

## Religious Sociology

The Expository Times (Édimbourg, octobre 1915)

Anon.

S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)

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- 1 The *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is the title of a book by Professor Émile Durkheim of the University of Paris, which has been translated into English by Mr. Joseph Ward Swain, M.A. (Allen & Unwin; 15s. net). It is further described as 'A Study in Religious Sociology.'
- 2 The book is a manual of Primitive Religion. But it is correctly called 'A Study in Sociology.' For the origin and development of religion, and all its rites, ceremonies, and beliefs, are traced, not to the need of the individual, but to the demands of the community. In short, Professor Durkheim does for religion what Professor Westermarck does morality – he finds its explanation in the fact that man is a gregarious animal. No crowd, then no morality and no religion.
- 3 This position will be challenged. 'My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.'<sup>[1]</sup> That is the desire of the individual, and that desire is echoed in innumerable individual hearts all the world over. To which Professor Durkheim would reply, that in a highly developed religion like that of the Israelites, the individual is strong enough to stand by himself; but his heart's cry is really the prayer of the community which he has for the moment appropriated to himself. It is a cry for protection or prosperity (in war [78a] perhaps) first of all. And but

for the need of the community the individual would not even know that he had a God to cry to.

- 4 Dr. Durkheim gathers his data mainly from the least civilized tribes of the earth. But he does not neglect altogether the higher forms of religion. The truth is that his way from lower to higher is very easy. The outward rites differ. They differ so greatly as often to make us shudder at the horrors perpetrated by the uncivilized in the name of religion. But the ideas underlying the rites and aimed at in them do not differ. And when Dr. Durkheim discusses such fact as asceticism, he finds that with all outward incongruities there is an underlying likeness.
- 5 And that likeness is sociological. Surely, we say, the monk goes out into the desert as solitary; if there is an *individual* on earth it is he. Not so. He is not alone even in his solitary cell. That which he is doing, he is doing for the sake of the whole community. "It is [even] a good thing that the ascetic ideal be incarnated eminently in certain persons, whose speciality, so to speak, it is to represent, almost with excess, this aspect of the ritual life; for they are like so many living models, inciting to effort. Such is the historic rôle of the great ascetics. When their deeds and acts are analysed in detail, one asks himself what useful end they can have. He is struck by the fact that there is something excessive in the disdain they profess for all that ordinarily impassions men. But these exaggerations are necessary to sustain among the believers a sufficient disgust for an easy life and common pleasures. It is necessary that an elite put the end too high, if the crowd is not to put it too low. It is necessary that some exaggerate, if the average is to remain at a fitting level.
- 6 "But asceticism does not serve religious ends only. Here, as elsewhere, religious interests are only the symbolic form of social and moral interests. The ideal beings to whom the cult is addressed are not the only ones who demand of their followers a certain disdain for suffering: society itself is possible only at this price. Though exalting the strength of man, it is frequently rude to individuals; it necessarily demands perpetual sacrifices from them; it is constantly doing violence to our natural appetites, just because it raises us above ourselves. If we are going to fulfil our duties towards it, then we must be prepared to do violence to our instincts sometimes and to ascend the decline of nature [78b] when it is necessary. So there is an asceticism which, being inherent in all social life, is destined to survive all the mythologies and all the dogmas: it is an integral part of all human culture. At bottom, this is the asceticism which is the reason for the existence of and the justification of that which has been taught by the religion of all times."<sup>[2]</sup>
- 7 The student of Religion may not agree with Dr. Durkheim, but if he attempts to do without this book it will be to his very great loss.

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## NOTES

1. [Psalm 84:2]

2. [« The Negative Cult and its Functions. The Ascetic Rites », Durkheim 1915, Book 3, chap. 1, p. 316-317]