MARY DOUGLAS AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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This does not pretend to be a complete list of Professor Douglas' vigorous writing during the last sixteen years. It is enough to suggest that, after her, the study of religion can never be the same again. It was Professor Evans-Pritchard who taught so convincingly that each culture must be understood as a Gestalt; each feature, whether of politics, economics, kinship, religion, perception even, fitting in with every other feature. It must first be seen in its total local context before we can engage in the hazardous attempt to compare it with apparently similar features in other cultures. So effective was his insistence on the integral part of religion in culture that some of his pupils have almost reversed the Durkheimian scheme to study the effect of religion on social structure. Professor Douglas would not now go so far. She is concerned with consonance rather than causality.

Rightly, she refuses to define 'religion' but wishes 'to compare people's views about man's destiny and place in the universe'. In the long run it is useless to study 'pollution' or 'witchcraft and sorcery' in general terms. The differences in the beliefs of different cultures are at least as important as their similarities; and they are to be understood only against the differences of political authority, of economic concern, of kinship systems and the status of women.

At times she runs the danger of being purely Durkheimian. She
guards herself. In the essay in *African Worlds* on 'The Lele of the Kasai' she writes that 'the manner in which they have chosen to exploit their environment may well be due to the ritual categories through which they apprehend it'. She is sometimes explosively aware of the power of symbols to undergo independent development and change the shape of the society which has created them; and *Natural Symbols* is, more than anything else, a passionate pastoral plea for their restoration in the contemporary West. But she writes as an anthropologist. She must, she says, in *Purity and Danger*, oppose sociological reductionism to the psycho-analytic reductionism which would explain culture in terms of infantile experience. She must, in *Natural Symbols*, attack those (presumably theologically-trained writers on comparative religion) who suppose that ideas develop independently of social structure. The first of these issues is too like the nature-nurture controversy. The psycho-analytic anthropologists may have been too simplistes. But is it not true, to use her phrase, that society consists of groups fitting inside one another like Chinese boxes; and that, whatever the individualist mythology in which they may still speak, psycho-analysts are concerned primarily with the innermost of these groups, the child and its parents? There is surely much yet to be said about the complementary contributions to an understanding of man which can be made by social and individual studies: studies, as it were, at the molecular and atomic levels.

The second issue is more serious. Dr. Douglas' criticism may be exaggerated. But it is certainly true that too many students of religion ignore its social context and therefore present an incomplete, sometimes misleading, picture. Because they compare 'religious' features out of their place in the total culture, they sometimes compare incomparables and often obscure the essentially human character of religious behaviour. There is, in some circles, an attempt to argue that a department of religious studies should study religion 'in its own terms'; and this is very different from the belief that they should study whole men, and whole societies, as they attempt to give answers to questions 'about man's destiny and place in the universe'. The delight of reading Dr. Douglas is that she shows so convincingly the relation between religious behaviour and other detailed aspects of a particular culture. She would not claim that she is always right, or that she has done more than make a beginning. The challenge to students of religion is that, instead of studying 'world religion'—or even one religion as a generalized concept—each should go to his particular society, whether in