Magic, Religion and Belief

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The period 1650-1800 witnessed not the decline of European magic but its reconfiguration. Religious authorities remained fixated on combating "superstition" among the common folk, but popular magical beliefs were overlooked if they did not impinge on Christian doctrine. The growth of natural philosophy provided alternative standards for judging magic, based on experimentation, observation, and skepticism. Natural philosophers distanced themselves from supernatural causation, although the limitations of this approach encouraged occult speculation. Meanwhile, state authorities abandoned the prosecution of witchcraft, a move greeted with alarm by some clergymen. Even more unsettling were the channeling of elite sociability into secret societies and the rise of a commercialized print culture that regarded every subject, including magic, as falling within its domain. The result was the reinvigoration of popular magic as well as the appearance of new forms of learned magic, which neither organized religion nor the Enlightenment itself could effectively uproot.