *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare* (Oxford, 1974), 73–74. On *The Parish*, see Sarah Houghton-Walker, *John Clare's Religion* (Farnham, UK, 2009), 11–20.

[34] Tennyson's "The Northern Farmer, Old Style" was published in 1864. "The Northern Farmer, New Style," though also composed in 1861, was not published until 1869.

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example, had used it to expand the remit of their discipline to include some long-standing supernatural beliefs.[35] Still, during the eighteenth century, the term "popular superstition" appears to have been rarely employed beyond scholarly circles. When they reported on belief in witchcraft and magic, for instance, newspapers usually opted for the unadorned noun "superstition."[36] However, during the nineteenth century, and particularly the 1820s, journalists began to attach the socially suggestive prefix "popular." The *Times*, for example, seems to have first used the phrase "popular superstition" in 1820.[37]

Ghosts, witches, and omens were thus increasingly classified as "popular superstitions" worthy only of the uneducated and the lowly. At the same time, active opposition to magical belief escalated considerably. However, this drive against "popular superstition," which spanned approximately the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, has almost no presence in the historiographical literature. It has certainly received far less attention than the contemporaneous campaigns to reform "popular" sports, holidays, and working habits.[38] That seems remiss, not least because the drive against "popular superstition" figured in all the major forms of early Victorian media, influenced legislation, inspired direct activism, and commanded the support of several important interest groups.

THE DRIVE AGAINST "POPULAR SUPERSTITION," 1820–1860

Newspapers led the charge against customary magic by adopting a more combative editorial line. The *Leeds Herald*'s assertion that "the pretended art of witchcraft justly merits public exposure," was a typical refrain.[39] In part, journalists took this stance because their readers expected them to repudiate "popular superstitions." When, for instance, *Jackson's Oxford Journal* unwittingly advertised the services of a local cunning-man in 1819, an irate correspondent called for it to withdraw the offending notice.[40] More often, though, the press anticipated public opinion by condemning local outbreaks of "superstition" and exhorting readers to take a stand against them. Thus when the *Oxford City and Country Chronicle* (Oxford Chronicle) learned of the intimidation of a reputed witch, it encouraged the local "clergy and influential persons" to "exert themselves to put a stop to such disgraceful

[35] Francis Grose, *A provincial glossary, with a collection of local proverbs and popular superstition* (London, 1787).

[36] The term hardly features in the British Library's Burney Collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century newspapers. The exceptions are some late eighteenth-century classified advertisements for poetic and antiquarian books. See *World*, 25 March 1788. As of February 2015, the British Newspaper Archive's collection of digitized newspapers records seven uses of the term "popular superstition" between 1810 and 1820. There are seventy-six between 1820 and 1830.

[37] "Popular superstition" first appeared in the *Times* on 26 September 1821. The first reference to "popular superstitions" was 4 May 1820.

[38] See Alun Howkins, "The Taming of Witsun: The Changing Face of a Nineteenth-Century Rural Holiday," in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590–1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure*, ed. Eileen and Stephen Yeo (Sussex, 1981), 187–208; Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford, 1989), 13–73; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1993), chaps. 4, 6, and 7.

[39] *Leeds Intelligencer*, 4 November 1830.

[40] *JOJ*, 31 July 1819.

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proceedings."[41] It did something similar in 1839 after the village of Little Tew was thrown into a state of "very considerable" excitement by rumors that witchcraft had caused an evil spirit to take up residence in a cottage. It was neither enough, the *Oxford Chronicle* argued, to "mark this fraud by silent contempt," nor was it sufficient to denounce it as a risible hoax. In the paper's view a further course of action was "indispensable." "The matter," it proclaimed, "should be sifted [investigated], in order to disabuse the minds of the credulous."[42]

While newspapers were becoming more critical, a new type of superstition- debunking public lecture enjoyed something of a vogue. Its character is nicely illustrated by the Reverend James Jordan's presentation, "Ghosts and Apparitions," which he delivered to the Mechanics' Institutes in Banbury, Oxford, and Witney in 1838.[43] Casting his eye over the history of "superstition," Jordan homed in on several infamous incidents. These included the manifestation of Caesar's ghost before Brutus; the haunting of the Wesley family at Epworth rectory; and a local episode, the so-called Woodstock Devil, which had harassed the parliamentary commissioners sent to the town during the Civil War in 1649. Those events, he explained at some length, were the result either of elaborate chicanery, the percipient's disturbed psychology, or various "natural causes." Jordan's allying of sensational ghost stories with the worthy purpose of educating the public in the laws of causality proved to be extremely popular. Local journalists applauded the way his lecture was "particularly addressed" to believers in ghosts and designed "to uproot all such superstitions and chimerical ideas."[44] It was not only a critical success. One newspaper estimated that the oration drew "the most numerous and respectable audience … ever witnessed" to Banbury Mechanics' Institute since its opening three years earlier, in 1835.[45] At Witney such a multitude attended that "many were obliged to return, unable to gain admission."[46] This ensured that Jordan was invited back to Banbury Mechanics' Institute the following year. He was still reprising his "celebrated lecture" in village reading rooms as late as 1861.[47]

Between the 1830s and 1860s, lecturers from all over Britain, but especially in market and county towns, catered to the considerable demand for presentations about "popular superstition."[48] Elite literary societies, learned philosophical institutes, and provincial athenaeums regularly heard such addresses, but their characteristic venue was the Mechanics' Institute. Sponsored by middle- and upper-class

[41] *Oxford City and County Chronicle* (hereafter *OC*), 7 October 1837.
[42] *OC*, 10 November 1838; 6 April 1839.
[43] *OC*, 17 November 1838; *Banbury Guardian*, no. 13 (April 1839), 6–7.
[44] *JOJ*, 8 December 1838; *OC*, 17 November 1838.
[45] *OC*, 17 November 1838.
[46] *JOJ*, 8 December 1838.
[47] *JOJ*, 8 December 1838, 21 December 1861.
[48] *Essex Standard*, 4 December 1835; *Hampshire Advertiser*, 21 October 1837; *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 3 November 1842; *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 7 March 1844; *Bristol Mercury*, 11 September 1847; *Manchester Times*, 28 January 1852; *York Herald*, 5 February 1853; *North Wales Chronicle*, 1 April 1853; *Cheshire Observer*, 26 February 1859; *Wrexham and Denbighshire Advertiser*, 26 February 1859; *Aberdeen Journal*, 18 April 1860; *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 27 December 1860; *Bradford Observer*, 10 October 1861.

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patrons for the benefit of self-improving workers, Mechanics' Institutes were established to disseminate useful knowledge and dissipate "ignorance and superstition."[49] At a soirée to celebrate the thirteenth anniversary of Bristol's Mechanics' Institute, the audience roared with assent when a speaker identified "their enemies" as "the giant of ignorance, and his progeny—the hydra of superstition (cheers). Who would not fight in so glorious a cause?"[50] Animated by this sense of purpose, it is little wonder that Mechanics' Institutes regularly hosted superstition-debunking lectures. A sample of twenty-eight such lectures, delivered between 1835 and 1838, finds five targeting belief in ghosts, twelve taking aim at "popular superstition" in general, two denouncing the idea of witchcraft, and a further nine explaining how the rational study of natural history, Shakespeare, astronomy, and the weather might eradicate those and other ignoble credulities.[51]

Lecturers and journalists were far from being the only people who publicly challenged belief in customary magic. Antiquaries—those often ridiculed and frequently misunderstood scholars—were equally committed to uprooting "popular superstition." Encouraged by the success of John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777) and Francis Grose's *Collection of local proverbs and popular superstitions* (1787), antiquaries had recently broadened the scope of their discipline to include some consideration of not only the physical but also the cultural remains of the past. Rural festivals, calendar customs, magical practices, fairy lore, ghost stories, and witchcraft were of particular interest to antiquaries, who supposed that within them were traces of paganism and early Christianity. And while it could be elitist and obscure, antiquarianism also had a popular side. Encyclopedic and anthological works like Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) and Charles Mackay's *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1856) were great commercial successes.

Too often, however, antiquarianism is conflated with folklore. Indeed, even the most conceptually careful historians are prone to anachronistically label eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century antiquarians as "folklorists," despite the fact that the term "folk lore" was not coined until 1846, and the Folk Lore Society not established until 1878.[52] For though it is right to see the later Victorian folklorists as the inheritors of the antiquarian tradition, there were significant differences between the two groups of scholars, and those differences were more than methodological. As a rule, antiquaries were more at home with arcane literary sources, while folklorists undertook more systematic ethnographic fieldwork. British antiquaries and folklorists, however, also had fundamentally different goals.

[49] *Hereford Times*, 8 April 1837.

[50] *Bristol Mercury*, 20 January 1838.

[51] *Essex Standard*, 4 December 1835, 9 December 1836, 20 January 1837; *Hereford Times*, 5 December 1835; *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 12 February 1836; *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 5 March 1836, 10 September 1836; *Kendal Mercury*, 26 March 1836; *Bristol Mercury*, 19 November 1836; *Huntingdon, Bedford, and Peterborough Gazette*, 29 October 1836; *Worcester Journal*, 1 December 1836; *Hampshire Advertiser*, 24 September 1836, 17 November 1836, 7 January 1837, 28 October 1837; *Stamford Mercury*, 17 June 1836, 21 December 1838; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 25 February 1837; *Hertford Mercury and Reformer*, 27 June 1837; *Hampshire Telegraph*, 17 April 1837, 30 January 1837; *Leeds Times*, 2 December 1837; *Manchester Times*, 18 March 1837; *Reading Mercury*, 10 February 1838.

[52] For example, see Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 2.

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It is well known that Continental European antiquaries hoped to recover traces of ancient national mythologies, and thereby identify the cultural foundations upon which new states could be built.[53] Less appreciated is the fact that English antiquaries, by contrast, routinely defended their interest in witchcraft and ghosts by arguing that they intended to cure the public of their erroneous beliefs. Even authors aiming at the widest possible audience, like Albany Poyntz in his *A World of Wonders* (1845), aimed at both "amusement and instruction." Through his admittedly "cursory" collection of anecdotes about belief in magic, apparitions, divination, witchcraft, and other "popular superstitions," Poyntz claimed to be furnishing his readers with a "refutation of these popular prejudices and vulgar errors."[54] It was, likewise, by citing the goal of intellectual improvement, that the author of a more specialist treatise on "rustic customs" ultimately vindicated his work. As he put it: "If by this feeble undertaking a single individual shall … [be] induced to trace back to natural causes those striking effects which have hitherto been considered supernatural … this little volume will not have been without its use."[55]

There was substance to this self-appointed educational mission. In his *History of Banbury* (1841), for instance, Alfred Beesley went to some length to discredit old yarns about an apparitional battle that occurred in the night sky around Edgehill. Those "marvellous stories," he maintained, were easily accounted for by a combination of a "natural phenomenon" like the Aurora Borealis, the easily duped "imagination of the country people," and the "exaggerations of the relators."[56] Similarly, J. A. Giles's *History of Bampton* (1848) took pains to undermine the reputation of the town's "haunted house" by blaming it on the drunkenness and stupidity of its former inhabitants.[57] A scholar of Kington on the Welsh border went so far as to complain about the "ignorant people" who baked hot-cross buns on Good Friday and kept one for the following year in the hope of attracting "good luck." That seemingly innocuous practice, he suggested, was "undoubtedly a relic of superstition and ought to be abolished."[58]

British antiquaries thus simultaneously pursued the seemingly contradictory goals of preserving "popular superstitions" from historical oblivion and showing that such beliefs were ill founded. Reviewers evidently expected them to do both, and they praised works in which "the anecdotes of popular superstition … [are] interspersed with some wholesome correctives of vulgar errors."[59] This was not a cause pursued only by obscure scholars. Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) was a hugely popular work that combined arresting anecdotes with a thorough critique of history's most pervasive "superstitions." Initially coy about his educational

[53] Jennifer Schacker, *National Dreams: The Remaking of Fairy Tales in Nineteenth-Century England* (Philadelphia, 2003), 2–3.

[54] Albany Poyntz, preface to *A World of Wonders, with Anecdotes and Opinions Concerning Popular Superstitions* (London, 1845).

[55] George Theodore Manning, *Rural Rhymes, illustrative of rustic customs and popular superstitions, with an introductory essay* (London, 1837), xii.

[56] Alfred Beesley, *The History of Banbury: including copious historical and antiquarian notices of the neighbourhood* (London, 1841), 339–40n20.

[57] John Allen Giles, *History of the parish and town of Bampton, with the districts and hamlets belonging to it* (Bampton, UK, 1848), 60–64.

[58] Richard Parry, *The History of Kington* (Kington, UK, 1845), 200.

[59] *Illustrated London News*, 16 October 1847, 250.

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agenda, Scott claimed his purpose was merely to recount certain intriguing incidents and "the observations which naturally and easily arise out of them."[60] In reality, his text was fundamentally structured around arguments designed to refute common preternatural beliefs. In the first and second chapters, for example, he drew on theology, physiology, psychology, and history to dispute the intellectual foundations of belief in witchcraft. J. N. Radcliffe's *Fiends, Ghosts, and Sprites* (1854) took a similar approach. The work did indeed, as the author declared at the outset, "trace the origin of this belief, the causes of the various modifications it has undergone, and the phases it has assumed." But though it included a great deal of intellectual history and comparative mythology, Radcliffe's book also dedicated more than one hundred pages to disproving both conventional belief in ghosts and spiritualism.[61] Thus, for all their scholarly goals, early nineteenth-century antiquaries were second to none in their concern to avoid, as one put it, "the peril of encouraging the idea of the possibility of direct spiritual influences and communications in these latter days."[62]

Novelists, obscure and celebrated alike, joined the assault on "popular superstition." Pressure for them to do so began during the eighteenth century, when the "superstitious" character of ghost stories came under scrutiny—particularly because they often got into the hands of children. As a result, some authors began to write rationalizing tales that explained how belief in ghosts was ill founded. Still, as Sasha Handley has observed, "it would be a number of years before the success of these efforts could be measured."[63] "True" ghost stories, in which there was no indication that the preternatural agents were in any sense fraudulent or misunderstood, were still being published at the close of the century.

Much more than were their predecessors, early nineteenth-century writers were expected to use supernatural tropes in a responsible fashion that ultimately made it clear that occult forces were not really at work. Charles Dickens, as a prolific author and publisher of ghost stories, was well aware that he "should be deservedly pounced upon" if he put out tales that purported to be "true."[64] In his early apparitional stories like *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Dickens circumvented the issue by drawing on the theory of spectral illusions to explain to his readers that his were not real ghosts but projections of his characters' psychology. He was certainly right to think that the reviewers would condemn any work, no matter how ephemeral, that seemed to promote "superstition." The *Gentleman's Magazine*, for example, denounced an anthology entitled *Accredited Ghost Stories* as "a most absurd and indeed dangerous publication." Attacking the "ridiculous collection of falsehoods" propagated by the book, it advised any readers "who may still labour under the early prejudices of the nanny," to sate their taste for the marvelous elsewhere. Ackermann's

[60] Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft, addressed to J. G. Lockhart* (London, 1830), 3.

[61] John Netten Radcliffe, *Fiends, Ghosts, and Sprites. Including an Account of the Origin and Nature of Belief in the Supernatural* (London, 1854), 1, 105–213, 266–67.

[62] "Superstitions," in *Chambers's Information for the People*, ed. William and Robert Chambers (Edinburgh, 1842), 1:763.

[63] Sasha Handley, "Visions of an Unseen World: The Production and Consumption of English Ghost Stories, c.1660–1800" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2005), 290–99.

[64] Louise Henson, "Investigations and Fictions: Charles Dickens and Ghosts," in *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. Nicola Brown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge, 2004), 44–63, at 60, 45–47.

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recent *Ghost Stories, Collected with a Particular View to Counteract the Vulgar Belief in Ghosts*, it pointed out, was free from the credulity implicit in the previous text, and demonstrated "how easily the imagination may be imposed upon by appearances, resulting alone from natural causes."[65]

Clergymen, too, became more outspoken in their criticism of "popular superstition." In a private letter from 1853, Samuel Wilberforce, the bishop of Oxford, condemned belief in spiritualism, witchcraft, and a local haunting known as the "Beckley Ghost." Those things, he wrote, were nothing but "lying impositions" and could be described as "the work of the Evil Spirit only so far forth as all frauds are."[66] We might well expect that sort of skepticism from a Victorian prelate—even from one who, like Wilberforce, was renowned for attacking agnosticism, atheism, and Darwinism.[67] But the most fervent Nonconformists, who previously took for granted the existence of witches and evil spirits, had also become hostile to such beliefs. The Reverend William Peacefull, for instance, was the kind of Primitive Methodist preacher who "perceived the Providential Hand of God" in everyday events, from the storm that drove the sinners inside the chapel to the ray of light that shone upon a penitent's face as he or she acknowledged his or her sinfulness. Further, he believed that the "Evil One" really was at work in the world, leading backsliders down the road to perdition, and using his "servants" to intimidate the faithful. Yet despite all that supernaturalism, Peacefull also said prayers for his flock in which he "besought the Lord to deliver them from the fear of witches, ghosts and apparitions, and all such superstitious bondage."[68]

Others fought "popular superstition" by scrutinizing local hauntings and bewitchments, such as the one at Little Tew, in Oxfordshire. During 1838 and 1839, hundreds of people went to the troubled cottage in order to hear strange sounds and witness the "mischievous freaks" that were apparently the work of the ghost.[69] Most went out of curiosity, some because they thought that the events had a sort of religious significance. There was, however, a rump of skeptics who, a supporter of the veracity of the haunting complained, "would not believe there was anything supernatural." Only "poor villagers" were prepared to admit that the disturbances might be caused by witchcraft, while no "respectable individuals" were willing to publicly vouch for such an interpretation.[70] Doctors, tenant farmers, and other members of the rural middle class, along with some artisan investigators, were both suspicious of the affair and keen to expose the fraud and foolishness they assumed must be behind it. Several "respectable farmers," for instance, postulated that an inhabitant of the allegedly haunted cottage, Ann Hall, was a ventriloquist

[65] *Gentleman's Magazine* 93 (June 1823), 541.

[66] R. K. Pugh, ed., *The Letter-Books of Samuel Wilberforce* (Oxford, 1970), 277–78. Beckley is a village a few miles north of Oxford.

[67] M. A. Crowther, "Church Problems and Church Parties," in *Religion in Victorian Britain,* vol. 4, *Interpretations*, ed. Gerald Parsons (Manchester, 1988), 21–22.

[68] I. Dorricott, *Memorials of an Earnest Life; Or, Records of the Rev. William Peacefull* (London, n.d. [ca. 1878]), 40, 49.

[69] Edgar Hewlett, *Personal recollections of the Little Tew ghost, reviewed in connection with the Lancashire bogie and the table-talking and spirit-rapping of the present day* (London, 1854), 7–13.

[70] *OC*, 6 April 1839. Respectable here denoted social position rather than personal conduct. Parker, "Oxfordshire Village Folklore," 74.

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who used her talents to imitate the "ghost." They even hired a genuine ventriloquist in an effort to prove it.[71]

The police, likewise, began to intervene when customary magical beliefs threatened to inspire violence or disorder. Hitherto communities had largely supervised themselves with the assistance of a sympathetic local constable drawn from their midst.[72] This tradition of self-policing was eclipsed between 1830 and 1850 by the establishment of professional and independent forces, first in the boroughs and later in the counties. That professionalization, combined with bourgeois anxiety about "popular superstition," explains why police officers from across the country started to investigate alleged hauntings—especially those attracting large crowds.[73] Often their involvement was enough to put an end to such disturbances. In Bicester in 1848, for instance, some "mysterious noises" that were alarming residents at one of the town's inns were swiftly quieted when the police threatened some guilty-looking residents with a night in custody.[74] But even when they could not detect the origin of a disturbance, a police presence usually ensured that the crowd's actions did not get out of hand. For example, in 1853 "uproar" ensued in the environs of Pond-Place, Chelsea, after rumors of a wandering ghost. The ensuing tumult, one paper reported, rendered it "necessary to send a number of the police to disperse the crowds that had assembled."[75] As agents of the ratepayers, as well as of the state, the police played an important role in restraining the more raucous and visible expressions of plebeian supernaturalism.

The increasingly long arm of the law also helped to curtail ritualistic violence against supposed witches. Communal mobbings and swimmings of witches ceased in the middle of the nineteenth century, doubtless because the authorities became intolerant of such outrages to public order.[76] The ancient practice of scratching alleged witches to draw their blood—reckoned to be one of the most effective means of breaking their spells—also came under significant duress, though it proved to be more tenacious. As late as 1940, a man was brought before East Dereham magistrates, in Norfolk, for attacking a neighbor who, he claimed, had bewitched him.[77] Nonetheless, witch-scratching had been in terminal decline since the prosecution of offenders became routine in even the most remote villages and hamlets, in the 1850s and 1860s.[78] Greater efforts were also made to prevent so-called cunning–folk, fortune-tellers, and other occult practitioners from pursuing their trades. The 1824 Vagrancy Act made it easier to prosecute "persons pretending or professing to tell fortunes, or using any subtle craft, means, or device, by palmistry or otherwise, to deceive or impose."[79] Those found guilty under the new law were to be considered as "rogues and vagabonds" and punished with a £25 fine or three months of hard labor. The skeptical mood of the 1820s may also have provided the impetus for

[71] Hewlett, *Personal recollections*, 12–13.
[72] Davies, *Witchcraft*, 115, 288.
[73] *Morning Post*, 29 June 1844; *OC*, 17 February 1849; *JOJ*, 10 February 1849, 26 May 1855; *Manchester Times*, 3 March 1855; *Liverpool Mercury*, 16 March 1855; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 4 March 1868.
[74] *OC*, 13 May 1848.
[75] *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 11 September 1853; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 11 September 1853.
[76] On the modern history of those practices, see Davies, *Witchcraft*, 96–119.
[77] *Hull Daily Mail*, 6 January 1941.
[78] On the decline of witch-scratching, see Davies, *Witchcraft*, 274–75.
[79] Quoted in Davies, *Witchcraft*, 54.

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the repeal of the unused, but symbolically significant, Irish law against witchcraft, which remained on the statute book until as late as 1821.[80] The same is probably true of the legislation outlawing the crossroad burial of suicides (a practice designed to prevent their restless ghosts from returning home), which was passed in 1823.[81] Even in its unreformed state, therefore, Britain's Parliament embodied the growing feeling that "popular superstition" ought to be challenged and, preferably, eradicated.

CAUSES AND CLASSES

Why, during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, did customary magic come under pressure from so many directions? For journalists, this was an ideal campaign. The elite, partisan press of the eighteenth century served up a comparatively restricted diet of politics, international relations, and finance to its elite, metropolitan audience.[82] The middlebrow press that emerged during the early nineteenth century, by contrast, needed to appeal to a broader and more provincial readership. Witchcraft and ghost stories were certainly entertaining—enthralling, even. They could also be used to flatter local patriotism and inflame regional xenophobia by highlighting the "superstitions" of other counties and countries. But most importantly, by carrying critical reports about belief in witchcraft and ghosts, newspapers were able to pose as repositories of wisdom and sobriety. This was vital because, far from considering journalists as an intellectual vanguard, some critics felt that the press fostered not knowledge and reason, but prejudice and discord.[83] It was on this account that newspaper subscriptions were prohibited at some mechanics' institutes.[84] Similar reasoning justified retaining stamp duties on newspapers—controversial "taxes on knowledge" that were increased in 1798 and again by the Six Acts of 1819.[85] While many duties were reduced in 1836, before their eventual abolition in 1861, they were still substantial enough to make newspapers prohibitively expensive for working people.

The challenge faced by early nineteenth-century newspaper editors was to counter their influential critics while simultaneously appealing to a broad, provincial readership. Editors thus needed stories that were both entertaining and edifying—copy that was respectable and sensational. Accounts of the extraordinary escapades of

[80] Ian Bostridge nevertheless concludes, "This repeal was, without a doubt, a measure of administrative reform pure and simple, undertaken without any reference to the ideological history of witchcraft theory." See Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations*, 196–97.

[81] Donna T. Andrew, "Debate: The Secularization of Suicide in England 1660–1800," *Past and Present* 119 (May 1988): 158–65, at 158.

[82] For a succinct summary of the development of the newspaper industry during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Matthew Rubrey, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (New York, 2009), 4–9.

[83] Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton, 1998), 53.

[84] Ibid., 83. See also *The Arranged Catalogue of the Library of the Mechanics' Institute, or Literary and Scientific Society of the Borough of Gateshead, with the Fifth Report of the Committee; The Rules for the Regulation and Government of the Society* (Gateshead, UK, 1842), 6.

[85] Jennifer Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution: 1785–1820* (Abingdon, 2014), 99; Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People, 1790–1860* (Cambridge, 2004), 74; Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1996), 97.

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witchcraft and ghost believers interspersed with a little critical commentary fitted the bill exactly. This partly explains why stories about "popular superstition" became standard journalistic fodder during this period. But as hostility towards customary magic figured prominently in other forms of media, too, it is evident that its roots ran much deeper than the self-interested posturing of the press.

There was a political aspect to the critique of customary magic. Liberal, Whig, and Radical journalists were particularly enthusiastic disparagers, no doubt because witchcraft belief in particular could be used to embarrass their Tory and Anglican opponents. Thus in 1838, the Liberal-supporting *Western Times* described how, in its own neighborhood, were "men who believe in witchcraft and charms—not their own fault, but the fault of those Tories who have so effectually resisted popular education."[86] This mentality, a letter to the paper asserted, explained why some rustics were so averse to the recent smallpox vaccinations. "It is impossible that such delusions," the *Western Times* decreed, "could prevail generally, if the clergy were to do their duty."[87] Some Liberal and Radical newspapers even suggested that the Conservative Party's strength in rural constituencies owed something to the prevalence of ignorance and witchcraft belief. In 1838, for instance, the *Morning Chronicle* mischievously reported how "in a great county in the west of England a Noble Lord who lost his election was greatly injured by the defection of a celebrated wizard [that is, a cunning-man] to the ranks of his opponents."[88]

Dissenters also attacked "popular superstition" in order to further their own agenda. Thus in 1841 the Reverend William Ferguson, minister of Bicester Congregational Church, submitted the first in a series of letters to the *Oxford Chronicle*, in which he warned of its divisive consequences. "Ignorance lowers man," he insisted, as "[i]t renders him the groveling slave of superstition—the tool of faction—and the prey of the designing."[89] A month later he reiterated the point in stronger terms: "Ignorance is the Parent of Superstition—the unlettered man is the prey of every designing knave that crosses his path—his fears are easily excited—the passions of his being are rendered subservient to the interests of gain."[90] Ferguson's florid forebodings did not end there. In 1848 he collected his thoughts into an ominously titled polemic about the condition of the countryside, *The Impending Dangers of our Country* (1848), in which he argued that "society … is radically, and to an alarming extent, unsound and deranged." Ferguson invoked the specter of rebellion and revolution by warning that the government "may very soon have to face, in the heart of England, the very evil which at present threatens to convert Ireland into a heap of graves." The reason was that "the people have been overlooked, and left to sink into a pit of ignorance, immorality, uncleanliness, degradation, and ruin!" Preternatural beliefs in the likes of ghosts and witches were both a symptom and cause of that dangerous degradation, and proof that "our peasantry are still living in a somewhat barbarous state."[91]

[86] *Western Times*, 18 August 1838.
[87] *Western Times*, 9 June 1838.
[88] *Morning Chronicle*, 9 June 1838.
[89] *OC*, 27 February 1841.
[90] *OC*, 13 March 1841
[91] William Ferguson, *The Impending Dangers of Our Country; Or, Hidden Things Brought to Light* (London, 1848), i–ii, 96–97, 111.

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The Reverend Ferguson's polemics were aimed at breaking the Church of England's near monopoly on elementary education. His intention, clearly, was to make the case for more Nonconformist schools by showing that the current didactic regime was badly deficient. Whether or not they endorsed his solution, plenty of other commentators broadly agreed with his analysis about "superstition" undermining social and political cohesion. A widely reprinted editorial in the *Globe*, a notable London evening paper, made the point quite explicitly. "The gross ignorance which envelopes the poorer classes of England," it surmised, "is no longer [a] matter of controversy." Like Ferguson, the *Globe* thought "the population of our rural districts bear special and incontrovertible marks of its sad effects." And like Ferguson, it implied that the prevalence of fallacious supernatural beliefs made the rural poor vulnerable to the approaches of agitators and fanatics: "The population have been abandoned to knaves and demagogues, and we reap a harvest of superstition and rebellion." According to *the Globe*, it was clear that "the frenzy of a fanatical superstition alone appears capable of moving the moral prostration of too large a portion of the agrarian population."[92]

This sense that "superstition" fostered rebellion was highly exaggerated but not utterly baseless. There were indeed flickers of the supernatural in some varieties of popular dissent. In 1838, the introduction of the New Poor Law provoked an uprising in Kent led by the pseudo-religious prophet "Sir William Courtney," which ended in the massacre of nine agricultural laborers.[93] The rising, many newspapers agreed, was fueled by "sheer fanaticism, a sort of superstitious madness."[94] Anonymous threatening letters, a "characteristic form of social protest" during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were often written in a verse-like style and register that echoed the language of curses, scripture, and prophecy. "These rhymes," E. P. Thompson noted, literally "have a magical quality."[95] In Wales, some of those who burned ricks and maimed animals in the Rebecca Riots of 1839–42 swore supernatural oaths in blood.[96] The rhetoric of early agricultural trade unionism was, similarly, decidedly prophetic and millennial.[97]

There was, therefore, a kernel of truth in the notion that "popular superstition" fired revolt and disorder. Yet it was not the reality of working-class dissent, but a fantasy of insurrection driven by heady credulity that made "popular superstition" appear so threatening to "respectable" early Victorians. This fantasy was not particularly far-fetched, however. From a European perspective, early Victorian Britain might well have been regarded as an island of stability in a sea of unrest. From the domestic point of view, however, it did not appear so peaceable. The arson and machine breaking in Captain Swing's name (1830–31), the riots in Bristol and

[92] As reported in the *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 29 May 1839; *Caledonian Mercury*, 27 May 1839; and *Newcastle Courant*, 31 May 1839.

[93] Barry Reay, *Rural Englands: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2004), 146.

[94] *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 11 June 1838, 129.

[95] E. P. Thompson, "The Crime of Anonymity," in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, and E. P. Thompson (New York, 1975), 255–308, at 303.

[96] *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, Appointed by the Committee of Council of Education*, Part 1, *Carmarthen, Glamorgan, and Pembroke* (London, 1847), 6.

[97] J. P. D. Dunbabin, "The 'Revolt of the Field': The Agricultural Labourers' Movement in the 1870s," *Past and Present* 26 (November 1963): 68–97, at 75.

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Nottingham engendered by the first Reform Bill's failure (1831), the violent protests against the New Poor Law (from 1837), the Rebecca Riots (1839–43), the deeply intimidating, armed, nocturnal mass meetings of early Chartism (1838), and the disastrous Newport Rising (1839) are just some of the more clearly defined hostilities that haunted the imaginations of middle-class Britons. More generally, cities were feared as the homes of sedition, disease, and the godless masses. In the countryside, animal maiming was common, while enclosure continued to inspire localized outbreaks of disorder, like the Otmoor riots in Oxfordshire (1829–35).[98] Popular revolt seemed, if not imminent, then perfectly possible. It is indicative of contemporary concerns that, during the 1820s and 1830s, a satirist like George Cruikshank shifted his focus from corpulent royals and cynical politicians to the unruly masses.[99] "Fear of revolt and revolution," Harold Perkin has said, "was far more vivid than the actuality."[100] Even so, it was this fear that gave impetus to the drive against "popular superstition."

An alternative to this reading of the attack on "popular superstition" would be to interpret it as a self-serving campaign designed to legitimize the social hierarchy. Victorian elites, it has been argued, justified their privileged positions by stigmatizing and slandering their social inferiors with accusations of superstition.[101] Unquestionably, much of the criticism of magical beliefs was haughty and condescending. The outbreak of the drive against "popular superstition" also roughly coincided with the popularization of the terminology of social class.[102] It seems reasonable, therefore, to connect those developments. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have noted that, from the later eighteenth century, the middle classes "increasingly claimed moral power for themselves."[103] The rise of the censorious language of "popular superstition" was, perhaps, just another bourgeois attempt to acquire cultural power and moral authority.

On closer inspection, though, the idea that debunking superstition was undertaken in order to denigrate the poor and to reinforce the rational self-image of their "betters" cannot explain as much as we might at first imagine. For it cannot account for journalists, public lecturers, antiquarians, and other "respectable" folk striving to *disprove* and *expose* customary magic. If their intention was to justify the lord in his castle and the poor man at his gate, then why not leave the masses to their credulous errors? To my mind, it seems more plausible that the attack on customary magic was motivated by much more pressing concerns about self-preservation. In an age of real and perceived unrest, the eradication of "popular

[98] Robert Lee, *Unquiet Country: Voices of the Rural Poor, 1820–1880* (Macclesfield, UK, 2005), esp. chaps. 2, 3, and 4; J. E. Archer, *"By Flash and a Scare": Incendiarism, Animal Maiming and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815–70* (Oxford, 1990).

[99] Anne L. Helmreich, "Reforming London: George Cruikshank and the Victorian Age," in *Victorian Urban Settings: Essays on the Nineteenth-Century City and Its Contexts*, ed. Debra N. Mancoff and Dale J. Trela (New York, 1996), 157–78.

[100] Harold Perkin, "An Age of Great Cities," in Mancoff and Trela, eds., *Victorian Urban Settings*, 3–26, at 7.

[101] For a sophisticated take on this interpretation, see Bell, *Magical Imagination*, chap. 3, esp. 120–29.

[102] Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement: 1783–1867* (London, 1974), 65, 170, 297. Patrick Joyce agreed about the popularization of the vocabulary, even if he disagreed with Briggs about its implications. See Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, c. 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), 29.

[103] Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 450.

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superstition" was thought of as tending towards the improvement, and thereby pacification, of the populace.

THE TOLERATION OF MAGIC, 1860–1900

The early Victorian hostility to customary magic attached, as Catherine Crowe noted in 1848, a "sort of odium" to preternatural belief. Because of this stigma, she suggested, "nobody chooses to confess, in print, that he or anybody belonging to him, has seen a ghost."[104] It had, another critic agreed, become "a fine mark of vulgarity to suppose … there could be spirits." Until now, "very few people can find courage enough to raise the question."[105] Still, we should not confuse silence with disbelief. The drive against "popular superstition" diminished the more violent, riotous, and conspicuous aspects of supernaturalism. As one antiquary observed, "the belief in ghosts does not now possess those glaring features which were attached to it at the commencement of the present century." Though it had become "less obtrusive," he was candid enough to admit that ghost belief was "very far from being extinguished."[106]

With its more egregious features dimmed, magical belief enjoyed a modest renaissance, in middlebrow culture at least, during the later Victorian period. Some disapproval of faith in witchcraft remained, but those sentiments, perhaps because they took more benign forms, provoked less anxiety and outrage. The notion of ghosts, especially, was rehabilitated. Spiritualism and psychical science seemed, in the opinion of some, to hold out the possibility that there was more to alleged hauntings than just imposture and delusion. Readers began to write to their local papers, under spiritualist inspired headings like "Spirit-Rapping," to recount their investigations into "disturbed houses" and "unquiet cottages."[107] Once again, from around the late 1860s, "respectable" correspondents again started to vouch for the fidelity of the hauntings they examined—although usually from behind the reputational shield of a pseudonym.[108] At the close of the century, Oxfordshire's preeminent newspaper, *Jackson's Oxford Journal,* was even employing a columnist who regularly expressed her faith in the reality of the spirit world. Writing under the pen name the "Oxford Lady," she was obviously well educated, had a keen interest in psychical research, and was not in the least bit embarrassed to admit that she yearned to "see a ghost, or to at least hear one."[109] Her longing, in that respect, seems to have been satisfied vicariously, as she often regaled her readers with what to her mind were reliable reports about the appearance of phantasms of the living and the dead.[110] Such public admission to belief in ghosts would, in a serious newspaper at least, have been unthinkable during the early Victorian period.

Later Victorians were also much more willing to hear their public speakers argue that an ethereal spirit world might exist. Touring spiritualist mediums gave séances, but there were also respectable lecturers who attested to the veracity of something

[104] Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature, or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (London, 1848), 1:vi.
[105] *North British Review* 9, no. 18 (1848): 393–416, at 394.
[106] Radcliffe, *Fiends, Ghosts, and Sprites*, 103.
[107] *JOJ*, 22 February 1868.
[108] *JOJ*, 22 November 1890.
[109] *JOJ*, 20 May 1899.
[110] *JOJ*, 22 December 1900, 29 December 1900, 8 July 1899.

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more akin to traditional ghost belief.[111] In 1876, for example, the Reverend H. C. Shuttleworth, a minor canon of St. Paul's Cathedral, spoke to an audience in Wantage about supernatural family warnings, haunted houses, and apparitions of the departed. He did not present his tales as mere entertaining yarns; rather, as the local paper reported, without comment, the canon told stories "which he alleged were true."[112] Just fifteen years earlier, an affirmation from such an esteemed person would have drawn howls of indignation. But by the 1870s, skeptics were preoccupied with the trickery of spiritualism's stage mediums, and largely uninterested in the persistence of older fallacies.[113]

Later Victorian and Edwardian folklore collectors were, similarly, far less censorious than early nineteenth-century antiquarians. Admittedly, folklorists habitually used derogatory terms like "superstitious," "ignorant," and "pagan" to describe people who believed in ghosts, witches, and omens.[114] Some early anthropologists also implied that magical belief engendered profanity and societal turbulence.[115] Even so, unlike their antiquarian predecessors, later Victorian folklorists made no effort to dispel popular beliefs, and indeed were more focused on preserving "traditional" culture, including its emphasis on the preternatural.[116] As Alun Howkins has shown, fears of urban degeneration and the belief that rural culture could provide a wholesome alternative to the allegedly debased mores of city dwellers had transformed the caricature of the agricultural worker from the despised "Hodge" into the worthy repository of ancient lore, "Lob."[117] With the growing lure of rusticity, folklorists no longer needed to justify their work by playing on its ability to rescue the rural working classes from their traditional outlook. Thus in 1899 the sometime president of the Folklore Society, E. S. Hartland, argued that folklore had many uses, including promoting social harmony at home, aiding effective rule in the colonies, giving a proper understanding of canonical texts, and revealing the full meaning of Bible.[118] But of its ability to rid the popular mind of its fallacious, supernatural beliefs, he made no mention.

With the arrival of spiritualism and the emergence of the "sensation novel" in 1859, fantastical fiction also broke free from its responsibility to preach against "popular superstition."[119] Appropriately it was in 1859 that George Eliot departed from the social realism that had characterized her work to date. Her novella of

[111] *JOJ*, 16 April 1864. Following a lecture at Combe, "the readings and songs included some thrilling ghost stories (said to be well authenticated)." For similar post-lecture readings, see *JOJ*, 29 November 1873, 23 January 1869, 18 December 1875.

[112] *JOJ*, 28 October 1876.

[113] For exposes of clairvoyance and spiritualism, see *JOJ*, 28 July 1849, 5 December 1857, 1 May 1875.

[114] For example, see Charlotte Latham, "Some West Sussex Superstitions Lingering in 1868," *Folk-Lore Record* 1 (1878): 7–61. On this point, see Hutton, *Triumph*, 116.

[115] Supritha Rajan, "Networking Magic: Andrew Lang and the Science of Self-Interest," *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 64 (October 2013), http://ravonjournal.org/issue/ravon-64/.

[116] On later nineteenth-century folklorists, see Mark Freeman, *Social Investigation and Rural England 1870–1914* (Woodbridge, 2003), 59–60, 71–73.

[117] Alun Howkins, "From Hodge to Lob: Reconstructing the English Farm Labourer 1870–1914," in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison*, ed. Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (Aldershot, 1996), 218–35.

[118] E. S. Hartland, *Folklore: What Is It and What Is the Good of It?* (London, 1899), 23–38.

[119] For later Victorian supernatural fiction and its relationship to the sensation novel, see Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia, MO, 1996), chap. 6.

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that year, *The Lifted Veil*, seems to give credence to mystical powers like mind reading and fate. Dickens, too, was influenced by the changing climate. In contrast to his earlier narratives, his 1866 story "The Signalman" ends on an ambiguous note that leaves open the possibility that the protagonist really has seen a ghost.[120] The rehabilitation of unapologetically supernatural fiction was complete by 1888, when another proponent of realist fiction, Thomas Hardy, published his account of witchcraft, bastardy, and popular magic, "The Withered Arm." As one critic notes, the tale of Rhoda Brook, Gertrude Lodge, and Conjuror Trendle "resists all realistic explanations for the strange events it chronicles."[121] Had it been written a generation earlier, it is doubtful whether "The Withered Arm" would have been published in such a highly respectable periodical as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* if at all.

Perhaps the establishment of a more comprehensive system of universal education in 1870 helped to assuage old anxieties about the credulous populace. The decline, if not disappearance, of riot on the mainland, and a "greater law-abidingness" in general, may also have helped.[122] Denominational rivalries did not burn quite so hot, and it was no longer plausible, given the rise of Villa Toryism, to portray the Conservatives as the representatives of rustic backwardness.[123] Furthermore, with the abolition of stamp duties and the emergence of the yellow press, newspapers did not need to pose as models of respectability. Finally, as British culture slowly became more permissive and customary magic edged closer to new esoteric thought, it no longer seemed reasonable to denounce and denigrate those who took witchcraft and ghosts seriously.[124] The unique mix of anxieties and agendas that powered the early Victorian drive against "popular superstition" was, by the later Victorian period, no longer in place. Different fears and interests about supposed racial degeneration and social decay gave birth to new campaigns and moral panics.[125] The prevalence of belief in customary magic was, consequently, no longer considered to be a real cause for concern.

CONCLUSION

Belief in customary magic was, until the dawn of the nineteenth century, regarded sympathetically by many middle- and upper-class people. It was not until the 1820s and 1830s that the middlebrow media, along with the police, parliamentarians, and many "respectable" private individuals, began to put it under significant pressure. The chronology and character of this enterprise means that it cannot be

[120] Charles Dickens, "No. 1 Branch Line: The Signalman," in *Mugby Junction: the extra Christmas number of All The Year Round* (London, 1866), 20–25.

[121] Suzanne R. Johnson, "Metamorphosis, Desire, and the Fantastic in Thomas Hardy's 'The Withered Arm,'" *Modern Language Studies* 23, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 131–41, at 131.

[122] Bread riots occurred in London's East End as late as the winter of 1860–61. See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (London, 1984), 45, 47. On the "greater law-abidingness," see G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1866–1918* (Oxford, 2004), 198.

[123] On Villa Toryism, see Matthew Roberts, "Villa Toryism and Popular Conservatism in Leeds, 1885–1902," *Historical Journal* 49, no. 1 (March 2006): 217–46.

[124] Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 2003), 23.

[125] Anthony S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (London, 1977), 165, 218.

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satisfactorily accounted for or explained by linear, gradualist schemes of disenchantment or magical decline. In fact, it cannot really be classified as a case of the decline of magic at all. Far from slowly fading away, customary magic—conceptualized as "popular superstition"—suddenly and briefly became a matter of great concern among the respectable classes. This was not an inevitable consequence of "modernization" or of the Enlightenment. Rather, it reflected the confluence of some particular impulses and circumstances. A mounting anxiety about the masses and their potential for delusive disorder was chief among these, but the drive against "popular superstition" was also compatible with other agendas. From regional rivalry to nonsectarian education, anti-Tory propaganda, and enhancing the credibility of the provincial press, it served various ends. As this constellation of interests and anxieties shifted during the later Victorian period, the drive against "popular superstition" waned, too. Thus, rather than regarding this as an instance of the decline of magic, it is better seen a middle-class panic about customary magic, driven by several streams of self-interest and an overarching anxiety about the riotous poor.

Despite the early Victorians' efforts to combat credulity, belief in customary magic was not eliminated. The police curtailed ritualistic attacks upon supposed witches and pacified raucous hauntings, but in general, faith in ghosts and magic remained fairly common. Perhaps because it had been tamed, "popular superstition" no longer generated the same alarm it had a generation earlier. Added to that, the arrival of spiritualism, the growth of rural nostalgia, the increasing dominance of sensational entertainments, and the emergence of a more permissive mood all combined to create a cultural climate that gave more latitude to occult outlooks.[126]

This was the beginning of a long-term shift. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, magic increasingly escaped censure. One of many consequences of this development was that, during the 1910s, judicial prosecutions of fortune-tellers, which had never touched more than a minority, began to subside.[127] The press also became more sympathetic to occult practitioners; in the 1930s newspapers started carrying astrological horoscopes and reports on ghost hunters like Harry Price.[128] Modern pagan witchcraft—a religion that embraces magic—did experience initial hostility, but its growth into a less controversial faith is evidence of the increasingly tolerant atmosphere.[129] So too is the Church of England's decision in 1969 to repeal the seventeenth-century canon prohibiting its clergy from conducting exorcisms without the permission of a bishop. In recent decades, as a scholar of the Anglican Church's Deliverance Ministry notes, there has been "an official revival of a theology that accepts the existence of poltergeists, ghosts, and the devil."[130] Early Victorian prelates, we can assume, would have been appalled. Still, the relatively uncontroversial status that preternatural belief has now acquired puts into stark relief how uniquely hostile to "superstition" the early Victorians in fact were. Rather than a straightforward decline of magic it seems that, in Britain at least, there has since the 1860s also been a growing *tolerance* of magic.

[126] On the latter point, see Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance*, 23.

[127] Hutton, *Triumph*, 108–9.

[128] Davies, "Newspapers," 164; Joanna Timms, "Ghost-Hunters and Psychical Research in Interwar England," *History Workshop Journal* 74, no. 1 (Autumn 2012): 88–104.

[129] Hutton, *Triumph*, 253–71, 382–88, 416.

[130] Neal Milner, "'Giving the Devil' His Due Process: Exorcism in the Church of England," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15, no. 2 (May 2000): 247–72.

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