Mary Douglas

THE ABOMINATIONS

OF LEVITICUS

The subtle and suggestive implications of Mary Douglas’s theoretical approach, first advanced in her book Purity and Danger (1966), have led to reconsiderations of so-called magical attitudes in all parts of the world. Douglas provides an excellent application of her ideas in her consideration of Jewish dietary laws, most specifically the taboos against eating pork. She argues that the prohibited “abominations of Leviticus” are animals which appear anomalous in the classification of natural things handed down by God in Genesis. By avoiding what-in-nature challenges God’s order, men confirm that order. Through a dietary observance, God is made holy—separate and whole.

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 whose keystones, boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation.

To illustrate this take a hoary old puzzle from biblical scholarship, the abominations of Leviticus, and particularly the dietary rules. Why should the camel, the hare and the rock badger be unclean? Why should some locusts, but not all, be unclean? Why should the frog be clean and the mouse and the hippopotamus unclean? What have chameleons, moles and crocodiles got in common that they should be listed together?

[To help follow the argument the reader is referred to Deuteronomy XIV and Leviticus XI using the text of the New Revised Standard Translation.]

... Any interpretations will fall which take the Do-notes of the Old Testament in piecemeal fashion. The only sound approach is to forget hygiene, aesthetics, morals and instinctive revulsion, even to forget the Canaanites and the Zoroastrians, and start with the texts. Since each of the injunctions is prefixed by the command to be holy, so they must be explained by that command. There must be contrariety between holiness and abomination which will make over-all sense of all the particular restrictions.

Holiness is the attribute of Godhead. Its root means “set apart.” What else does it mean? We should start any cosmological enquiry by seeking the principles of power and danger. In the Old Testament we find blessing as the source of all good things, and the withdrawal of blessing as the source of all danger. The blessing of God makes the Jews possible for men to live in.

God’s work through the blessing is essentially to create order, through which men’s affairs prosper. Fertility of women, livestock and fields is promised as the result of the blessing and this is to be obtained by keeping covenant with God and observing all His precepts and ceremonies (Deut. XXVIII, 1-14). Where the blessing is withdrawn and the power of the curse unleashed, there is barrenness, pestilence, confusion. For Moses said:

But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you... (Deut. XXVIII, 15-24).
From this it is clear that the positive and negative precepts are held to be efficacious and not merely expressive; observing them draws down prosperity, infringing them brings danger. We are thus entitled to treat them in the same way as we treat primitive ritual avoidances whose breach unleashes danger to men. The precepts and ceremonies alike are focussed on the idea of the holiness of God which men must create in their own lives. So this is a universe in which men prosper by conforming to holiness and perish when they deviate from it. If there were no other class we should be able to find out the Hebrew idea of the holy by examining the precepts by which men conform to it. It is evidently not goodness in the sense of an all-embracing humane kindness. Justice and moral goodness may well illustrate holiness and form part of it, but holiness embraces other ideas as well.

Granted that its root means separateness, the near idea that emerges is of the Holy as wholeness and completeness. Much of Leviticus is taken up with stating the physical perfection that is required of things present in the temple and of persons approaching it. The animals offered in sacrifice must be without blemish, women must be purified after childbirth, lepers should be separated and ritually cleansed before being allowed to approach it since they are cured. All bodily discharges are defiling and defiling from approach to the temple. Priestly law only comes into contact with death when their own close kin die. But a high priest must never have contact with death.

He must be perfect as a man, if he is to he a priest.

This much reiterated idea of physical completeness is also worked out in the social sphere of the Jewish community in the warriers' camp. The culture of the Israelites was brought to the pitch of greatest intensity when they passed and when they fought. The army could not win without the blessing and to keep the blessing in the camp they had to be specially holy. So the camp was to be preserved from defilement like the Temple. Here again all bodily discharges disqualified a man from entering the camp as they would disqualify a worshipper from approaching the altar. A worshipper who had had an issue of the body in the night should keep outside the camp all day and only return after sunset, having washed. Natural functions producing bodily waste were to be performed outside the camp (Deut. XXIII, 10-15). In short the idea of holiness was given an external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as a perfect container.

Other precepts develop the idea of wholeness in another direction. The metaphor of the physical body and of the new undertaking relate to the perfection and completeness of the individual and his work. Other precepts extend holiness to species and categories. Hybrids and other confusions are abominated.

LEV. XX, 23. And you shall not lie with your beast, and defile yourself with it, neither shall any woman give herself to a beast to lie with it: it is perversion. . .

The word "perversion" is a significant mis-translation of the rare Hebrew word tebesh, which has as its meaning mixing or confusion. The same theme is taken up in Levit. XIX, 19.

You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind: you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall there come upon you a garment of mixed mode of two kinds of stuff.

All these injunctions are prefaced by the general command, "Be holy, for I am holy.

We can conclude that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused. Another set of precepts refines on this last point. Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order. Under this head all the rules of sexual morality exemplify the holy. Incest and adultery (Lev. XVIII, 6-20) are against holiness, in the simple sense of right order. Morality does not conflict with holiness, but holiness is a matter of separating that which should be separated than of protecting the rights of husbands and brothers.

Then follows in Chapter XIX another list of actions which are contrary to holiness. Developing the idea of holiness as order, not confusion, this list upholds rectitude and straight-dealing as holy, and contradiction and double-dealing as against holiness. Theft, lying, false witness, cheating in weights and measures, all kinds of dissembling such as speaking ill of the dead (and presumably smiling to their face), hating
your brother in your heart (while presumably speaking kindly to him), these are clearly contradictions between what seems and what is. This chapter also says much about generosity and love, but these are positive commands, while I am concerned with negative rules.

We have now laid a good basis for approaching the laws about clean and unclean meats. To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is integrity, the wholeness and integration of the individual and of the kind. The dietary rules merely develop the metaphor of holiness on the same lines. First we should start with livestock, the herds of cattle, camels, sheep and goats which were the livelihood of the Israelites.

These animals were clean inasmuch as contact with them did not require purification before approaching the Temple. Livestock, like the inhabited land, received the blessing of God. Both land and livestock were fertile by the blessing, both were drawn into the divine order. The farmer's duty was to preserve the blessing. For one thing, he had to preserve the order of creation. So no hybrids, as we have seen, either in the fields or in the herds or in the clothes made from wool or flax. To some extent men coveted with their land and cattle in the same way as God covetted with them. Men respected the first born of their cattle, obliged them to keep the Sabbath. Cattle were literally domesticated as slaves. They had to be brought into the social order in order to enjoy the blessing. The difference between cattle and the wild beasts is that the wild beasts have no covenant, they do not keep the rules. It is possible that the Israelites were like other pastoralists who do not relih wild game. The Nuer of the South Sudan, for instance, applied a sanction of disapproval of a man who lives by hunting. To be driven to eating wild meat is the sign of a poor herdman. So we would probably be wrong to think of the Israelites as longing for forbidden meats and finding the restrictions irksome. Driver is surely right in taking the rules as an a posteriori generalisation of their habits. Clever hooved, cud-chewing ungulates are the model of the proper kind of food for a pastoralist. If they must eat wild game, they eat wild game that shares these distinctive characters and is therefore of the same general species. This is a kind of cannibalism which permits scope for hunting antelope and wild goats and wild sheep. Everyone would be quite straightforward were it not that the legal mind has seen fit to give ruling on some borderline cases. Some animals seem to be ruminant, such as the hare and the hyrax (or rock hagers), whose constant grinding of their teeth was held to be cud-chewing and so are excluded by name. Similarly for animals which are cloven-hoofed but are not ruminant, the pig and the camel. Note that this failure to conform to the two classes of animal, or whose class itself is the only reason given in the Old Testament for avoiding the pig: nothing whatever is said about its dirty scavenging habits. As the pig does not yield milk, hide nor wool, there is no other reason for keeping it except for its flesh. And if the Israelites did not keep pig they would not be familiar with its habits. I suggest that originally the sole reason for its being counted as unclean is its failure as a wild beast to get into the antelope class, and that in this it is on the same footing as the camel and the hyrax, exactly as is stated in the book.

After these borderline cases have been dismissed, the law goes on to deal with creatures according to how they live in the three elements, the water, the air and the earth. The principles here applied are rather different from those covering the camel, the pig, the hare and the hyrax. For the latter we are excepted from clean food in having one but not both of the defining characters of live stock. Birds I can say nothing about, because, as I have said, they are named and not described and the translation of the name is open to doubt. But in general the underlying principle of cleanliness in animals is that they shall conform fully to their class. Those species are clean which are imperfect members of a defined class, or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world.

To grasp this scheme we need to go back to Genesis and the creation. Here a three-fold classification unfolds, divided between the earth, the waters and the firmament. Leviticus takes up this scheme and allot to each element its own kind of animal life. In the firmament are eagles, the winged worms. In the watery seas the fish swim with fins. On the earth four-legged animals hop, jump or walk. Any class of creatures which is not equipped for the right kind of locomotion in its element is contrary to holiness. Contact with it disqualifies a person from approaching the Temple. Thus anything in the water which has not fins and scales is unclean (xL 10-12). Not take is said about predators, habits or of scavenging. The only sure test for cleanliness in a fish is its scales and its propulsion by means of fins.

Four-footed creatures which fly (xL 20-26) are unclean. Any creature which has two
legs and two hands and which goes on all fours like a quadruped is unclean (XI. 27). Then follows (v. 29) a much disputed list. In some translations, it would appear to consist precisely of creatures endowed with hands instead of front feet, which perversely use their hands for walking; the weasel, the mouse, the crocodile, the shrew, various kinds of lizards, the chameleon and mole (Danby, 1933), whose forefeet are uncannily hand-like. This feature of this list is lost in the New Revised Standard Translation which used the word “paws” instead of hands.

The last kind of unclean animal is that which creeps, crawls or swarms upon the earth. This form of movement is explicitly contrary to holiness (Lev. XI. 41-44). Driver and White use “swarming” to translate the Hebrew shevar, which is applied to both those which teem in the waters and those which swarm on the ground. Whether we call it teeming, trailing, creeping, crawling or swarming, it is an indeterminate form of movement. Since the main animal categories are defined by their typical movement, “swarming” which is not a mode of propulsion proper to any particular element, cuts across the basic classification. Swarming things are neither fish, flesh nor fowl. Birds and worms inhabit water, though not as fish; reptiles go on dry land, though not as quadrupods; some insects fly, though not as birds. There is no order in them. Recall what the Prophecy of HaScuc says about this form of life:

For thou makest such like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. (I. v. 14)

The prototype and model of the swarming things is the worm. As fish belong in the sea so worms belong in the realm of the grave, with death and chaos.

The case of the locusts is interesting and consistent. The test of whether it is a clean and therefore edible kind is how it moves on the earth. If it crawls it is unclean. If it hops it is clean (XI. v. 21). In the Mishnah it is noted that a frog is not listed with creeping things and conveys no uncleanliness (Danby, p. 752). I suggest that the frog’s hop accounts for it not being listed. If penguins lived in the Near East I would expect them to be ruled unclean as wingless birds. If the list of unclean birds could be retranslated from this point of view, it might well turn out that they are anomalous because they swim and dive as well as they fly, or in some other way they are not fully bird-like.

Surely now it would be difficult to maintain that “The ye separate” means no more than “He ye separate.” Moshe wanted the children of Israel to keep the commands of God constantly before their minds:

Deut. xi.
18. You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.
19. And you shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise.
20. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.

If the proposed interpretation of the forbidden animals is correct, the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observation of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple.