

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

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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](#).

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.

Collected Works. 12 volumes. London: Routledge, 2003. Includes bibliographical references and index. Contents: v. 1. *The Lele of the Kasai* (1963) -- v. 2. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) -- v. 3. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (1970) -- v. 4. *Rules and Meanings: The Anthropology of Everyday Knowledge* (1973)-- v. 5. *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology* (1975) -- v. 6. (with Baron Isherwood) *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (1978) -- v. 7. *Edward Evans-Pritchard* (1980) -- v. 8. *Essays in the Sociology of Perception* (1982)-- v. 9. *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (1984)-- v. 10. *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology* (1987) -- v. 11. *Risk Acceptability according to the Social Sciences* (1985) -- v. 12. *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (1992).

Also: *Thought Styles, Critical Essays on Good Taste* (London: Sage, 1996).

May Douglas on the Bible and Other Literature

Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. With a new preface by the author. London: Routledge, 2002. Contents: Ritual Uncleaness -- Secular Defilement -- The Abominations of Leviticus -- Magic and Miracle -- Primitive Worlds -- Powers and Dangers -- External Boundaries -- Internal Lines -- The System at War with Itself -- The System Shattered and Renewed.

In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers. JSOTSup 158. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993. Contents: The Book of Numbers in the Context of Comparative Religion -- The Politics of Enclaves -- A Priestly Hierarchy -- The Question of Literary Form -- Twelve Sections in the Overall Pattern -- The People of Israel Numbers -- The Laws -- Israel, The Mystic Bride -- Twelve Tribes in Marching Order -- Jacob's Prophecies: Two Story Rungs -- Israel Defiled, Miriam and Her Brothers -- Balaam and Balak, A Political Satire -- The Land and the Jubilee.

Leviticus as Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Random headings: Analogical versus Rational-Instrumental Thinking -- Logic of the

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

Jacob's Tears, The Priestly Project of Reconciliation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Contents: Counting and Recounting Jacob's Twelve Sons -- Jacob Weeping for Joseph -- Ezra Reduces all Israel to Judah -- Balaam Delivers God's blessings on all Israel -- Problems in Reading the Priestly Books -- The Bodyhouse Cosmogram -- Uncleaness and Taboo draw the Lines of the World -- One God, No Ancestors, in a World Renewed.

Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition. Terry Lecture Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Contents: Ancient Rings Worldwide -- Moods and Genres -- How to Construct and Recognize a Ring -- Alternating Bands: Numbers -- The Central Place: Numbers -- Modern, Not-quite Rings -- Tristram Shandy: Testing for Ring Shape -- Two Central Places, Two Rings: The Iliad -- Alternating Nights and Days: The Iliad -- The Ending: How to Complete a Ring -- The Latch: Jakobson's Conundrum.

Also: *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism.* By Jacob Neusner. The Haskell Lectures, 1972-1973.. With a Critique and a Commentary by Mary Douglas. Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 1. Leiden: Brill, 1973.

Reading Leviticus: a Conversation with Mary Douglas. Edited by John F.A. Sawyer. JSOTSup 227. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.