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Book Notices

The Biblical World (Chicago, juin 1916)

Anon.

S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)



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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Anon., « Book Notices – *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. By Émile Durkheim. (Trans. by J.W. Swain.) New York: Macmillan, 1915. Pp. xi+456. \$4.00. », *The Biblical World* (Chicago), 47 (6), June 1916, p. 413

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Students of primitive religion will welcome this translation of an important work. The author's purpose is not so much that of the philosopher as to analyze the simplest religion in order to determine the elementary forms of religious life. These elementary forms [413b] he finds particularly among the Australians, but he draws much illustrative and parallel material from a knowledge of other religions. Durkheim as another, but, as he regards it, a secondary subject of research, the genesis of fundamental notions of thought which he believes to be religious. But the word "religious" with Durkheim is a synonym of "social." A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relating 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]. He would not base such beliefs and practices on fear, but on a sort of rational optimism. Founded on reality, it enables men to move into a larger sense of their social relations, with the confidence that society has laid the foundation of religion. Religion to him is therefore not strictly idealistic, for there is no religion than that which actually exists. But the ideal is not

altogether lacking. The sacred is that which is added and above. Thus idealism is involved in religion. The ideal world depends on beliefs which it can touch, and is thus naturally productive of social life. The ideal society is not outside of real society, but a part of it. Religion therefore is not an affair of the individual as such, but of the collective life.

Professor Durkheim looks to totemism for elementary experience or belief, and examines this matter in very great detail, but alongside of this belief he also finds the idea of a soul. He does not hold that the more personal one is, the more individual one is. We grow more personal as we are freed from our senses. Such a fact evidently reduces the individual to a secondary position.

In pursuing his general plan, Professor Durkheim has brought a very large amount of material gathered from literature dealing with primitive people. That is a book of first will be plain from what has been said. But that the author's generalization is altogether satisfactory may be doubted. The readers of the volume need the warning of Professor Farnell in his little treatise on *The Evolution of Religion*^[2], not to misjudge highly complicated religions by their primitive forbears.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Farnell (Lewis Richard), *The Evolution of Religion. An Anthropological Study*, New York / London, G.P. Putnam's Sons / Williams and Norgate, 1905, viii-234 p.

NOTES

1. [Paraphrase de : [Orig.] « Thus we arrive at the following 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 adhere to them* ». Cf. « Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1., p. 47]
2. [Lewis Richard Farnell, *The Evolution of Religion. An Anthropological Study*, New York / London, G.P. Putnam's Sons / Williams and Norgate, 1905, viii-234 p.]