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May 19, 2013: Religion, the Decline of Magic, and the Rise of Rationalism

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: Religion, the Decline of Magic, and the Rise of Rationalism

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5/19/2013 – – In today's New York Times book review section, Hilary Mantel, the author of *Wolf Hall*, says that the book she most presses on other people is *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas. I have not read Thomas's book but you can get a pretty good idea apparently of its content, though not its quality, from the title. The book traces the struggle of 18th century Protestantism in England against magical practices and by extension against the sacraments and rituals of the Catholic Church. [The struggle between magic and religion has contemporary manifestations as well. That struggle is one of the reasons that references to Christmas sound so jarring in the Harry Potter novels and movies. Those witches and wizards might fit Halloween, which is sort of about them, but their universe is completely alien to the Christ saga] The reference to Thomas's book suggested to me that you could easily write a sequel entitled *Science and the Decline of Religion*. The idea would be that just as Christianity struggled to rationalize monotheism by placing everything in the hands of God, science proceeded to rationalize still further by placing everything in the hands of natural laws. Or, in other words, just as earlier it turned out that you did not need magic to explain the world, it later became clear that you did not need religion either. Or something like that. It turns out however that Thomas actually wrote both books. This is pointed out by a reviewer at Amazon who suggested the title of this post as an alternative title for Thomas's book. This was no interpretive leap. This reviewer quoted Thomas toward the end of the book, page 765, as follows: "when the Devil was banished to Hell, God himself was confined to working through natural causes." Up to this point, my so-called rationalist friends and critics would be nodding approval. Now, they would say, all we need is science. The problem is that the science in question is, as the reviewer also notes, "mechanical philosophy." It is the science of Newton. It is a science of billiard balls. It is, it has been said, the science of the mechanistic American constitutional structure. But this kind of science no longer exhausts science. It is not the science of quantum physics. It is not the science of the perhaps untestable multiverse. Nor, it should be added, is it the science of human experience. This desire to treat mystery, meaning and telos as extrinsic to the universe is doomed to failure. The universe just is a place of mystery, meaning and telos. It turns out that mystery, meaning and telos cannot be banished, whether they are called magic or religion or even science.