Dame Mary Douglas (1921-2007): The Truth She Told

John F. Hobbins
www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com

The Times of London has a marvelous recap of her life and work. Go here. We mourn her loss.

The obit by Douglas Martin in the New York Times is not all bad either. This graph is certainly worth quoting:

Drawing on her field experience in Africa and expansive reading, [Mary Douglas] saw little difference between “modern” and “primitive” societies, and sometimes drew startling conclusions. In the provocative 1982 book “Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers,” she and Aaron Wildavsky argued that environmentalists’ complaints reflected an antipathy toward dominant social hierarchies. The authors compared environmentalists to religious cults and superstitious groups of the past.

Now you know why Dame Mary made a few enemies. She could spot an unpleasant truth a kilometer away, and delighted in rubbing it in. She destroyed the notion that modern societies mark an advance over primitive ones.

I don’t think I understood the first thing about Leviticus until I read Purity and Danger by Mary Douglas. She emphasizes that food is a system of communication. She knew that rules, you know, the arbitrary kind that religion traffics in, like: don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t dance, and don’t play cards, are arbitrary on one level but symbolically important on another. She knew that her church, the Catholic Church, made a big mistake after Vatican II when it no longer pushed the “stupid” rules, like not eating meat on Fridays. Rules like that give structure and rhythm to daily life. If you de-emphasize them, you de-structure people’s lives, and they end up looking for structure elsewhere. The secret of groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses lies therein.

Her keen anthropological eye opened up worlds of meaning to which a Leviticus commentator like Martin Noth was oblivious.

For a brief overview of her work and life in her own words, go here.

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Mary Douglas Bibliography for Students of the Bible

It’s a mistake to only read her works that touch directly on biblical literature. She herself only began to draw out the implications of her insights for the study of the Bible.


May Douglas on the Bible and Other Literature


Body -- The Doctrine of Remainders -- No Cult of the Dead -- Knowing When to Make a Private Sacrifice -- Atonement -- The Great Proclamation of Liberty.


