

## 📖 Topic Page: [Magic](#)

Definition: **magic** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Use (or apparent use) of natural or spirit forces to produce results that are logically impossible. Belief in magic is associated mainly with 'primitive' societies, although traces (such as superstitions) can still be found in developed countries. There are two main types of magic: **black** magic (which makes use of evil spirits) and **white** magic (used to good purpose and to counteract black magic). See *also* witchcraft



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Summary Article: **Magic**

From *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*

The belief in and practice of magic is probably as old as human history. Magic may be defined as the influencing of events and physical phenomena by humans using mystical, paranormal or supernatural means. The word ultimately derives from the Old Persian *magus* (plural *magi*), which referred to Zoroastrian priests and scholars of the Medes, credited by Classical commentators with mastery of astrology and other occult arts. The archaic spelling of *magick* was repopularized by the 20th-century occultist aleister crowley, who used it to differentiate his mystical system from stage magic (see magic, stage) and illusion. Since his time, many other occult and spiritual traditions have adopted this spelling to refer to their practices.

In *The Golden Bough* (1890), anthropologist James Frazer argues that magic precedes religion as an attempt by man to understand, control and influence his external environment. In his opinion it involves an essentially animistic worldview, in which all natural objects and phenomena are regarded as being 'alive' and having a consciousness (see animism). Most cultures also have, or have had at one time in their history, some form of magical tradition which recognizes a shamanic interconnectedness of spirit. In many tribal societies, magic may only be practised by certain members of the group, such as the shaman, medicine man or witch doctor, and is performed for social purposes – to help the tribe defeat its enemies, to bring rain, to increase the fertility of crops and livestock or for healing.

Common to many magical traditions is the belief that there is an inherent energy radiating from the Earth and all living things, and it is this energy which magic, as a system, seeks to harness and channel. To the ancient Egyptians, it was known as *heka*; to the Yoruba of Africa, it is *ashé*; to the Polynesians, mana. Magic is thus regarded as a source of power, neither good nor bad in itself, and whether it is used for good (see magic, white) or evil (see magic, black) depends on the magician's intentions. Some practitioners of magic hold that magic does not break the laws of nature, but rather, obeys laws of nature which are simply not yet understood, and thus should not be called 'supernatural'.

Throughout the millennia, each culture has developed its own system of magic, reflecting its traditions and preoccupations. The belief in the power of magical names, spells, figures, amulets, charms and rituals was an important part of ancient Egyptian life, and magic also formed a common tradition in the Graeco-Roman world. Collections of magic spells rank among the world's earliest written documents, and, according to Egyptian mythology, the lunar god Thoth, credited as the inventor of both magic and writing, wrote the very first book – a revelation of spells and rituals, which was believed to hold the key to all the secrets of the universe. In Egypt, a large number of papyri were discovered which contain

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early examples of much of the magical lore later incorporated into Western ceremonial magic (see magic, ceremonial), and which describe the use of wands and other ritual tools, the magic circle, and magical symbols and sigils. Modern Western practitioners have also drawn heavily upon the sacred magical texts of Hinduism, such as the *Atharva-Veda*, which discuss both white and black magic.

In Western history, the belief in and practice of magic has waxed and waned, either through pressure brought by the Christian Church (which has traditionally treated such things as witchcraft as sinful and forbidden) or through simple scepticism brought about by an increase in scientism. However, for many centuries most of Christian Europe maintained a reasonably tolerant view of magic, which formed a part of everyday life; ordinary people consulted the 'cunning men' and 'wise women' (see wisdom) found in every village. These people were believed to be skilled not only in healing and herbalism, but in detecting and counteracting the practices of those who used magic for evil purposes. But in the Middle Ages, the Church ruled that all magic was brought about by evil spirits manipulating nature on behalf of the sorcerer, who had entered into a pact with the devil (see devil's pact). Its practice was therefore forbidden, and was prosecuted with varying degrees of severity from the 15th to the 18th century. The Muslim faith has a similar relationship with magic, and its practice, known as *Sither*, is forbidden; it is written in the Koran that Allah permitted two angels to teach magic to mankind in order to test their obedience to the command not to use it. Magicians have always believed that by their arcane knowledge, and the power of their will, they can manipulate spiritual and natural forces and bend them to their own desires. It is perhaps this rejection of humility, and refusal to accept divine will, that has set magic in such opposition to the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Despite persecution, folk magic continued to be practised in secret, and the high-ranking and educated practitioners of high magic (see magic, high) generally escaped the censure of the Church and State. But by the 17th century, magic had come to be regarded as irrational in comparison with science, and those who practised ceremonial magic went underground; at this time, many secret societies such as the rosicrucians and freemasonry were formed. Toward the end of the 19th century, magic enjoyed a revival, as Romanticism fostered a renewed interest in exotic spiritualities, and European colonialism brought Westerners into contact with Indian and Egyptian beliefs. The late 19th century gave rise to many magical and occult organizations, the peak of this wave of magic being represented by the hermetic order of the golden dawn. A further revival of interest in magic was heralded by the 1951 repeal of the last Witchcraft Act, followed by the publication of Gerald Gardner's book *Witchcraft Today*, which sparked off a resurgence in witchcraft in the form of the new magic-based religion of wicca. The various branches of neopaganism and other earth-based religions which have since followed also combine the practices of magic and religion.

Practitioners of magic usually believe that it works on one or more of the following basic principles: the intervention of spirits; a mystical energy which exists in all things and can be manipulated by the magician; a mysterious interconnection in the cosmos which joins all things, with magic as the application of the magician's unity with the universe; the use of symbols, which can magically take on the physical quality of the phenomenon or object they represent, so that by manipulating the symbol, the magician can also manipulate the reality the symbol represents; the focus of the magician's will on the desired object; the power of the subconscious mind; and the principles of sympathetic magic, also known as contagious, homeopathic, or imitative magic, whereby a desired effect is produced by imitating it, and whatever is done to a material object is believed to have the same effect on the person with whom it was once in contact, or of whom it was once a part (see magic, contagious; magic,

homeopathic; magic, imitative; magic, sympathetic).

The magical production of effects in the material world is usually achieved by spells, which are believed to bring about the desired result either directly, or by summoning the relevant power for the purpose. The potent words of the spell are generally accompanied by a ritual which must be observed exactly to make the spell effective and to control its power. By conjuration, evocation, incantation or invocation, spirits or powers may be summoned. Western ceremonial magic, Wicca and neopaganism focus strongly on the power of the four directions (see directions, four) and their elements of earth, air, fire and water, which are honoured and invoked during the casting of a magic circle and represented on the altar and at each corner of the circle by ritual tools such as a cup, cauldron, dagger, pentagram, sword or wand. These tools have no inherent power, but are magically charged by the magician. oils, bells, robes and incense are also often used as part of the ritual.

Magic may be used for protection against harm or the malign influence of the evil eye (see apotropaics), and magically charged objects such as amulets, charms and talismans are often worn or hung up to protect the bearer or their property. These protective objects sometimes incorporate a magical symbol such as an ankh, pentagram, hexagram or lemniscate, or a magic square. Magic may also be used, in the form of a curse or hex, to cause harm, and image magic (see magic, image) is sometimes employed for this purpose.

There are many types and traditions of magic. The simplest, sometimes known as low magic (see magic, low), is the magic practised throughout the centuries by the village wise woman or cunning man. It does not involve long, complex rituals, and its aim is usually to change conditions or bring about events in the physical world, or for divination. It may involve love, plant or weather magic (see magic, love; magic, plant; magic, weather), and is commonly used today by followers of various neopagan paths. The aim of high magic, ritual magic (see magic, ritual) or ceremonial magic is usually to connect with the divine or to enable the magician to operate on a 'higher spiritual plane'. Sex magic seeks to harness and channel the energy of sexual intercourse (see magic, sex), while the practitioners of chaos magic (see magic, chaos) are encouraged to adopt any belief or method which allows them to attain the altered state of consciousness necessary to bring about the desired magical effect.

At present, there is in general less persecution of practitioners of magic than at any time since the rise of Christianity, and magical tools and ingredients, together with books on magic, once rare or forbidden, can be bought in the high street and on the Internet. Magic features prominently in popular culture, with television series such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*, and films and books such as the *Harry Potter* series, as well as countless computer and role-playing games and anime films. The idea of magic continues to capture and fascinate the imagination, as it has done since the dawn of mankind.

See also magic, enochian; magic, healing .

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Gilmour, L. (2007). Magic. In U. McGovern (Ed.), *Chambers Dictionary of the unexplained*. London, UK: Chambers Harrap. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/magic>

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