The Roots of Religion
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S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)
That great complex of actions, ideas, and ideals which we term religion not only exhibits itself in innumerable forms, but has had diverse origins; consequently, from whatever quarter religion is studied, some interesting conclusion is reached which may or may not convince other students. Various members of the modern school of sociology in France have investigated certain aspects of religion from the point of view of sociology with most far-reaching results.

Acting on the principle that there is nothing in the end which in not in the beginning, Professor E. Durkheim in his study of religion casts about for a primitive religion in order to reach that which is most fundamental, and therefore common, to most religions. But in order to study religion it must be defined and we must first know what it is, of what elements it is made up, from what causes it results, and what functions it fulfils. Magic has its beliefs and rites, which are often identical with those of religion. Though there is much in common there is a marked repugnance of religion for magic and a reciprocated hostility; as Hubert and Mauss have remarked[1], there is something thoroughly anti-religious in the doings of the magician. The really religious beliefs are always common to a given group they are not merely received individually by members of the group, but they belong to it and make its unity. The individuals feel themselves united to each other by their common faith. It is quite another matter with
magic, which does not bind together its adherents. The magician has a clientèle, and not a Church. The one is social, the other is anti-social, or at best non-social. Hence the following definition is arrived at: “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.”

For reasons which he explains, Professor Durkheim takes totemism as the subject for his investigations, realizing the profoundly religious character of this ancient and widely-spread institution, a fact which Sir James Frazer has denied owing to his narrow definition of religion. He also wisely discards the comparative method, by which “facts have been unduly connected with each other which, in spite of exterior resemblances, really have neither the same sense nor the same importance.” He therefore practically limits his attention to the evidence for Australia, as our knowledge of Australian totemism is sufficiently trustworthy and detailed. Professor Durkheim states that, though it is possible to distinguish varieties among them, Australian societies all belong to one common type. This is true if the type is made broad enough; but he is apt to be misleading when he asserts that they are “perfectly homogeneous.” We are now recognizing that there are several cultural layers in Australia which point to as many cultural drifts, if not actual migrations, into Australia; the homogeneity of Australia is thus more apparent than real. In comparing North American totemism with Australian he suggests that the indefiniteness and lack of stability of the latter is “the product of a degeneration [...] due both to the natural decay of time and the disorganizing effect of the whites”; but the former would operate in North America as well as in Australia. Surely the difference is mainly an expression of the higher social structure of North American communities. The totem is not merely an emblem of collective label, it is the very type of a sacred thing, as it is in connexion with it that things are classified as sacred or profane. It is this which gives sanctity to the bull-roarer, churinga, and other holy ritual implements; the idea of the churinga being the residence of an ancestor’s soul has “obviously been made up afterwards to account for the sacred character of the churinga.”

The representations of totems are more sacred and actively powerful than the totems themselves. Totemism is not a sort of animal worship, for the man as also something sacred about him, especially certain organs and tissues, the relation of the man and the totem being one of practical equality. If totemism is to be considered as a religion comparable to the others, it should offer us a conception of the universe; as a matter of fact it does, but this aspect has generally been neglected owing to the too narrow notion of the clan which has been prevalent. Though each clan is an autonomous society which celebrates its own totemic cult, it is only a part of a single whole. The men of one clan never regard the beliefs of neighbouring clans with that indifference, scepticism, or hostility which one religion ordinarily inspires for another. Thus to form an adequate idea of totemism the tribe as a whole must be considered. We are told that “totemism is [tightly] bound up with the most primitive social system which we know, and in all probability, of which we can conceive.” The social system of Australia scarcely impress most people as being primitive; it certainly is not so simple as that of the Negritos: coming the Andamanese, for example, we have sufficient information to show that they are non-totemic, probably pre-totemic, and their social structure is of the simplest. Further, the evidence points to this simplicity being primary and not secondary, that is due to degeneration. To say that “it is impossible to go lower than totemism” is to make an assertion which is somewhat rash. It is quite possible that totemism was introduced into Australia relatively late. Professor Durkheim recognizes [488b] that totemism is not a cult of certain “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” – the mana of the Melanesians, the manitu, orenda, &c., of North American Indians. Dr. Rivers, however, argues that the idea of mana was introduced by a relatively recent immigration into Oceania, the one, indeed, which brought in totemism (“The History of...
Melanesian Society,” II, pp. 373, 485). This does not necessarily conflict with Professor Durkheim’s main contention, but it does weaken his view as to the primitive character of Australian totemism.

Whence is this force derived? The tribal force is manifested when people are gathered together to celebrate a religious ceremony or hold a secular corroboro. The serial concentration induces an extraordinary degree of exaltation; passion is freed from control, and a violent super-excitation of the whole physical and mental life is produced. Each individual feels himself dominated by an external power, he becomes a now being, and out of this effervescence time religious idea scenes to be born.

The theory that this is really its origin is confirmed by the fact that in Australia the really religious activity is almost entirely confined to the moments when these assemblies are held [...] Since religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan, and since this can be represented in the mind only in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is like the visible body of the god.

Consequently to it the cult is addressed. But the clan, like every other sort of society, can live only in and through the individual consciousnesses that compose it. So if religious force, conceived as incorporated in the totemic emblem, appears to be outside of the individuals and to be endowed with transcendence over them, it, like the clan of which it is the symbol, can be realized only in and through them. They feel it present and active within them, for it is this which raises them to a superior life. This is why men have believed that they contain within them a principle comparable to the one residing in the totem, and consequently why they have attributed a sacred character to themselves. The believer is not deceived when he believes in the existence of a moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself; this power exist, it is society. When the Australian is carried outside himself and feels a new life flowing within him, he is not the dupe of an illusion; this exaltation is genuine and is the effect of forces outside of and superior to the individual. It is true that he is wrong in thinking that this increase of vitality is the work of a power in the form of some animal or plant. Behind figures and metaphors, be they gross or refined, there is a concrete and living reality. Religion is thus essentially a system of ideas by means of which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it. Again it is asserted that “Religious force is only the sentiment inspired by the group in its members, but projected outside of the consciousnesses that experience them, and objectified. To be objectified, they are fixed upon some object which thus becomes sacred.” Thus arise totems, heroes, godlings, gods.

A clan is essentially a reunion of individuals who bear the same name and rally around the same sign; take these away and the clan is no longer representable. The names and emblems of the Australians are preponderantly taken from animals and plants, probably because they constitute an essential element of the economic environment, especially the former. From an observation made by Strehlow, “it seems as though each group had taken as its insignia the animal or plant that was the commonest in the vicinity of the place where it had the habit of meeting.” In connexion with this is may be noted that Speck in Memoir 70 of the Department of Mines, Canada (1915), says that the old men of the Timagami band of the Ojibwa “think that to totem nickname originated from the abundance of some particular animal in the old hunting territories, which later became a mark of identity for the proprietors.” Many other aspects of Australian totemism are dealt with by Professor Durkheim, all of which are interpreted in a most illuminating manner from the sociological point of view; but the application is wider than the text—

References:

Archives de sciences sociales des religions, La première réception des <em>Formes</em> (1912-1917) (S. Baciocchi, F. Théron, eds.) 2011
However complex the outward manifestations of the religious life may be, at bottom it is one and simple. It responds everywhere to one and the same need, and [it] is everywhere derived from one and the same mental state. In all its forms, its object is to raise man above himself and to make him lead a life superior to that which he would lead[,] if he followed only his own individual whims; beliefs express this life in representations; rites organize it and regulate its working.[10]

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Hubert (Henri), Mauss (Marcel), « Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie », *L’Année sociologique*, 7 (1902-1903), Mémoires originaux, 1904, p. 1-146


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**NOTES**

1. [Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, « Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie », *L’Année sociologique*, 7 (1902-1903), Mémoires originaux, 1904, p. 1-146.]

2. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1, p. 47]

3. [« Totemism as an Elementary Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 4, p. 94]

4. [« Totemism as an Elementary Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 4, p. 95]

5. [« Totemic Beliefs. The Totem as Name and as Emblem », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 1, p. 112]

6. [« Totemic Beliefs. The Totem as Name and as Emblem », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 1, p. 123]


8. [« 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. 203]

9. [« 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]


16. [« Piacular Rites and the Ambiguity of the Notion of Sacredness », Durkheim 1915, Book 3, chap. 5, p. 414]