

The Totem and Society

The Nation (New York, juillet 1916)

Anon.

S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)



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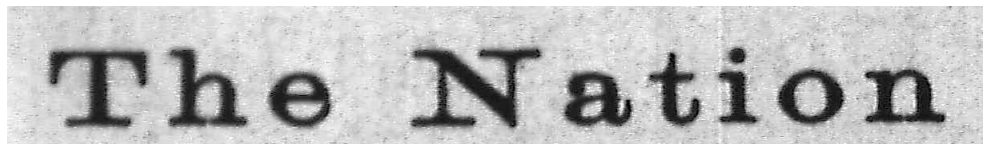
EDITOR'S NOTE

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- 1 It was in 1912 that “Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse” appeared; and English readers are fortunate that not more than four years were allowed to elapse before the publication of an English edition. Mr. Swain’s translation is hardly brilliant, and in a very few cases his understanding of the French and his choice of English words are not all that could be desired. But his sentences are invariably clear and his version is faithful to the original.
- 2 The book is probably the most important contribution to the study of primitive religions that this century has yet produced. After a careful analysis and critique of the animistic and naturalistic hypotheses, the author passes to an exposition of totemistic beliefs and rites in the light of his own sociology. The major part of the book is devoted to his elaborate exposition and analysis. For his facts Durkheim is dependent chiefly upon Spencer and Gillen and upon Strehlow – though he has practically exhausted the literature of his subject and draws liberally upon all the more important investigators.

But the arrangement and interpretation of the facts are his own, and, whether one agrees with him or not, no one can deny that his methods and conclusions are both original and brilliant.

- 3 The essential thing about religion, according to Durkheim, is the distinction which it makes between the sacred and the profane. "Sacred things are those which the interdictions (of society) protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of the sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things. Finally, rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects."^[1]
- 4 "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."^[2]
- 5 If we would find the essential elements of religion in their most obvious form, the author argues, we must seek it in the most primitive religion discoverable; and this most primitive religion will be that belonging to the [40a] most primitive societies known. Now, the societies most simple in structure known to sociology are the tribes of central and northern Australia. For this and other reasons Durkheim conclude that the religion of this tribes is the most primitive of all religions; and he is the more convinced of this because he has been able, as he believes, to find in their religion the germs of all higher forms. This primitive religion from all other religions have developed is, of course, totemism. A possible attack upon his position from those who see the earliest form of religion in primitive man's concept of *mana* – the impersonal power – Durkheim avoids by incorporating *mana* into totemism as an essential part of it. Mana, in fact, is interpreted as the totemic force – the principle or "god" of which the totem is the symbol. But the totem is not only the symbol of this mysterious force; it is the symbol of the social group as well. "It is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from the others, the visible mark of its personality, a mark borne by everything which is a part of the clan under any title whatsoever, men, beasts, or things. So, if it is at once the symbol of the god and of the society, is that not because the god and the society are only one ?^[3] [...] The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as the totem^[4]."^[5] Here we are at the very heart of Durkheim's thesis: society and the god of all historical religions are really identical. "It is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers. In fact, a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend [...] Now, society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence."^[6] And not only are we physically dependent upon it; it exerts upon us a moral constraint which no merely physical power could ever make us feel, and thus both morally and physically acts upon the individual as the god is always pictured as doing. Durkheim argues the point at length, and very brilliantly, with the great force of illustration and originality of conception. The masses of facts that have been piled up by investigators in Australia and from our own West are worked over so as to yield results at which those who reported them would never have

guessed, and in such fashion as to throw unexpected light on many a hitherto dark place in various higher stages of religion.

- 6 Yet brilliant as is Durkheim's argument concerning the original form and the essential nature of religion, it can hardly be called conclusive. A good deal may still be said for Animism, and particularly for Naturalism. In fact, most of Durkheim's facts might be taken out of the very clever [40b] arrangement he has devised for them, in which they point so clearly towards a totemistic origin of nearly everything, and be rearranged so as to lead to an animistic and naturalistic conclusion. As a fact, indeed, Spencer and Gillen, the great authorities on Australian matters, lean decidedly towards an animistic interpretation. Very much more evidence will have to be produced before it can be made even probable that totemism is the primitive form of all religions. Why, indeed, must all religions have had the same origin? The conditions in which men have lived in various parts of the world have been so varied that a plurality of origins for religion would, on the face of it, seem not at all improbable. To insist that all began in one way smacks a little of the dogmatic monism from which philosophy has suffered so long, and from which it is beginning to declare its independence.
- 7 Finally, it is very questionable whether we can ever get at all that is essential in religion by confining our study to its sociological expressions and to its most primitive forms. In early tribal societies we shall indeed find most easily its simplest elements; but it may well be that in its later developments there are truly essential elements which are far from simple. Or must we presuppose, without investigation, that nothing of fundamental importance has been added to religion in times subsequent to the simplest and lowest? It may perhaps be shown – if further evidence be forthcoming – that for the Arunta and the Ojibway “the reality which religious thought expresses is society.”^[7] But a good deal more must still be done to show that what is true for the Arunta must therefore also be true for the Buddhist and the Christian. The truth is, Durkheim's definition is too narrow except for the practical purposes of sociology. Religion as a psychical fact of modern life has significant aspects which can never be evolved out of any manipulation of the sacred and the profane.

NOTES

1. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1, p. 40-41]
2. [« Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 1., p. 47]
3. [« Origins of these [Totemic] Beliefs. Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 7, p. 206]
4. [Orig.] « as totem » et non pas « as *the* totem ». Cf. « Origins of these [Totemic] Beliefs. Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 7, p. 206.
5. [« Origins of these [Totemic] Beliefs. Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 7, p. 206]
6. [« Origins of these [Totemic] Beliefs. Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 7, p. 206]

7. [« Conclusion », Durkheim 1915, p. 431]