

ARE "PRIMITIVES" NECESSARY?

There have been several recent attempts to draw anthropological material into the wider discourse of comparative religion and philosophy, and to formulate general terms of discussion in this field. For example, Burridge (1969) uses "traditional" material to develop a general framework for dealing with millennial movements; Turner (1969) ranges from the Ndembu to St. Francis and Bob Dylan in his exploration of the possibilities of liminality, "communitas" and anti-structure as general terms of comparison; and Leach, in the Introduction to the Cambridge volume of essays on "practical religion" (1968) states explicitly his formula for the integration of tribal material with comparative religion:

"At one time anthropologists studied savages in contrast to civilized men; we now find ourselves studying the thought processes of practical, ordinary people as distinct from those of technical professionals. Among 'civilized' practical people the distinction between primitive and sophisticated largely disappears ... the similarities are more remarkable than the contrasts".

... "The kind of cross-linkage which this collection establishes between so-called 'higher religions' and so-called 'primitive religions' marks a fundamental step forward in the study of comparative religion".

Whether or not one agrees with the particular methods of these authors, most people welcome their efforts to overcome the primitive/modern dichotomy, and to break through the parochial boundaries of anthropology.

It is, therefore, curious that in Mary Douglas' recent and highly influential Purity and Danger (1966), a central chapter is devoted to a re-instatement of the concept "primitive" in relation to systems of thought (Ch. 5). Those who avoid the term are accused of "squeamishness" and secret convictions of superiority. Mary Douglas maintains that our difficulty in understanding, for example, the notion of cosmic pollution is due partly to our "long tradition of playing down the difference between our own point of vantage and that of primitive cultures. The very real differences between 'us' and 'them' are made little of, and even the word 'primitive' is rarely used." She concludes that we "must attempt to phrase an objective, verifiable distinction between the two types of culture, primitive and modern", and proceeds to do so in terms closely related to those of Levy-Bruhl. She sees progress as "differentiation", and in relation to thought, the relevant differentiation is that "based on the Kantian principle that thought can only advance by freeing itself of its own subjective conditions". The primitive world is therefore a pre-Copernican world, a subjective personal world in which the universe is turned in upon man, and which lacks "self-awareness and conscious reaching for objectivity". She asks, "What is the objection to saying that a personal, anthropocentric, undifferentiated world-view characterizes a primitive culture?"

I will not attempt to give a full answer to this ethnocentric question here, except to suggest that it would include a rejection of the holistic concept of "a culture", of the assumption that "modern culture" is not in many ways personal and anthropocentric, and of the assumption that objectivity and differentiation are not found beyond the industrial world; and also a rejection of the accompanying theory that in "primitive cultures" thought is socially determined: "The primitive world-view ... has evolved as an appanage of social institutions ... it is produced indirectly".

What I would like to suggest in this short note is that the rather extreme position held in the fifth chapter of Purity and Danger is an isolated statement, not only in relation to other contemporary writings in social anthropology, but also in relation to the bulk of Mary Douglas' own work. It is not even consistent with the main argument of the book in which it appears, which is after all an attempt to elucidate certain universal principles of symbolic association. In a recent article in New Society (1970a) Dr. Douglas appears to undermine her own defence of the "primitive":

"If it be accepted that tribal societies display as much variety as we in their religious propensities, the really interesting questions arise ... They, too, will have had their protestant ethic, their shakers and quakers and anti-sacerdotal movements. They will also have had their periods of scepticism and secularism. Why not? A modern study of comparative religion must do away equally with the notion of the global primitive and with the notion of the fixity of tribal beliefs."

And in her latest book (1970b), she claims to be concerned with "a formula for classifying relations which can be applied equally to the smallest band of hunters and gatherers as to the most industrialised nations" (p. viii) and compares the philosophical position of Congo pygmies and Dutch bishops (p. 49). She asserts that she has "dared to compare Christian ritual with magic and primitive notions of taboo." In Natural Symbols Mary Douglas is explicitly attempting to formulate a general framework for comparative studies: "If we cannot bring the argument back from pygmy to ourselves, there is little point in starting it at all" (p. 63). We are exhorted to "break through the spiky, verbal hedges that arbitrarily insulate one set of human experience (ours) from another set (theirs)."

How are we to reconcile this position with the earlier arguments of Purity and Danger for the resurrection of "the primitive world"? The social and political context of anthropology is changing; why should it be necessary to reaffirm the colonial boundaries of its thought? Surely the best contemporary writing, including some of Mary Douglas' own, removes the necessity for the word "primitive", which has after all obscured more issues than it has clarified in the history of our subject.

Wendy James.

Bibliography

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