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Review and Minor Notices

The Journal of Education, a Monthly Record and Review (Londres, 1^{er}
mars 1916)

Anon.

S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)



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Review and Minor Notices

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Source primaire :

Anon., « Review and Minor Notices - *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. A Study in Religious Sociology. By Emile Durkheim. Translated from the French by J.W. Swain. (15 s. net Allen & Unwin) », *The Journal of Education, a Monthly Record and Review* (London), 48 (560), March 1, 1916, p. 151-152

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aucune

Prof. Durkheim, who holds the chair of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Paris, has written an intensely interesting book, and has propounded in a most lucid manner his sociological theory of the origin of religion. Whether he succeeds or not in converting his opponents, they will at least admit that his study of Australian totemism is profoundly suggestive. The title of the volume indicates the object of his inquiry. He is searching for what is most primitive and fundamental in religion, for "the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend."^[1] These he finds among the Australian tribes, whose social structure, based on the clan, appears to him to be the most elementary form of social structure in existence. Occasional reference is made in the volume to North American totemism, but the author for the most part confines himself to Australia. Here, thanks to the investigations of Spencer and Gillen, and of the German missionary Strehlow, we have rich material to our hand. We are not sure, however, that Prof. Durkheim is right in his confident assertion that Australian totemism represents the most primitive form of social organization; nor has he, perhaps, allowed sufficiently for the existence of various strata of beliefs among the Australian tribes. He tends to treat Australian totemism too exclusively as a homogeneous whole, whereas, in point of fact, it may represent the result of a considerable evolution.

It is an old difficulty this, how to define religion, or, indeed, any subject-matter which admits of development. If you say that the lower stages of religion contain the essence of the whole, are you not unfair to the higher stages? If you say that the ends explains the beginning, then you are apt to read into the earlier stages more than they contain; while, if you take as your criticism of religion the elements which are common to all forms of religion, you reach a result which is very thin and meagre. Now, the author begins with the lower, partly for the sake of method, but also because he insists that the lowest religions translate some human need, and reveal aspects of human life which are essential and permanent. He does not reduce the higher to the level of the lower; but, rather, true to the principle that there is nothing in the end which was not in the beginning, heightens the value of the earlier stages. It would probably prove a fruitful study to compare this writer's treatment of religious development with that of the late Edward Caird in his *Evolution of Religion*^[2].

One interesting note of the volume, which recurs constantly, is the contention that all our logical categories have a religious origin. The categories, he says, "are a product of religious thought,"^[3] and are social in origin, just as religion is social in [152a] origin. He claims that his view enables him to mediate between empiricism and the a priori creed of Kant. But we are in some doubt whether he has correctly stated the kantian position. Kant was not concerned with asking the psychological question how the categories arose in the mind of any individual; but he was asking the logical question, what necessary presuppositions he had to make in order to account for the existence of experience and knowledge. His answer was that the mind supplied certain forms which it imposed upon the flux of sensation; but he surely never dreamed of endowing the baby with the ready-made apparatus of the categories. In other words, when Prof. Durkheim claims to mediate between Kant and empiricism, he is undertaking a task which is unnecessary, for Kant would never have denied the evolutionary origin of the categories, though he did stoutly deny - and surely proved his point - that empiricism could account for our mental outfit.

We can only touch in barest outline upon the writer's account of totemism. Here are his main contentions. He finds the "distinctive trait of religious thought"^[4] in the division of the world into two spheres, the sacred and the profane. The presence of this division characterizes all known religious beliefs. Thus he rejects the idea of the supernatural and mysterious as giving the differentia of religion. He attacks the animist theory of Tylor and Herbert Spencer, and the naturist theory of Max Müller, and his criticisms here seem to be sound. Certainly on both these theories you have reduced to an hallucination, for the animist finds the origin of his sacred beings in the imaginary conceptions formed during sleep; while Max Müller is in no better case, since the phenomena of Nature were, according to him, first likened to human acts and subsequently were personalized. What was originally a metaphor was thus taken literally. Prof. Durkheim, on the other hand, insists that religion is rooted in reality and expresses a permanent need of humanity. This need is sociological. The primitive man feels himself to be one with his society. The Australian does not separate himself from his clan; hence his "religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities."^[5] The name of an Australian clan is the name of a determined species of material things (usually an animal or vegetable), with which the members of the clan believe they have special kinship. Indeed, the members of the clan share in the life of the totem, and frequently picture the totemic emblem on their bodies to illustrate their common descent. Thus a moral unity is given to the clan by the presence of the totem, much as a regimental flag helps to unite the members of the regiment.

Now, the totemic cult is not addressed to any personal God or spiritual being, though belief in such is found in some more advanced forms of totemism. But where it exists it is a derived and secondary product. The totem stands rather for an impersonal force, or common principle in which all the totemic emblems share. "[...] totemism is the religion, not of such and such animals

or men or images, but of an anonymous and impersonal force found in each of these beings, but not to be confounded with any of them.”^[6] The totem is “the material form under which the imagination represents this immaterial substance, this energy diffused through all sorts of heterogeneous things”^[7]. Whence comes this belief? From society, answers our author. Totemic religion is a reflection and outcome of the social structure of the Australian clan. The individual dies, the clan endures. The individual is weak, the clan is strong. When the clan meets for a religious rite the enthusiasm generated quickens the moral and social life of the individual. At the same time the clan, as it were, renews its existence, and the totemic rites strengthen and revivify the social sentiments. This religion, therefore, meets a need, and is rooted in reality; for no one can deny the moral force of society, on which we all depend.

We have no space to deal with the author’s attempt to show how a belief in souls and spirits and divinities grew naturally out of this primitive totemic cult; but his whole treatment of these problems is most stimulating. In conclusion, we would point out one or two blemishes in the translation. On page 176 [152b] we have this sentence, “it is not desired in its and for itself,”^[8] surely an atrocity of style. On page 276 we read: “In a society like the Arunta, where each one has his protecting ancestor, there would be as many or more gods than there are individuals.”^[9] “Abjective” for “objective” occurs on page 413^[10], and on page 436 “*sub species aeternitatis*.”^[11] In at least six places (e.g. pages 205, 207, 221, 224, 259, 367)^[12] “imminent” is printed where “immanent” is intended.

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Caird (Edward), *The Evolution of Religion. The Gifford Lectures delivered before the University of St. Andrew in Sessions 1890-91 and 1891-92*, Glasgow, James Maclehose and Sons, 1893, 2 vol., xv-400 et 334p.

NOTES

1. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 8]
2. [Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Religion. The Gifford Lectures delivered before the University of St. Andrew in Sessions 1890-91 and 1891-92*, Glasgow, James Maclehose and Sons, 1893, 2 vol., xv-400 et 334 p.]
3. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 9]
4. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1, p. 37]
5. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 9]
6. [« 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. 188]
7. [« 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. 189]
8. [Orig.] « Quant à la solidarité de l’homme et de la chose, avec tous les inconvénients qu’elle implique, elle est acceptée comme une conséquence forcée du rite; mais elle n’est pas voulue en elle-même et pour elle-même ». Cf. « Examen critique des théories », Durkheim 1912 : livre 2, chap. 5, p. 251

9. [Orig.] « [...] dans une société comme celle des Arunta, où chacun a son ancêtre protecteur, il y aurait autant ou plus de dieux qu'il n'y a d'individus. » Cf. « La notion d'esprit et de dieux », Durkheim 1912 : livre 2, chap. 9, p. 396]
10. [« Piacular Rites and the Ambiguity of the Notion of Sacredness », Durkheim 1915, Book 3, chap. 5, p. 413]
11. [« Conclusion », Durkheim 1915, p. 436]
12. [Voir aussi, p. 13, 19]