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# Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse

## Review of Theology & Philosophy (Edimbourg, juin 1913)

**Andrew Lang**

**S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)**

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# Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse

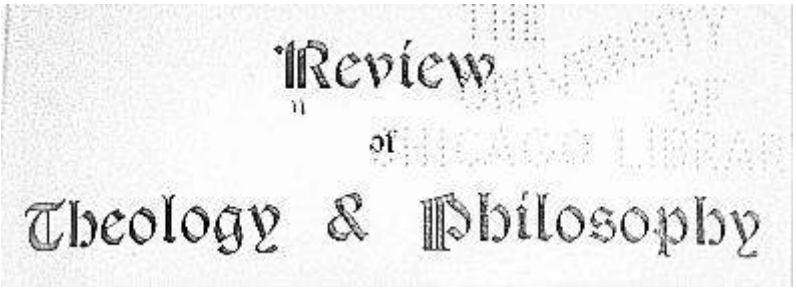
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Source primaire :
LANG Andrew, « Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse, by Emile Durkheim. Paris: Alcan, 1912. pp. 647. 10 F. », *Review of Theology & Philosophy*, edited by Allan Menzies (Edinburgh), 8, July 1912-June 1913, p. 115-120
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DR DURKHEIM'S new book on elementary forms of religion contains more than 600 pages. He is a leader of the sociological school. I have never understood why they lay so much stress on the social and collective aspects of Institutions. Man being a social animal, his creeds and laws *must* be of social and collective origin. "Who's a denying of it?" We all admit it, and, indeed, take it for [116] granted. Writers who keep insisting on telling us, at great length, what we all admit are apt to fatigue the reader. Dr Durkheim chiefly examines religiousness among the Australian tribes, and devotes much space and ratiocination to totemism. To this part of his work I mainly confine

my review. On this topic he and I have ere now broken lances, and it is rather unlucky for myself that he appears to know nothing of my work in this kind since *The Secret of the Totem* (1905)[1] and the first edition of *The Making of Religion* (1898)[2]. On one point I have, for Dr Durkheim, written in vain. He maintains that "the phratries" (the two chief exogamous divisions of an Australian tribe) "are certainly a primitive institution, for everywhere they are retreating; while the class" (totem kins) "which issued from them have gone to the front" (p. 152)[3]. This is not, he says with truth, the case in North America. But the phratries are only waning in parts of Australia among tribes which possess "matrimonial classes." These classes, relatively modern, do the work which the phratries still do among tribes with no matrimonial classes. In America there are no such classes, so the phratries are there in the first line; while "clans" are breaking up under heraldic influences absent in Australia. Meanwhile, the phratries cannot be more primitive than the clans, and the clans cannot have been segmented out of them, because where descent of the totem young is in the female line (the earlier mode of counting kin) a clan *cannot* be segmented out of a larger social unit. The thing is physically impossible (*Secret of the Totem*, pp. 100-102)[4]. With female descent a phratry *cannot* be subdivised out into totem kins as Dr Durkheim supposes (p. 185)[5]. Dr Durkheim criticises Mr J.G. Frazer's latest theory of the origin of totemism (pp. 257-262)[6], and says that it rests on a *petitio principii*. Other historical objections may be made, and Dr Durkheim makes them. The Arunta, whose totemic methods suggested Mr Frazer's theory, are certainly not in the very early but a very decadent state of totemism, while they (or a part of the tribe) retain a hereditary totem derived in the female line. So Mr Strehlow tells us, for Dr Durkheim does not, [117] like Mr Frazer, reject Mr Strehlow's evidence. To do so is a peculiarity in Mr Frazer. Again, Mr Frazer refuses to see a religion in totemism; by which I suppose him to mean that the origin of totemism was not religious, though, in places, totemism affects religion. But here all depends on our definition of religion. In the early stages of totemism, or rather, in a stage of totemism which he believes (and Dr Durkheim does not believe) to be very early, Mr Frazer sees, not religion, but magic. The dispute about definition is endless and tedious.

Dr Durkheim next criticises my opinions. They have changed in important points since I wrote *The Secret of the Totem* in 1905[7]. However, I do not, even now, think that totemism is, to Australians, "the institution divine,"[8] though certain tribes believe that it was founded by a being whom we, if we believe in heroes, would call "divine." I did not go behind the general conception of things potent and mysterious, called *wakan*, *mana*, *orenda*, etc. in various languages. To go further back was not a part of my purpose. The conception exists: that was enough for the moment. If the existence of this conception marks all things to which the conception is applied as "religious," then totemism is religious. So is the idea that a pebble resembling a yam will provoke fertility in yams, and the rule of taking off our hats to magpies.

When Dr Durkheim says (p. 267, note 1, and elsewhere[9]) that I attribute "l'idée des grande [sic] dieux à une sorte de révélation primitive,"[10] he charges me with a theory which my friend, Père Schmidt, blames me for rejecting[11] ! I never held it; in Prefaces to *Making of Religion* (second and third editions)[12] I have given the theory which I prefer, adding "another theory which may be maintained,"[13] but to it I see grave objections. Dr Durkheim has a third: all are conjectures. The facts alone are important; the facts of the Australians' (and other low races') belief, *les grands dieux*, who are not descended from ghosts, are not ghosts raised to the sky. Dr Durkheim (pp. 409-424)[14] accepts the facts, which are not due, he says, to European influences. All this has been denied, in the face of great masses of [118] trustworthy evidence, by British anthropologists of the first rank. I feel that I have won my case when a student of Dr Durkheim's eminence accepts the facts. *He* does not ignore the evidence of Mr Strehlow and of Mr Langton Parker[15].

Dr Durkheim's method of accounting to himself for the conception of the All Father among peoples of the lowest culture is to me indifferent. The conception is acknowledged to exist. Our

author (p. 418)[16] connects it with totemism because, for example, “Duramulum is an Eagle Hawks.” Altjira has emu’s feet; the meaning of Bunjil is Eagle Hawk. In fact Duramulun’s effigy—made for the mysteries and destroyed when they are ended—is purely anthropomorphic; and Bunjil, though applied to the king of birds, merely means “lord,” “master,” or any such honorific title. Basanir, purely anthropomorphic, had a totem-creature for every joint of his body. Zeus, in his *jeunesse orageuse*, whore many animal guises, but is not derived from totemism. But Dr Durkheim says that four noted All Fathers are “the divinised totem of the phratries” (p. 420)[17]. One cannot criticise this opinion without examining all the evidence. How “*le grand dieu*” can be “*un esprit ancestral*,” *while he is not regarded as spiritual at all* (so Mr Howitt came to see), among tribes which profess no regard for ancestral spirits I fail to understand! Even in Central Australia Arunta made himself and gave himself his name in a region far above the sky; there is nothing totemic, nothing spiritual about him.

Dr Durkheim’s theory starts from the notion that man believes first in “an immaterial substance, an energy diffused through all sorts of heterogeneous entities, which is, and alone is, the true object of the cult” (p. 270)[18]. Well may he say (p. 272)[19] that he may seem “to give to primitive man ideas beyond the stretch of his intelligence !”[20] He falls back on conceptions like *wakan*, *orenda*, *mana*, and so forth, now entertained by races far from the primitive. To me it seems that such conceptions are no more primitive than the scientific conception of the ether is primitive. They [119] are stupendous generalisations from multitudes of individual instances. For example, man finds himself doing magic, pointing a sharp bone at a foe invisible in the distance. The foe, when he comes to hear of the performance—or by chance coincidence—dies; in the former case by suggestion. “The thing works,” says man, “but *how* does it work? By a puissant kind of ether which carries the telepathic energy of my will: let us call this ether *ariquiltha*” (Arunta). *Mana*, *orenda*, *wakan*, *ariquiltha* are generalisation covering all things necessary and not understood. Man could not begin with the generalisation! Magic does not “rest on the notion *mana*” (p. [2]88)[21]. *Mana* is a generalisation for and explanation of acts of magic. Ghosts have plenty of *mana*, but *mana* is there a generalisation covering and explaining ghosts. Men believed in ghosts *because they saw them*, or because, if you prefer it, they, like us, were subject to visual hallucinations and phantasms of the dead, the dying, and the living. How did clans get totems? Dr Durkheim makes much (as, at first, did Mc Lennan, though not in print) of the tattooing of a clan symbol on the clansfolk (pp. 332-333)[22]. (In Australia this is rare). But whence came the symbol, usually “geometric,” of the clan object of regard, and how did the clan come to have a regard for that object? Well, the nomad clan with the female descent needs a common symbol: chiefs are vague, places are vague; “without the name and the sign which materialise the name the clan *n’est même plus représentable*” (p. 334)[23]. But “what sign materialising the names” do the Australian tribes of female decent possess? I observe only a single example given by Dr Durkheim of any kind of scarified totem among Australian tribes of female descent (p. 1[6]4[24], vol. vii [sic]). In this one case some people are scarified after the fall of rain, but they are not said to be people of the Rain totem (Howitt, p. 744)[25]. As a matter of fact totemic “signs”—schematised or naturalistic—occur among Australian tribes of male descent, and culminate in the heraldry of the Indians of North-West America. At far as I see, the most primitive existing clans make no use, or very little use, of representations or signs [120] indicating their totems. Yet Dr Durkheim thinks that the totemic sign “has played a more important part than the name” (p. 334)[26]. To prove this he must produce many examples of the use of the sign among Australian tribes of female descent. He must show that the clansfolk are tattooed with the sign of their clan in each case. He seems to think that the clans deliberately chose their totems in the beginning of totemism (p. 329)[27]. “It seems that each group took for its sign the animal or vegetable most *répandu* in the neighbourhood of the place where it was wont to assemble” (p. 335)[28]. To obtain evidence of this is impossible. If a cockatoo totem kin *now* meets at a place remarkable for, say, many cockatoos,

that is because it is a cockatoo kin; it does not follow that it became a cockatoo kin because it was originally a local group in a region rich in cockatoos! I have not space enough to do more than touch on a few points in Dr Durkheim's book. If, even concerning these, I misapprehend his meaning, the errors are involuntary—and he has not been more successful in my own case.

[NdE] This notice is one of the last of Mr Lang's writings. The proof was not corrected by him. He was a willing and prompt contributor to this Review, and the Editor, who was his school-fellow at the Edinburgh Academy and fellow-student at St Andrews, bids him farewell with deep regret.

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## NOTES

**1.** [Andrew Lang, « The Theories of Dr. Durkheim », *The Secret of the Totem*, London/New York/ Bombay, Longmans, Green and Co, 1905, p. 91-110]
**2.** [Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion*, London / New York / Bombay, Longmans, Green, and Co, 1898, 380 p.]
**3.** [Orig.] « Les phratries sont certainement une institution primitive, car elles sont partout en voie de régression ; ce sont les clans, issues d'elles, qui sont passées au premier plan ». *Cf.* « Les croyances proprement totémiques - I. - Le totem comme nom et comme emblème », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 1, p. 152]
**4.** [Andrew Lang, « The Theories of Dr. Durkheim », *The Secret of the Totem*, London/New York/ Bombay, Longmans, Green and Co, 1905, p. 91-110. La controverse porte sur le mémoire d'Émile Durkheim, « Sur le totémisme », *L'Année sociologique*, 5 (1900-1901), Mémoires originaux, 1902, p. 82-121]
**5.** [« Les croyances proprement totémique. L'animal totémique et l'homme », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 2, p. 185]
**6.** [« Origines de ces croyances [totémiques]. Examen critique des théories », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 5, p. 257-262]
**7.** [Andrew Lang, *The Secret of the Totem*, London/New York/Bombay, Longmans, Green and Co, 1905, x-215 p.]

**8.** [« Origines de ces croyances [totémiques]. Examen critique des théories », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 5, p. 265]
**9.** [*Cf.* Andrew Lang, « The Origin of Belief in a God », *The Athenaeum*, 4423, August 3, 1912, p. 119b-c]
**10.** [« Origines de ces croyances [totémiques]. Examen critique des théories », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 5, p. 267]
**11.** [Wilhelm Schmidt, « Le préanimisme monothéiste d'Andrew Lang », *L'origine de l'idée de Dieu. Étude historico-critique et positive. 1re partie : Historico-critique*, Paris, Librairie Alphonse Picard & fils, 1910, p. 72-124]
**12.** [Andrew Lang, « Preface to the Second Edition » et « Preface to the Third Edition (May 1909) », *The Making of Religion*, Third Edition, London / New York / Bombay / Calcutta, Longmans, Green, and Co, 1909, p. vii-viii et p. ix-xxiv]
**13.** [Orig.] « another theory may be *entertained* » (nous soulignons), *Cf.* Andrew Lang, « Preface to the Second Edition », *The Making of Religion*, Third Edition, London / New York / Bombay / Calcutta, Longmans, Green, and Co, 1909, p. xii]
**14.** [« La notion d'esprit et de dieux », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 9, p. 409-424]
**15.** [Durkheim cite et utilise abondamment les travaux de Katie Langloh Parker, *More Australian Legendary Tales, collected from Various Tribes*, with an Introduction by Andrew Lang, (London / Melbourne, David Nutt / Melville, Mullen & Slade, 1898. xxiii-103 p.) et *The Euahlayi Tribe. A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia*, with an Introduction by Andrew Lang (London, Archibal Constable and Company, 1905, xxvii-156 p.) ainsi que ceux du missionnaire Carl Friedrich Theodor Strehlow, *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*, Frankfurt am Main, Josef Baer & Co, « Veröffentlichungen aus dem städtischen Völker-Museum Frankfurt am Main » (Teil 1, *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen des Aranda-Stammes*, 1907, 104 p. ; Teil 2, *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen des Loritja-Stammes : Die totemistischen Vorstellungen und die Tjurunga der Aranda und Loritja*, 1908, 140 p. ; Teil 3, *Allgemeine Einleitung und die Totemistischen Kulte des Aranda-Stammes*, 1910-1911, 75 p.)]
**16.** [« La notion d'esprit et de dieux », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 9, p. 418]
**17.** [« La notion d'esprit et de dieux », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 9, p. 420]
**18.** [Orig.] « Voilà en quoi consiste réellement le totem : il n'est que la forme matérielle sous laquelle est représentée aux imaginations cette substance immatérielle [la religiosité comme force impersonnelle], cette énergie diffuse à travers toutes sortes d'être hétérogènes, qui est, seule, l'objet véritable du culte. ». *Cf.* « La notion de principe ou mana totémique et l'idée de force », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 6, p. 270]
**19.** [« La notion de principe ou mana totémique et l'idée de force », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 6, p. 272]
**20.** [Orig.] « On se demandera peut-être si, en interprétant ainsi le totémisme, nous ne prêtons pas au primitif des idées qui dépassent la portée de son esprit. ». *Cf.* « La notion de principe ou mana totémique et l'idée de force », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 6, p. 272
**21.** [« La notion de principe ou mana totémique et l'idée de force », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 6, p. 288]
**22.** [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 332-333]
**23.** [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 334]
**24.** [« Le totem comme nom et comme emblème », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 1, p. 164]
**25.** [Alfred William Howitt, « Various Customs », *The Natives Tribes of South-East Australia*, London, Macmillan, 1904, p. 744]
**26.** [Orig.] « Il nous paraît vraisemblable que l'emblème a joué un rôle plus important que le nom », *Cf.* « Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 334

**27.** [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 329]
**28.** [Orig.] « Il semble donc bien que chaque groupe ait pris pour insigne l'animal ou le végétal qui était le plus répandu dans le voisinage de l'endroit où il avait l'habitude de s'assembler », *Cf.* « Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 335

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