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Magical Thinking But No Magic: Implications for Sacred Terrorism

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Abstract. This article describes lay and scientific psychological constructs of magic with implications for terrorism perpetrated through religious motivation.

In lay psychology--the psychology of those who may or may not formally employ the scientific method but who do not possess the socially sanctioned label of psychologist--magic denotes positive and negative denotations and connotations. Magic can be something wonderful like the magic of a new romantic love, of a seemingly Herculean task suddenly avoided or completed, of seemingly defying the lay understanding of how the world works, or of making pretend that that understanding is temporarily defied. Magic also can be something to be dreaded as in forces that cannot be understood or controlled but that have malevolent intent or malignant consequences.

In scientific psychology--the psychology of the scientific method employed by socially sanctioned psychologists--magic has usually been related to something negative as in magical thinking. Here, magical thinking denotes cognitive content, sequencing, and processing that are assumed to be very statistically significantly different and often more dysfunctional from those of most other people or some sort of average or usual person. In fact, magical thinking is often discussed in the context of a susceptibility or a marker for schizophrenia or of an indicator of schizophreniform functioning even as there may also be a concurrent association for creativity. Other associations for magical thinking include (1) a coupling with superstitious behavior and an increase under conditions of psychological stress via the intermediary quest to regain a lessened sense of control and (2) a link to functional hemispheric imbalance away from the left and towards the right hemisphere as demonstrated by higher olfactory perceptual thresholds. One positive aspect of magical thinking, however, may be that it reduces subjective distress related to terminal medical conditions such as cancer.

All forms of magical content, sequencing, and processing from lay and scientific psychology reflect a "something different from what is supposed to be." Such magic is amply demonstrated in the public discourse over political violence in the Mideast. On the one hand, there are advocates of the inevitable triumph of peace over war, of giving peace a chance, of lions becoming lambs through getting to know each other, of honoring justice and tolerance, of some Lord desiring peace at any price, and so on. On the other hand, there are advocates of the purifying consequences of extreme violence, of the necessity of destroying the Alien Other as if another would not crop up in its place, of some vengeful Lord to be emulated or obeyed, and so on.

Who's right? In fact, all lay and scientific epistemologies are magical in that their foundations are based ultimately on what people choose to believe or are conditioned into believing. A kinship to be developed through collective acceptance of this magic might, indeed, lead to a magic of reduced political violence. Here, magic in place of magic may be a tautology, nonsensical, or the only way out of dire straits. (See Barnett, K.J., & Corballis, M.C. (2002). Ambidexterity and magical ideation. *Laterality*, 7, 75-84; Keinan, G. (2002). The effects of stress and desire for control on superstitious behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 102-108; Mohr, C., Roehrenbach, C.M., Laska, M., & Brugger, P. (2001). Unilateral olfactory perception and magical ideation. *Schizophrenia Research*, 47, 255-264; Salander, P.

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