



Archives de sciences sociales des religions

La première réception des *Formes* (1912-1917) (S. Baciocchi, F. Théron, eds.)

Notices of Books

The Irish Church Quarterly (Dublin, juillet 1916)

William Townley Beckerson

S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/24396>

ISSN: 1777-5825

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Electronic reference

William Townley Beckerson, « Notices of Books », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* [Online], The Early reception of *The Elementary Forms* (1912-1917), II, Online since 29 November 2013, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/24396>

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Source primaire :

Beckerson (William Townley), « Notices of Books – *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* . By Emile Durkheim. Translated from the French by T. W. Swain, M.A. (Allen and Unwin.) 15s. net. », *The Irish Church Quarterly* (Dublin), 9 (35), July 1916, p. 245-247

Source(s) numérique(s) identifiée(s) :

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30067652>

- 1 At the outset of his work the author repels an accusation which is commonly levelled at the comparative study of primitive religions—that it reduces the highest forms of religious thought to the level of the lowest, and that it is in reality an evidence of a systematic hostility to all religions; “if we admit that the crude cults of the Australian tribes can help us to understand Christianity, for example, is that not supposing that this latter religion proceeds from the same mentality as the former, that it is made up of the same superstitions and rests upon the same [246] errors?”^[1] Undoubtedly certain scholars have laid themselves open to this reproach. M. Durkheim, writing from the standpoint of a sociologist, is actuated by very different motives. “It is an essential postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot rest upon an error and a lie, without which it could not exist. If it were not founded in the nature of things, it would have encountered in the facts a resistance over which it could never have triumphed^[2] [...] So when we turn to primitive religions it is not with the idea of depreciating religion in general, for these religions are no less respectable than the others. They respond to the same needs, they play the same role, they depend upon the same causes.”^[3]
- 2 It is for this very reason, because they do not hold to reality and cannot, therefore, express it, that the theories of Animism and Naturism, advocated by Tylor and Max

Müller respectively, must be deemed unsatisfactory explanations of the origin of religion. They are both simply derived forms or particular aspects of another sort of cult, more fundamental and more primitive, to which ethnologists have given the name of Totemism. There are three classes of things which Totemism recognizes as sacred, analogous to the heraldic devices of the feudal period; the animal or plant whose appearance the emblem reproduces; and the member of the clan, who is invested with a personal sanctity due to the fact that he believes, that while he is a man in the usual sense of the word, he is also an animal or plant of the totemic species. The practices prevalent among Australian and North American Indian tribes prove the existence of Totemism as a complex and highly organized religion. M. Durkheim finds an explanation of these beliefs in the almost universal conception of the Totemic emblem as the permanent element of the social life. "Since religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan, and since this can be represented in the mind only in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is like the visible body of the god...^[4] But the clan, like every other form of society, can live only in and through the individual consciousnesses that compose it. So if religious force, in so far as it is concerned as incorporated in the totemic emblem, appears to be outside of the individuals and to be endowed with a sort of transcendence over them, it, like the clan of which it is the symbol, can be realized only in and through them; in this sense it is immanent in them, and they necessarily represent it as such. They feel it present and active within them, for it is this which raises them to a superior life."^[5]

- 3 Robertson Smith traced the origin of sacrifice to a common social meal, in which the ties uniting the god to his worshippers were thought to be renewed and strengthened by feasting upon a sacred animal akin to both. In a section dealing with the positive [247] cult, M. Durkheim accepts this theory, though with certain modifications. "Of course the sacrifice is partially a communion; but it is also, and no less essentially, a gift and an act of renouncement. It always presupposes that the worshipper gives some of his substance or his goods to his gods."^[6] There are certain passages in this book which will come with something of a shock to the orthodox reader. He will learn with no little surprise that "the Christian communion is inseparable from the myth of the Last Supper, from which it derives all its meaning"^[7] Nor do we think it an accurate use of terms, when examples are being given of the survival of savage practices in presumably Christian systems, to cite as "Catholic" superstitions which are repudiated by a considerable portion of the Catholic Church.
- 4 In conclusion a tribute of praise is due to Mr. Swain for the admirable manner in which he has performed a difficult task—that of giving a vigorous, lucid translation into English of an erudite and highly-technical foreign work.

NOTES

1. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 2]
2. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 2]

3. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 3]
4. [« Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 7, p. 221
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5. [« Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, chap. 7, p. 221
]
6. [« The Elements of the Sacrifice », Durkheim 1915, Book 3, chap. 2, p. 343]
7. [« Leading Conception of the Elementary Religion. II. – Naturism », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, chap. 3, p. 82]