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**Recent theological literature – A Study in Religious
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The American Journal of Theology (Chicago, janvier 1917)

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THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

- 1 This book¹ is a translation of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le Système totémique en Australie*, by the well-known editor of *L'Année sociologique*. The subtitle has been changed and the tribal map of Australia omitted. The lack of a map is a distinct loss to those who may desire to follow out in detail the author's description of totemism in Australia, which takes up a large part of the book and upon which his conclusions are largely based.
- 2 Professor Durkheim has long been known for his writings on ethnology, sociology, and sociological method. As editor of *L'Année sociologique* he gained quite a following, and his influence upon sociological thought has been considerable. He has made a special study of the native Australians, and had already published several notable articles before the appearance of this book. He is well able to give us, therefore, a detailed and

thorough analysis of the facts relating to that area, so far as they have been investigated and described. To this field he applies his sociological method, and develops his theories, which relate, not only to the origin of religion, but even to the origin of thought itself.

- 3 [144] “In this book,” he says, “we propose to study the most primitive and simple religion which is actually known, to make an analysis of it, and to attempt an explanation of it.”^[2] There must be certain fundamental conceptions and ritual attitudes at the basis of all religions. These are the permanent elements of religion, the “objective contents of the idea.”^[3] How is it possible to pick them out? We must go to the most primitive, the simplest, where we can best discern “the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend.”^[4] This study also throws light on the problem of knowledge. “When primitive religious beliefs are systematically analyzed, the principal categories [of thought] are naturally found. They are born in religion and of religion; they are a product of religious thought.”^[5] Both are the products of society, which “is a reality *sui generis*,”^[6] and has its own peculiar characteristics. There are doubtless germs of rationality in the individual consciousness, but these become something different through the action of society. “Between those indistinct germs of reason and the reason properly so called there is a difference comparable to that which separates the properties of the mineral elements out of which a living being is composed from the characteristic attributes of life after this has once been constituted.”^[7] Reason as well as religion is thus a product of society. What, now, is religion?
- 4 All religions, according to Durkheim, have one common characteristic: “They presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred” (*profane, sacré*)^[8]. Granting this, “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.”^[9] This definition is largely objective. Rites are necessary as well as beliefs, and these beliefs are held and rites practiced, not by an individual, but by a social group. Magical beliefs and practices are thus excluded as pertaining only to individuals.
- 5 After a critical discussion of the animistic and naturistic theories, Durkheim dismisses these as unable to account for the origin of the idea of the divine, the sacred, as distinct from the profane. “Since neither man nor nature have of themselves a sacred character, they must get it from another source,”^[10] a “cult more fundamental and more primitive”^[11] than the animistic or naturistic. He finds this in totemism, and regards Australia as offering the most favorable field for its study, which, he [145] declares, must be intensive rather than comparative. This, however, does not prevent him from drawing numerous facts from the conditions among the North American Indians when he does not find what he wants in Australia.
- 6 Australian totemism is chosen because here, he says, the civilization is the most rudimentary and the organization the simplest, being based on the clan.
- 7 The clan, then, is the fundamental thing, the simplest form of human society, and the religion associated with it the most primitive. All members of the clan regard themselves as related, belonging to one family. They also have a common name, the name of some object, usually an animal or plant, which is known as their totem. This

totem is represented by some emblem. Both the totem and the emblem are sacred, so also are the members of the clan, who bear the name of the totem. All these, with their totem and emblems, form a group distinct from the other clans with their totems and emblems. Each clan has its own particular cult, but each recognizes the others as necessary to the general system.

- 8 Totemism, therefore, has all the elements of a religion. If we can discover the origin of these beliefs “we shall very probably discover at the same time the causes leading to the rise of the religious sentiment in humanity.”^[12] There are two phases in the life of the clan. Usually it is broken into small groups, each engaged in the ordinary occupations of hunting, fishing, etc. At certain times these groups gather together at determined places for special ceremonies, which may continue for days. The clan as a group feels the necessity for an objective symbol and a name, and chooses the animal or plant common in the region where the ceremonial gatherings take place. During the ceremonies there are numerous images and emblems of this object (always a class, not an individual), which we call the totem, on every side. The members of the clan in the ceremonial activities stimulate each other almost to frenzy, and regard themselves as acted upon by an external power. “A man does not recognize himself; he feels himself transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds him. In order to account for the very particular impressions which he receives, he attributes to the things with which he is in most direct contact properties which they have not, exceptional powers and virtues which the objects of everyday experience do not possess.”^[13] Thus above the real is the ideal, the sacred. Surrounded as he is by the emblems of the totem, this power and sacredness is ascribed to them, and hence to the totem itself.
- 9 [146] Also the members of the clan bearing the same name are regarded as sacred, though to a less degree. All these are not so much sacred in themselves as because of a mysterious and impersonal force which abides in them, and manifests itself through them. To this mysterious power, which Durkheim calls the totemic principle, the native ascribes the sensations and emotions which he feels so strongly during the ceremonies, and which are so different from his everyday experiences. “So it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born.”^[14] This totemic principle Durkheim regards as the forerunner of the idea of a great mysterious power pervading all life, such as the *wakan* and *orenda* of the North American Indian, and the *mana* of the Melanesians.
- 10 The totemic principle is incarnate in the totemic animals, also in the members of the clan. The soul is then an individualized portion of the totemic principle, which preserves its individuality and may be reincarnated time after time. This explains the very common belief of reincarnation in animals. Permanently disembodied souls, especially those of the original ancestors, become spirits and acquire local habitations. Gods and divinities easily follow. Rites as well as beliefs are necessary to religion, and Durkheim undertakes to classify the most general forms of primitive rites and to determine their origin and significance. He treats more especially of negative, sacrificial, imitative, representative, and peculiar rites, all of which are represented in the Australian cults.
- 11 In the conclusion, after briefly summarizing the results of his study as to the origin of religious beliefs and cults from social organization, he emphasizes the fundamental reality of these beliefs from their universality, and develops more fully his theory of

the dependence of the fundamental notions of science and thought, to which he has referred several times before, on religion and society. “At bottom the concept of totality, that of society, and that of divinity are very probably only different aspects of the same notion.”^[15]

- 12 In such a comprehensive study as this of Durkheim’s it is possible to touch on only a few points. In spite of the keenness of its analysis and the force of the closely reasoned argument, this frequently rests on assumptions rather than on proved facts. Both religion and reason, he says, rest on the clan organization of society. Thus, before there was a social organization of this character, man was not yet human, being without religion or reason. It is by no means proved, however, that the [147] clan is the most primitive form of society. There are many kinds of clans, some among peoples rather high in the social scale, and there are many primitive peoples, such as the Eskimo, who show no indications of clans or totems, or of ever having had such an organization. It does not follow, as he says, that because the material culture of the Australians is simple (primitive?) the social organization must be primitive. It is certainly not simple. Nor is it necessary that the simplest religion be associated with the clan, nor that this be totemism, if totemism be a religion. His conception of totemism ignores the more recent studies, which show its complex nature and the probability that its various elements are derived from different sources, that it is not uniform in character, and that the origin of these different complexes which are generally known as totemic is doubtless different in different places. We should certainly not regard totemism as the simplest religion.
- 13 Exception might also be taken to his definition of religion as including too much and as assuming a definiteness of organization, especially in the “moral community,”^[16] far in advance of the most primitive. And why must religion be entirely due to social causes? Primitive man most certainly stands in awe of, and experiences a high emotional thrill in the presence of, what he regards as supernatural, and it does not require the ecstasy of some social dance or other ceremony to make him conscious of something different from the ordinary affairs of daily life. What of the hermits and of the solitary lives of many who have thus been inspired. as it were, to the advancement of religious thought? Surely we must consider individual psychology as well as social.
- 14 Durkheim claims a great advantage in his method, which is inductive rather than deductive or comparative. His criticism of many who have used the comparative method is doubtless justified; but in assuming that one case proves all, that if a thing is true of Australia it must be true everywhere, he is certainly assuming what has yet to be proved. Granting the evolution of culture and religion, it is far from being proved that all cultures pass through the same stages in their development. There is good evidence, in fact, to the contrary. He has given us a definition of religion that fits Australia, and has drawn many interesting conclusions from his study of that region; but further than that his arguments, however interesting, rest on too many doubtful assumptions to carry conviction.
- 15 While we may refuse to follow Durkheim to his final conclusions, the necessity of considering the social side of these problems must be [148] admitted. Durkheim has done good service in emphasizing the influence of society, and his work deserves most careful study from this point of view.

NOTES

1. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. A Study in Religious Sociology.* By Emile Durkheim. Translated from the French by Joseph Ward Swain. New York, Macmillan, 1915. xi+456 pages. \$3.75
 2. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 17]
 3. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 5]
 4. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 8]
 5. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 9]
 6. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 16]
 7. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 16 note 1]
 8. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1, p. 37]
 9. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1, p. 45]
 10. [« Leading Conception of the Elementary Religion. II. – Naturism », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 3, p. 87]
 11. [« Totemism as an Elementary Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 4, p. 88]
 12. [« Origins of these Beliefs. Critical Examination of Preceding Theories », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 4, p. 168]
 13. [« Conclusion », Durkheim 1915, p. 422]
 14. [« Origins of these [Totemic] Beliefs. Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 7, p. 218]
 15. [« Conclusion », Durkheim 1915, p. 442 note 1]
 16. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1912, Book 1, chap. 1, p. 44 et p. 47]
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