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**RONALD HENDEL,
MARY DOUGLAS AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODERNISM**

MARY DOUGLAS AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODERNISM

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INTRODUCTION

Mary Douglas was one of the most brilliant and wide-ranging scholars of the last half-century, a period during which her subject—cultural anthropology—became an essential intellectual field. Among the many scholarly disciplines that she participated in and influenced, she had a longstanding engagement with scholarship of the Hebrew Bible. Although she was keenly aware of her lack of linguistic skills in her biblical work, her anthropological intelligence enabled her do path-breaking work in the study of biblical ritual, religion, and society. In a revealing essay titled “Why I Have to Learn Hebrew,” she describes the motives for her biblical studies:

My personal project in the study of the Bible is to bring anthropology to bear on the sources of our own civilization. This is in itself enough of an explanation for having to learn Hebrew. But there is more. In pre-Enlightenment Europe, other religions were condemned as false, even as evil; the Enlightenment changed the condemnation to irrational superstition. Neither stance was conducive to understanding. The practice of anthropology has been to provide a critical, humane, and sensitive interpretation of other religions.¹

As she observes, the anthropological study of biblical religion involves a twofold strategy. First, we must approach biblical religion in the same way that anthropologists approach “other religions,” which is to say as an informed participant-observer. This stance involves a balance between critical distance and cultural empathy. A second step—really a corollary of the first—is to critique our own Western preconceptions about religion, in order to transcend the reductive dichotomies of revealed versus false religion or reason versus superstition. Ironically, in order to achieve “a critical, humane, and sensitive interpretation” of biblical religion, we must step aside from the biblical evaluation of “other religions,” and approach biblical religion as itself an “exotic” religion, a world that is both familiar and new.

In many respects this anthropological approach is a refinement of the critical method in biblical studies developed by Spinoza, Herder, and others, which yielded what Jonathan Sheehan calls “the cultural Bible.”² In Spinoza’s terms, this method addresses the Bible’s meanings within its own semantic and cultural horizons, and prescinds from theological judgments of truth and falsity.³ In Herder’s terms, it approaches biblical culture by

means of participatory empathy (*Einfühlung*), bracketing our own cultural predispositions to the extent possible, and respecting the authenticity of its native structures of meaning.⁴

In other words, Mary Douglas's anthropology does not present a wholly new method, but is a sophisticated and reflective development of the same critical method from which modern biblical studies arose. It is not surprising, therefore, that pioneers such as Herder and Robertson Smith were important figures in both biblical studies and cultural anthropology. Mary Douglas is a successor to these scholars, who brought to biblical studies an anthropological vision. In the following I will try to sketch the type of anthropological vision that she brought to bear, its intellectual backdrop, and a perspicuous example of her work on the Bible.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODERNISM

In *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography*, Richard Fardon describes Douglas's oeuvre as "a classic expression of British anthropological modernism."⁵ Anthropological modernism is shorthand for the dominant movement in British anthropology from roughly the 1920's to the 1980's. This movement was founded by Bronislaw Malinowski, professor at the London School of Economics, who championed the value of intensive fieldwork and "participant-observation," and by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, professor at Oxford, who melded Émile Durkheim's theoretical sociology into a working model of "functionalism," which focused on how social phenomena and practices mesh to create a coherent social system. As Adam Kuper describes this confluence of strategies and ideas:

Malinowski brought a new realism to social anthropology, with his lively awareness of the flesh-and-blood interests behind custom, and his radically new mode of observation. Radcliffe-Brown introduced the intellectual discipline of French sociology, and constructed a more rigorous battery of concepts to order the ethnographic materials.⁶

An important strand of anthropological modernism is the turning away from evolutionary theories of human culture, which had, in good Victorian fashion, produced triumphal narratives of human ascent from primitive superstition to modern Western science. There are many reasons for the turn away from evolutionary theory, not least the devastations of World War I, which battered common faith in cultural evolution and progress. Modernism in general is characterized by a turn away from naive evolutionism and toward a cross-cultural examination of the human condition. Part of the stimulus was the dissemination of the art and literature of non-Western cultures—consider Picasso's fascination with the abstractions of ancient and tribal art, or Eliot's and Pound's interest in Asian literature—which raised awareness of the complexity of other cultures.

Anthropological modernism shares its intellectual horizons with other modernisms. The distinctive features of literary modernism are brilliantly described by Erich Auerbach in his classic study, *Mimesis*.⁷ He observes a

shift from the narration of great events and heroic protagonists to a focus on mundane, everyday events, which in their minute details are revelatory of universal human conditions.

This shift in emphasis expresses something that we might call a transfer of confidence: the great exterior turning points and blows of fate are granted less importance; they are credited with less power of yielding decisive information concerning the subject; on the other hand there is confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed. There is greater confidence in syntheses gained through full exploitation of an everyday occurrence than in a chronologically well-ordered total treatment which accompanies the subject from beginning to end, attempts not to omit anything externally important, and emphasizes the great turning points of destiny.⁸

In other words, a large-scale and chronologically ordered realism gives way to a fragmented and subjective modernism, a messy and quizzical version of realism, which focuses on everyday events and details, and ordinary, unheroic protagonists. This is also the move of anthropological modernism, which turned away from great meta-narratives of cultural ascent and turned to micro-narratives of everyday events and cultural habits, yet always with an eye to reveal the fundamental and the universal in human culture.

Auerbach further unpacks the implications of the modernist engagement with everyday events and their link with the universal, commenting on a mundane yet revelatory moment in Virginia Wolff's *To the Lighthouse*:

[W]hat happens in that moment [while Mrs. Ramsey is measuring a stocking] ... concerns in a very personal way the individuals who live in it, but it also (and for that very reason) concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common. It is precisely the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes unaffected by them, as daily life. The more it is exploited, the more the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light.⁹

This search for the universal in the particular—in the mundane and everyday events that are largely unaffected by the vicissitudes of public politics and controversy—lies at the heart of anthropological modernism as well as literary. For Virginia Wolff, the scene of a woman measuring a stocking can be revelatory. For Mary Douglas, a joke or a meal can be a revelatory event or, in her friend Victor Turner's words, a social drama, in which “the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light.”

According to this modernist insight, the deep forms of human life and culture—whether of a particular culture or culture in general—are best pursued by teasing out the implications and connections of everyday, particular events, rather than the more famous unique events of political or

public life. From this modernist insight, the historian Fernand Braudel developed his research program which emphasized the relatively unchanging habits and conditions of the *longue durée*, rather than restricting one's focus to the unique events of *l'histoire événementielle* ("event-history"). The habits of everyday human practices are the preferred scope of modernist inquiry, for they open the path to understanding the complex relationship between the universal and the particular. This is the nexus that enables us to relate in "a critical, humane, and sensitive" way (in Mary Douglas's words) with other peoples and cultures, and with our own cultural and religious past. The philosophical imperative to "know thyself" now involves knowledge of everyday habits and mundane practices, both in exotic cultures and our own. As Auerbach observes, in modernism this cross-cultural impulse results in a cultural universalism in which "there are no longer even exotic peoples,"¹⁰ since the others—seen in their particularity, not in abstract caricature—are now recognizably like us.

DOUGLAS AND DURKHEIM

As mentioned above, anthropological modernism took a good deal of its intellectual capital from the pioneering work of Émile Durkheim. Durkheim, the scion of an eminent lineage of French rabbis, became a secular rationalist and a founder of modern sociology.¹¹ Although Durkheim's writings maintain a wavering commitment to evolutionary theories of culture, many of the strategies and insights of anthropological modernism are represented, at least germinally, in his work, such as the view of society as a functional system and, perhaps most importantly, the embeddedness of cognitive and moral categories in social life. (I would note that much of what we call postmodernism also derives from aspects of Durkheim's work, particularly his emphasis on the social construction of—and constraints upon—our systems of knowledge.¹²)

Mary Douglas describes Durkheim as one of the great modern discoverers of "the secret places of the mind."¹³ Like Marx and Freud, Durkheim showed that we are not entirely who we think we are, that we are shaped by forces beyond our conscious knowledge and will. This is a type of modernist insight, revealing a reality shaped by non-rational and unconscious forces, and uncovering a dimension of our selves and motives that is hidden from ordinary awareness.

Douglas avers, however, that Durkheim flinched from pursuing the implications of his discovery of the social embeddedness of cognitive and moral categories. He held that primitive tribal cultures, united by "mechanical solidarity" (i.e., characterized by small size and nested social segments) are deeply shaped by social forces, which yield a shared collective consciousness and conscience. In contrast, modern Western cultures, united by a looser and more differentiated "organic solidarity" (i.e., characterized by a division of labor and greater population) are relatively immune to such forces, enabling the flourishing of individual thought. (Durkheim brilliantly argued that the modern concept of the individual is a distinctive outcome of

organic solidarity.)¹⁴ As such, he exempted our culture from the implications of his analysis of simpler “primitive” cultures.

Douglas compares the impact of Durkheim’s truncated theory with the impact of the other theorists:

Marx and Freud were not sanguine when they unveiled the secret places of the mind. Marx, when he showed ideology for a flimsy justification of control, shook the great chancelleries. The scene of anguished hate and fear which Freud exposed to view was just as alarming at a more intimate level. The first looked to a long-span historical determination of political forms and the second to a short-span determination of the emotions in family life. Between these two, another intermediate span is necessary that Durkheim’s insights were ready to supply: the social determination of culture. It should have become the central critical task of philosophy in this century to integrate these three basic approaches.¹⁵

But since Durkheim exempted modern Western culture from the social entanglements of thought and practice that he found in primitive cultures, he authorized cultural anthropology to focus on “exotic” and “primitive” non-Western societies, and not to turn the anthropological gaze upon ourselves.

Mary Douglas, more than any other modern anthropologist, explicitly revoked Durkheim’s exemption for modern Western societies from anthropological study. She argued that our thoughts, habits, and categories are also entangled in our social environments, in ways of which we are largely unaware. Douglas described this dimension of culture in various ways—as “implicit knowledge,” “cultural bias,” or “thought-styles”—and regarded it as the task of anthropological investigation to show how modern lives are shot through with practices, commitments, and habits of thought that are shaped by our social environments. In other words, our “forms of social life” and our “forms of moral judgment” are deeply interrelated, each supporting and ratifying the other, without our conscious awareness that this is so. This is the implication of Durkheim’s great discovery, which Mary Douglas has developed in various areas—in economics, risk theory, and even biblical studies. In so doing, she took on the delicate task of critiquing one’s own cultural bias, the social environment of one’s own commitments.

This is a high-wire act, which requires empathy and critical distance regarding one’s own social engagements and cognitive situation. But this is a modernist dilemma that no one can escape, even—or especially—the postmodernists among us, who embrace the cultural politics of all knowledge. We are each implicated in our own inquiries—for example, in the study of the Bible, which is our own heritage. This is a Janus-faced inquiry, for as we study particular cultures, we are simultaneously confronting the social forces that shape our own thought, thereby entering a labyrinthine and mirrored inquiry. The results—as Durkheim and Douglas would agree—will always be provisional, but it is an inquiry well worth the risk.

Although Douglas consistently viewed her work as a development of Durkheim's sociological project, in one important respect she diverged from his basic understanding of the social embeddedness of religious thought. Durkheim, as a good rationalist, viewed religion as a surplus or supplement added to the real world, originating as a projection of social needs and goods. He writes:

[U]pon the real world where profane life is lived, [man] superimposes another that, in a sense, exists only in his thought, but one to which he ascribes a higher kind of dignity than he ascribes to the real world of profane life. In two respects, then, this other world is an ideal one.¹⁶

The sacred is an ideal world in the sense of its moral perfection *and* in its ultimate fictiveness. Religion, therefore, is a cognitive and performative supplement to the real world, even as it performs decisive functions in this world. In contrast, Mary Douglas, as a practicing Catholic, viewed the sacred as a supplement to the profane world that is *found* as well as *made*. It is part and parcel of the real world, yet—and this is the key point—what is found is always conditioned by one's implicit knowledge and cultural bias. The sacred, like other aspects of reality, is perceived through the medium of human consciousness and the social forms that condition our consciousness. The difference between Durkheim, a secular Jew, and Douglas, a practicing Catholic, has to do with the etiology of religion, and implicates their own social environments. But irrespective of the origin of religion—which modernism tends to eschew as the province of outdated evolutionary theories or as sheer speculation—there is continuity of anthropological method and of the central insight of the social entanglement of our thoughts and habits.

THE ABOMINABLE PIG

Let us consider the implications of anthropological modernism in Mary Douglas's work on the Bible. In her famous study of the biblical dietary prohibitions (in *Purity and Danger*), she makes an essential modernist move in rejecting the older evolutionary model in which irrational magic (including ritual) belongs to the primitive stages of humanity, contrasted with the sacramental theology of modern Western (viz. Protestant) religion, which belongs to a more advanced stage of reason and morality. She confutes this dichotomy by showing that ritual has its reasons too, which are not at all irrational, and that modern religion too has symbolic actions; indeed "it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts."¹⁷

Consider the pig taboo, a famous detail in the dietary laws of Leviticus 11.¹⁸ Douglas first shows how various medieval and modern interpretations of this ritual detail are spurious, because they are ad hoc and divorced from the wider realities of the cultural system. She argues that this is neither an irrational superstition (in Protestant theological terms, a "dead work"), nor a moral symbol (the pig as filthy or evil or an allegory of slothfulness), nor an instance of primitive medicine (avoidance of trichinosis).¹⁹ Rather than

accepting these piecemeal explanations, she takes seriously the details and context of the ritual instruction. The text says:

These you shall not eat, apart from those that chew the cud and have (cloven) hooves: the pig, for it has hooves which are cloven, but it does not chew the cud—it is unclean for you. (Lev 11:4,7)

These are ordinary, mundane-seeming details, but like a good modernist, Douglas traces the larger implications of the ordinary to unfold the conceptual world that it implies. She argues in good anthropological fashion that the pig taboo is part of a larger cultural system:

Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas. Hence any piecemeal interpretation of the pollution rules of another culture is bound to fail. For the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought.²⁰

In this instance, she argues, “When something is firmly classed as anomalous the outline of the set in which it is not a member is clarified.”²¹

What is the set that the pig taboo and the allied taboos on camel, rock badger, and rabbit (Lev 11:4–6) clarify? The set in which they are not members is the land animals permitted for Israel’s food—animals which chew the cud and have cloven hooves (viz. cattle, sheep, goats, and the antelope family). The animals explicitly listed as excluded each have one of the two traits, but lack the other, so they mark a red line around the category of permitted cuisine. The reason the pig is singled out, along with the other three prohibited animals, is that these are borderline cases, pointing to the “cloven-hoofed, cud-chewing ungulates [which] are the model of the proper kind of food.”²²

Why should these animals constitute a model of proper cuisine? Douglas observes (after *Purity and Danger*) that the category of land animals permitted for Israel’s food maps very closely onto the category of the land animals permitted for sacrifice to God (with the further qualification that sacrificial animals must be unblemished and domestic), setting up an analogy between God and Israel:

permitted for God’s altar :: permitted for Israel’s table

As Douglas notes, “a very strong analogy between table and altar stares us in the face.”²³ This analogy between table and altar “invests the individual meal with additional meaning.”²⁴

Drawing out the consequences of this analogy, Douglas finds that a number of features of the Israelite conceptual world are implicitly encoded into this food symbolism, including the following hierarchies:²⁵

geography:	holy space (altar)
	profane space (Israelite table)
	foreign space (foreign table, where all animals are permitted)
people:	holy people (priests, who officiate at the altar)
	profane people (all other Israelites)
	foreign people (outside of system of holy/profane)

cosmic domains and their denizens:
 land, with land animals
 water, with water animals
 sky, with sky animals

In other words, the prohibition of certain animals calls into play the structure of the created cosmos (land, water, sky, see Genesis 1), the distinctions and relationship between God, Israel, and other humans, and the divisions of holy and profane persons. This latter distinction also implicitly asserts the religious authority of the priests, who—not surprisingly—are the authors of Leviticus 11 and who administer its laws and practices. Distinctions of cosmos, divinity, ethnicity, and religious authority—of knowledge and power—are articulated within this system and are ritually enacted in the daily meal.

As Douglas argues, the purity rules infuse into ordinary practices a multivalent system of implicit meanings. From her study of seemingly obscure details—including the food taboos, sexual taboos, and other matters of purity and impurity—comes a richer comprehension of biblical religion and cosmology. She summarizes her analysis of this system as follows:

It consists of rules of behaviour, actions and expectations which constitute society itself. The rules which generate and sustain society allow meanings to be realised which otherwise would be undefined and ungraspable.... As in any social system, these rules are specifications which draw analogies between states. The cumulative power of the analogies enable one situation to be matched to another, related by equivalence, negation, hierarchy and inclusion. We discover their interrelatedness because of the repetitive formulas on which they are constructed, the economy and internal consistency of the patterns. The purity rules of the Bible ... set up the great inclusive categories in which the whole universe is hierarchised and structured."²⁶

The abominable pig in Leviticus is not an irrational superstition, a pre-scientific prophylactic, or a moral allegory. It is an instance of human social and symbolic behavior—of participating in and constituting the meaning of the world through everyday practices. It involves both the stability of the cultural-religious system and the risk of disruption and disorder. These rules and practices, Douglas observes, “are a single system of analogies, [which] do not converge on any one point but sustain the whole moral and physical universe simultaneously in their systematic interrelatedness.”²⁷

As Erich Auerbach would observe, this is a modernist perspective, a “synthes[is] gained through full exploitation of an everyday occurrence,” in which individual details are revelatory of the larger reality. As Durkheim would add, it is an exemplary anthropological demonstration of how rituals embed cognitive and moral categories in social life. Through the social practice of purity laws, the real is infused with the ideal. In all of these respects, the instance of the abominable pig shows the richness and

explanatory scope of Mary Douglas's version of anthropological modernism.²⁸

¹ M. Douglas, "Why I Have to Learn Hebrew: The Doctrine of Sanctification," *The Comity and Grace of Method: Essays in Honor of Edmund F. Perry*, eds. T. Ryba, G. D. Bond, and H. Tull (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 151.

² J. Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 219–21.

³ B. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. J. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 [Latin original, 1670]), ch. 7 ("On the Interpretation of Scripture").

⁴ See I. Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," in idem, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 359–435, esp. 403–12.

⁵ R. Fardon, *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Routledge, 1999), 260.

⁶ A. Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 36.

⁷ E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 525–53 (ch. 20, "The Brown Stocking").

⁸ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 547–48.

⁹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 552.

¹⁰ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 552.

¹¹ See S. Lukes, *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (London: Penguin, 1973).

¹² See K. E. Fields, "Introduction," in É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995 [French original, 1912]), xxiii.

¹³ See n. 14.

¹⁴ É. Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1997 [French original, 1893]); see Lukes, *Durkheim*, 147–72.

¹⁵ M. Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), xx.

¹⁶ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 424.

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 62.

¹⁸ In the following discussion, I synthesize details of several of Douglas's discussions. She consistently revised her own views and sometimes rejected earlier versions. My comments represent a critical appropriation of her work—and include judicious pruning of her occasional errors, on which see, e.g., J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 719–21.

¹⁹ It is unlikely that people in antiquity would have associated this disease with eating inadequately cooked pork; this correlation was only discovered in 1846. Moreover, as Douglas argues, this is not the reason given in Leviticus, and it fails to explain why all other non-ruminants are also prohibited.

²⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 41.

²¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 38.

²² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 54.

²³ M. Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in idem, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 262.

²⁴ Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," 257.

²⁵ Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” 263–69; see further Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 721–26; D. P. Wright, “Unclean and Clean (OT),” *ABD* 6. 739–41.

²⁶ M. Douglas, “Critique and Commentary,” in J. Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 1; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 138–39.

²⁷ Douglas, “Critique and Commentary,” 140.

²⁸ For further elaboration of the Priestly food laws in a Douglasian mode, see R. Hendel, “Table and Altar: The Anthropology of Food in the Priestly Torah,” *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, eds. R. B. Coote and N. K. Gottwald (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 131–48.