

Science

The Athenaeum (Londres, 20 novembre 1915)

Anon.

S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)



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EDITOR'S NOTE

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THE ATHENÆUM

No. 4595, Nov. 20, 1915

- 1 This book is of sufficient value to warrant its translation into our language, though the readers unable to comprehend the French original will probably be few. Prof. Durkheim contends that for an understanding of the most recent religions it is necessary to follow the manner in which they have been progressively composed in history; and he finds himself in opposition to the philosophers who examine the idea of religion which they make for themselves, and illustrate their results by examples from religions which realize their ideals. It is necessary to go back to origins, which are the simplest social conditions actually known, and, according to Prof. Durkheim, the principal categories are naturally found through an analysis of primitive religious beliefs. They are born in religion and of religion; they are a product of religious thought. It apparently follows, if the principal categories are a product of religious thought, that the creative thought is possible without them. Since no definition of religion is given by Prof. Durkheim when he makes this statement, it almost seems as if he were anxious not to be as the philosophers who make their own idea of religion; but at the end of his first chapter he offers this definition:—

“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them.”^[1]

- 2 Mystery and divinity are not found among the essential elements, and it is maintained that there are great religions in which invocations, propitiations, sacrifices, and prayers are far from holding a preponderating place, and which do not present that distinctive sign by which some recognize religious manifestations.
- 3 Examining religious phenomena, Prof. Durkheim finds that they are naturally arranged under beliefs and rites, and beliefs, we are told, presuppose a classification of things as profane and sacred. Obviously one must ask how the dualism has taken place, as the question is fundamental, and for the answer a search must be made for the elementary religion out of which Prof. Durkheim's definition has been constructed. The leading conceptions of the elementary religion are examined, and Animism and Naturism are rejected—the former because it reduces religion to nothing more than a system of hallucinations, and the latter because it does not explain the division of things into sacred and profane. Animism is discarded with something like contempt. It is held to be inadmissible that systems of ideas like religions, so important in history and so helpful as sources of energy, should be made up of a tissue of illusions, and, since law, morals, and even scientific thought were born of religion, a vain fantasy could not have fashioned the human consciousness so strongly and so durably. The last argument marshalled against Naturism is that, if objects became sacred from their imposing forms, the great cosmic powers, the sun, the moon, the sky, should have been the first to be recognized as sacred, and they were not. As a matter of fact, the first to be “divinized” were ducks, rabbits, worms, frogs, &c., and their forms could not be the origin of the religious sentiments they inspired.
- 4 Prof. Durkheim finds in Totemism the fundamental and primitive cult of which he is in search. His method in dealing with it is the comparative method, but it is societies, rather than facts with exterior resemblances, which are to him of supreme importance. Two facts from two different societies cannot profitably be compared merely because they seem to resemble each other; the two societies themselves must first be shown to be varieties of the same species, and through them the facts become relevant. It is claimed that by the comparative method thus applied errors are avoided, and Sir J. G. Frazer is cited as a “horrid example.” It frequently happens, we are told, that he assimilates simple rites of wild-animal worship to totemic practices, though the distance separating the two social systems would exclude all idea of assimilation. Unfortunately for Prof. Durkheim, the use of the comparative method, however serviceable for purposes of concentration, does not lead to an explanation of such similarities as those to which Sir J. G. Frazer draws attention.
- 5 Australian Totemism, the variety of which most is known, is chosen as the principal field, and an examination is made of intellectual conceptions and ritual practices. The beliefs connected with the totem are primary, and therefore the most important. At the basis of nearly all the Australian tribes is the clan. The individuals of the clan are united by a special bond of kinship. The name of the clan is the name of a species of material things to which the individuals are specially related, and which forms the bond. “The species of things which serves to designate the clan collectively is called its totem. The totem of the clan is also that of each of its members.”^[2] Further, the objects which serve as totems are generally animal or vegetable, especially the former, and it is in connexion with the

totem that things are classified as sacred or profane. Totemic images are the primary, though not the only, sacred things. Things connected with the totem, the beings of the totemic species and the members of the clan, very early become the objects of rites. A conclusion is reached that the images of totemic beings are more sacred than the beings themselves, but it does not touch the fact that there is a distinction between things sacred and profane.

- 6 This distinction does not exhaust what is involved in Totemism. If Totemism is to be considered as a religion comparable to other religions, it must, as it does, offer a conception of the universe. The clan is a subdivision of the tribe, and for the Australian things themselves form a part of the tribe. Things as well as men are regular members of it. All known things are “arranged in a sort of tableau or systematic classification embracing the whole of nature.”^[3] At onetime it was thought that each tribe had as many independent religions as it had different clans; but now, according to Prof. Durkheim, these religions are viewed as parts of a whole, the elements of a single religion, since the men of one clan never regard the beliefs of neighbouring clans with indifference or hostility.
- 7 But does Totemism offer a conception of the universe, or reach the idea of one religion of which the religions of the clans are elements? There is, or seems to be, evidence for the classification of what is believed to be the whole of nature, and it may be admitted that Totemism offers what may be dignified by the name of a conception of the universe; but, even though the Australian of one clan respects, or is not hostile to, the religion of another clan, is there the slightest indication of his conceiving religion to be a whole with parts, of which his religion is one? We are asked to believe that the “cults fit into each other, and the totemic religion is a complex system formed by their union, just at Greek polytheism was made by the union of all the particular cults addressed to the different divinities.”^[4]
- 8 It does seem, however, that we are passing away from religion as a whole with parts when we turn to the idea that religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan. Since this force, we are told, can be represented only in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is like the visible body of the god. This force, a “moral power”^[5] upon which the believer depends, and from which he receives what is best in him, is society.
- 9 After an examination of the ideas of the soul, spirits, and gods, Prof. Durkheim goes on, in Book III^[6], to a consideration of the principal ritual attributes, and deals with the ascetic rites and the positive cult. Included in the positive cult are sacrifice, and imitative, commemorative, and expiatory rites. The thesis already stated is not neglected—that the principal categories are a product of religious thought. Society, which is the religious source, is also the source of logical or conceptual thought. It may be pointed out that we know nothing of individuals as individuals, and nothing, therefore, of their thought; we know of them in groups, in societies. The history or tradition of the original societies with which Prof. Durkheim deals is a religious one, and the logical thought of individuals, as first it can be followed, is the thought of individuals existing in a religious society. Though it may be objected that Prof. Durkheim attributes too much to religion as a source, the highest praise is due to him for his treatment of Totemism. His thought is clear and his style lucid.

NOTES

1. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1., p. 47]
2. [« Totemic Beliefs. The Totem as Name and as Emblem », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 1, p. 102]
3. [« Totemic Beliefs. The Cosmological System of Totemism and the Idea of Class », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 3, p. 142]
4. [« Totemic Beliefs. The Cosmological System of Totemism and the Idea of Class », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 3, p. 156]
5. [« Origins of these [Totemic] Beliefs. The Notion of the Totemic Principle, or Mana, and the Idea of Force », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 6, p. 190]
6. [« The Principal Ritual Attitudes », Durkheim 1915, Book 3, p. 297-515]