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Reviews

Folk-Lore. Transactions of the Folk-Lore Society (Londres, décembre 1913)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

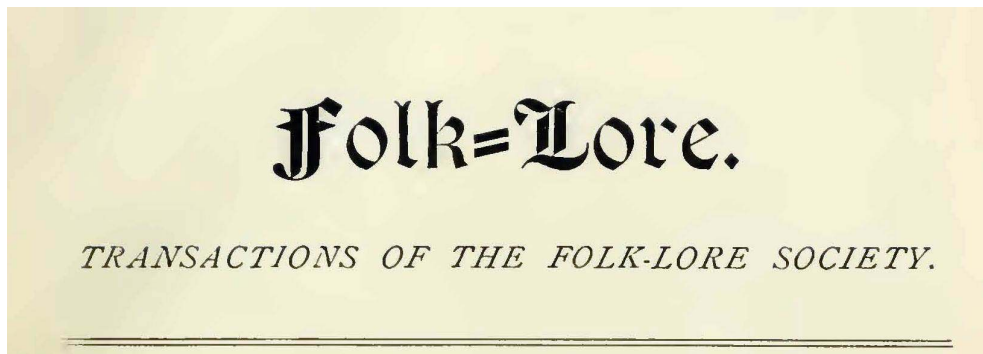
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It is superfluous to draw the attention of students to the importance of Prof. Durkheim's new work, for the appearance of a large volume from the pen of the leader of the French sociological school is a scientific event. The group of savants connected with *l'Année Sociologique* has achieved remarkable success in dealing with problems in primitive religion, and we have to thank it

especially for the essays of MM. Hubert and Mauss on Sacrifice and Magic, and the articles of M. Durkheim on the Definition of Religious Phenomena, Classifications in Primitive Thought, and Totemism, and of M. Hertz on Funerary Rites^[1].

To Prof. Durkheim the religious is the social *par excellence*. The distinctive characters of social and religious phenomena practically coincide. The social is defined, in *Règles de la méthode sociologique*, by its “exteriority to individual minds,” by its “coercive action” upon individual minds; the religious, which is also “external” to individual minds, by its “obligatoriness.”² It is obvious, therefore, that the present volume is of special importance, being the systematic and final expression of the best organized sociological school extant on a subject specially important to, and specially well-mastered by, this school.

There is yet another reason why this book should particularly arouse the interest of the sociologist. It is Prof. Durkheim’s first [525] attempt to treat a “problem of origins” of such a fundamental and general social phenomenon as religion. In his methodological work, *Règles de la méthode sociologique*, he has strenuously insisted upon the treatment of social phenomena “as things,” upon the necessity of excluding all forms of psychological explanations from sociology.³ This postulate undoubtedly appears to many a rule rather artificial and barren in its practical applications, –and especially to British anthropologists, who prefer psychological explanations of origins; and this volume enables us to judge as to the success of his method.

The book has several aspects and aims. It attempts to state the essential and fundamental elements of religion, being thus a revision of the author’s former definition of *the religious*; it investigates the origins of religion; it gives a theory of totemism; and it is designed as a substantial contribution to philosophy.

All these problems M. Durkheim seeks to solve by an analysis of the beliefs of practically one single tribe, the Arunta. His keen eye detects in the facts we owe to Messrs. Spencer and Gillen much that is not patent to a less acute mind, and his researches through their two volumes, completed by the records made by Mr. Strehlow, yield him an abundant crop of theoretical results. Nevertheless, to base most far-reaching conclusions upon practically a single instance seems open to very serious objections. It is extremely dangerous to accept any people as “the absolutely primitive type of mankind,” or as “the best example of elementary forms of social organization and creed,” and to forego the verification of conclusions by other available instances. For example, when M. Durkheim, in trying to determine the fundamental aspect of religion, finds it in an universal and absolute bipartition of men, things, and ideas into “sacré et profane,” (pp. 50 *et seq.*)^[4], he may refer to a well-known passage by the Australian ethnographers,⁵ and, in fact, a sharp division of all things into religious and non-religious seems to be a very marked feature of the social life of Central Australian natives. But is it universal? I feel by no means persuaded. In reading the detailed monograph by Dr. and Mrs. Seligmann about the Veddas^[6], no such division is suggested as existing [527] among that extremely primitive people. Again, it would be difficult to maintain the existence of such a separation amongst the Melanesian peoples of whom we have very copious records. This may be due to a gap in our information, but, anyhow, it is not admissible to base a system upon a mere assumption, instead of on certain knowledge.

One does not feel quite easy, also, about the assumption of totemism being the elementary form of religion (liv. I, cap. iv.)^[7], especially as here again we find the investigation limited to the beliefs of the Central Australians.

Prof. Durkheim’s theory of totemism is that the essence of totemism lies in the totemic symbol and badge, and that the sacredness of the totem is derived from the sacredness of the badge. A reconsideration, from this new point of view, of the problem of totemism, grown slightly

wearisome owing to “totemic hyper. production” in recent times, cannot fail to be stimulating. M. Durkheim and his school accept, as is well-known, Dr. Marett’s theory of preanimism^[8]. The totemic principle, the totemic force, is for Prof. Durkheim akin in nature to *mana*. This principle, inherent in the first place in the totemic badge arid symbol, then in the species, and then in the clansmen, is thus explained:—“Le dieu du clan, le principe totémique, ne peut donc être autre chose que le clan lui-même, mais hypostasié et représenté aux imaginations sous les espèces sensibles du végétal ou de l’animal qui sert de totem” (p. 295)^[9]. Undoubtedly this is a very interesting conception of religion, foreshadowed in our author’s former works, in which so much stress is laid on the social nature of the religious,—but here plainly expressed for the first time.

M. Durkheim proceeds to show how it comes about that society is the real substance, the *materia prima*, of the human conception of divinity. “Une société a tout ce qu’il faut pour éveiller dans les esprits, par la seule action qu’elle exerce sur eux, la sensation du divin ; car elle est a ses membres ce qu’un dieu est à ses fidèles” (*ibid.*)^[10]. Again, “parce qu’elle a une nature qui lui est propre, différente de notre nature d’individu, elle poursuit des fins qui lui sont également spéciales ; mais, comme elle ne peut les atteindre que par notre intermédiaire, elle réclame impérieusement notre concours” (*ibid.*)^[11]. Let us note that here society is [528] conceived to be the *logical subject* of the statement; an active being endowed with will, aims, and desires. If we are not to take it as a figure of speech (and M. Durkheim decidedly does not give it as such), we must label it an entirely metaphysical conception. Society conceived as a collective being, endowed with all properties of individual consciousness, will be rejected even by those sociologists who accept a “collective consciousness” in the sense of a sum of conscious states (as it is accepted, for example, by Messrs. McDougall, Ellwood, Davis, and, partly, by Simmel and Wundt). But, a few pages further, we read a statement which seems to allow of another interpretation. Speaking of “manières d’agir auxquelles la société est assez fortement attachée pour les imposer a ses membres,”^[12] he says, “Les représentations qui les expriment en chacun de nous ont donc une intensité à laquelle des états de conscience purement privés ne sauraient atteindre ; car elles sont fortes des innombrables représentations individuelles qui ont servi à former chacune d’elles. C’est la société qui parle par la bouche de ceux qui les affirment en notre présence” (p. 297)^[13]. Here we stand before a dilemma: either this phrase means that “social ideas” possess a specific character, because the individual who conceives them has the consciousness of being backed up by society in his opinion, in which case the statement is perfectly empirical; or the statement implies the conception of a non-empirical action of society upon the individual consciousness, in which case it conveys no scientific meaning.

The writer expresses himself again on the subject, from the genetic point of view,—“En un mot, quand une chose est l’objet d’un état de l’opinion, la représentation qu’en a chaque individu tient de ses origines, des conditions dans lesquelles elle a pris naissance, une puissance d’action que sentent ceux-la mêmes qui ne s’y soumettent pas” (p. 297)^[14]. Here the author stands in front of the real problem. What are these specific social conditions in which arise “social consciousness,” and consequently religious ideas? His answer is that these conditions are realized whenever society is actually gathered, in all big social gatherings:—“Au sein d’une assemblée qu’échauffe une passion commune, nous devenons susceptibles de sentiments et d’actes dont nous sommes incapables quand nous sommes réduits à nos seules forces, et quand l’assemblée [529] est dissoute, quand, nous retrouvant seul avec nous-mêmes, nous retombons à notre niveau ordinaire, nous pouvons mesurer alors toute la hauteur dont nous avons été soulevé au-dessus de nous-mêmes” (p. 299)^[15].

This answer is somewhat disappointing. First of all, we feel a little suspicious of a theory which sees the origins of religion in crowd phenomena. Again, from the point of view of method, we are at a loss. Above we had been dealing (with some difficulties) with a transcendental collective subject, with a “society which was the creator of religious ideas”: “Au reste, tant dans le présent

que dans l'histoire, nous voyons sans cesse la société créer de toutes pièces des choses sacrées" (p. 304)^[16]. Then society was the divinity itself, *i.e.* it was not only creator, but the object of its creation, or at least reflected in this object. But here society is no more the logical and grammatical subject of the metaphysical assertions, but not even the object of these assertions. It only furnishes the external conditions, in which ideas about the divine may and must originate. Thus Prof. Durkheim's views present fundamental inconsistencies. Society is the source of religion, the origin of the divine; but is it "origin" in the sense that "the collective subject... thinks and creates the religious ideas"? This would be a metaphysical conception deprived of any empirical meaning; or is society itself the "god," as is implied in the statement that the "totemic principle is the clan," thought under the aspect of a totem? That reminds one somewhat of Hegel's Absolute, "thinking itself" under one aspect or another. Or, finally, is society, in its crowd-aspect, nothing more than the atmosphere in which *individuals* create religious ideas? The last is the only scientifically admissible interpretation of the obscure manner in which M. Durkheim expounds the essence of his theories.

Let us see how our author grapples with actual and concrete problems, and which of the three versions of "origins" just mentioned he applies to the actual facts of Australian totemism. He starts with the remark already quoted about the double form of the social life of the Central Australian tribesman. The natives go through two periodically changing phases of dispersion and agglomeration. The latter consist chiefly, indeed, almost [530] exclusively, of religious festivities. This corresponds to the above-mentioned statement that crowd originates religion: "Or, le seul fait de l'agglomération agit comme un excitant exceptionnellement puissant. Une fois les individus rassemblés, il se dégage de leur rapprochement une sorte d'électricité qui les transporte vite à un degré extraordinaire d'exaltation..."^[17] On conçoit sans peine que, parvenu à cet état d'exaltation [...], l'homme ne se connaisse plus. Se sentant dominé, entraîné par une sorte de pouvoir extérieur qui le fait penser et agir autrement qu'en temps normal, il a naturellement l'impression de n'être plus lui-même. Il lui semble être devenu un être nouveau : les décorations dont il s'affuble, les sortes de masques dont il se recouvre le visage figurent matériellement cette transformation intérieure, plus encore qu'ils ne contribuent à la déterminer [...] tout se passe comme s'il était réellement transporté dans un monde spécial, entièrement différent de celui où il vit d'ordinaire..."^[18] C'est donc dans ces milieux sociaux effervescent et de cette effervescence même que paraît être née l'idée religieuse. Et ce qui tend à confirmer que telle en est bien l'origine, c'est que, en Australie, l'activité proprement religieuse est presque tout entière concentrée dans les moments où se tiennent ces assemblées"^[19] (pp. 308, 312, 313)^[20].

To sum up, theories concerning one of the most fundamental aspects of religion cannot be safely based on an analysis of a single tribe, as described in practically a single ethnographical work. It should be noted that the really empirical version of this theory of origins is by no means a realization of the "objective" method, in which M. Durkheim enjoins treating social facts as things and avoiding individual psychological interpretations. In his actual theory he uses throughout individual psychological explanations. It is the modification of the individual consciousness in big gatherings, the "mental effervescence," which is assumed to be the source of "the religious." The sacred and divine are the psychological categories governing ideas originated in religiously inspired crowds. These ideas are collective only in so far as they are general, *i.e.* common in all members of the crowd. None the less we arrive at understanding their nature by individual analysis, by psychological introspection, and not by treating those phenomena as "things." Finally, to trace back the [531] origins of all religious phenomena to crowd manifestations seems to narrow down extremely both the forms of social influence upon religion, and the sources from which man can draw his religious inspiration. "Mental effervescence" in large gatherings can hardly be accepted as the only source of religion.

But, while one is bound to criticize certain points of principle in Prof. Durkheim's work, it must be added that the work contains in a relatively small bulk such thorough analyses of theories of religious facts,—several of which, of first-rate importance, are original contributions by Prof. Durkheim or his school,—as could only be given by one of the acutest and most brilliant living sociologists, and that these by themselves would make the book a contribution to science of the greatest importance.

B. Malinowski

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NOTES

1. [Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, « Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice », *L'Année sociologique*, 2 (1897-1898), Mémoires originaux, 1899, p. 29-138 et, « Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie », *L'Année sociologique*, 7 (1902-1903), Mémoires originaux, 1904, p. 1-146 ; Émile Durkheim, « De la définition des phénomènes religieux », *L'Année sociologique*, 2 (1897-1898), Mémoires originaux, 1899, p. 1-28 et, « Sur le totémisme », *L'Année sociologique*, 5 (1900-1901), Mémoires originaux, 1902, p. 82-121 ; Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, « De quelques formes primitives de classification. Contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives », *L'Année sociologique*, 6 (1901-1902), Mémoires originaux, 1903, p. 1-72 ; Robert Hertz, « Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort », *L'Année sociologique*, 10 (1905-1906), Mémoires originaux, 1907, p. 48-137.]

2. See "Sur la définition des phénomènes religieux," in *L'Année Sociologique* vol. ii. [Émile Durkheim, « De la définition des phénomènes religieux », *L'Année sociologique*, 2 (1897-1898), Mémoires originaux, 1899, p. 2]

3. *Op. cit.*, Table of Contents, cap. ii. [Émile Durkheim, « Règles relatives à l'observation des faits sociaux », *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris, F. Alcan, « Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine », 1895, p. 20-58]

4. [« Définition du phénomène religieux et de la religion », Durkheim 1912, livre 1, chap. 1, p. 50 sq.]
5. *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*, p. 33 [Le passage signalé est crucial : “During his early years, up till perhaps the age of fourteen, the boy is perfectly free, wandering about in the bush, searching for food, playing with his companions during the daytime, and perhaps spending the evening watching the ordinary corroborees. From the moment of his initiation, however, his life is sharply marked out into two parts. He has first of all what we may speak of as the ordinary life, common to all the men and women, and associated with the procuring of food and the performance of corroborees, the peaceful monotony of this part of his life being broken every now and again by the excitement of a fight. On the other hand, he has what gradually becomes of greater importance to him, and that is the portion of his life devoted to matters of a sacred or secret nature. As he grows older he takes an increasing share in these, until finally this side of his life occupies by far the greater part of his thoughts.”, Walter Baldwin Spencer, Francis Gillen, “Introduction”, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*, London, Macmillan, 1904, p. 33]
6. [Brenda Z. Seligmann, Charles Gabriel Seligman, *The Veddas*, with a chapter by C.S. Myer and an appendix by A. Mendis Gunasekara, Cambridge, at the University Press, 1911, xix-463 p.]
7. [« Le totémisme comme religion élémentaire », Durkheim 1912, livre 1, chap. 4, p. 123-138]
8. [Robert Ranulph Marett, « Pre-Animistic Religion », *Folk-Lore. Transactions of the Folk-Lore Society*, 11 (2), June, 1900, p. 162-184 et *The Threshold of Religion*, London, Methuen & Co, 1909, xix-173 p.]
9. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
10. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
11. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
12. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
13. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
14. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
15. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
16. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 295]
17. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 308]
18. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 312]
19. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 313]
20. [« Genèse de la notion de principe ou mana totémique », Durkheim 1912, livre 2, chap. 7, p. 308, p. 312 et p. 313]