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A Revised Functionalism in the Sociology of Religion: Mary Douglas's Recent Work¹

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ABSTRACT

Mary Douglas is justly famed for her social analyses of symbolism and for her 'grid/group' technique of relating cosmologies to particular social structures. In recent years she has turned her attention toward developing, in her words, 'a coherent argument about the social control of cognition'. She argues that religious and other beliefs are 'part of the action' in society. They are strongly connected with the needs of the institutional order, while remaining products of individual consciousness.

Douglas's recent work is theoretically interesting because she uses a functionalist argument to defend the rationality of social actors, while at the same time showing how belief systems are generated from the social order. This essay critically reviews her argument, and weighs the efficacy of her approach for scholars interested in the social role of religious beliefs.

Mary Douglas is something of an anomaly in the social-scientific study of religion. She is justly famed for *Purity and Danger* (1966), an early book on the social attributes of symbolism. And scholars have applied the 'grid/group' theory she presented in *Natural Symbols*

(1970) to topics as diverse as Christian sacramentalism, Sherpa social life and the analysis of New Testament texts.²

Yet Douglas calls her own early work out-of-date.³ She has extensively revised her theories in recent years, but has not received much attention for doing so. Some of this is her own fault: she never tells the reader, for example, that the 'grid/ group' diagrams found in the 1970 and 1973 editions of *Natural Symbols* are radically different. As I have outlined elsewhere,⁴ both were eclipsed by *Cultural Bias* (1978), which itself was revised in *Risk and Culture* (1982, coauthored with Aaron Wildavsky).

With her latest book, *How Institutions Think* (1986), Douglas's thought has entered a new phase. She is still engaged with the same project: a Durkheimian effort to develop a sociological view of human thinking. But the project has taken, in my view, a more productive turn. In her words, she is seeking to develop 'a coherent argument about the social control of cognition'.⁵ Her most recent work should interest students of religion, because it treats beliefs as part of the social order, without reducing individuals to mindless automata.⁶

Like many sociologists, Douglas says that religious thought is socially generated. But unlike other theorists of the relationship between ideas and institutions, she does not treat religion as false consciousness. Nor does she argue that people's beliefs are socially determined. She never treats people as sheep or robots; she gives them credit for rationally understanding the world—from their point of view. The aim of her work is to explain how institutions lead people to particular points of view, religious and otherwise. In *How Institutions Think* she uses a greatly revised functionalism to defend the rationality of social actors, while at the same time showing how belief systems arise socially.

Scholars who have not kept up with the twists and turns of Douglas's thought are missing out on an important development in the

¹ I wish to thank Benton Johnson, Thomas Robbins and Aaron Wildavsky for comments on previous version of this article.

² For sample treatments by social scientists see the articles collected in Douglas (1982a). For sample treatments by students of religions see Malina (1981, 1986) and Neyrey (1985a, 1985b).

³ Douglas (1982b: xix-xxv; 1986: ix-x; 1989).

⁴ Spickard (1989; 1984: 286-326).

⁵ Douglas (1986: ix).

⁶ See Douglas (1979a).

social study of belief. This article seeks to aid those scholars by locating and evaluating Douglas's recent writing in the overall direction of her work. I shall begin by reviewing her earlier attempts to develop a sociology of belief. Then I shall outline her new approach.

Douglas's Early Work

In The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, Emile Durkheim proposed a social origin for the concepts with which people think. With Hume, he said that individual experience is not able to generate the basic notions that underlie everyday thought—such as time, space and causality. Nor are these notions innate. Empirically, they vary from time to time and place to place. But social life depends on them being fixed in some way. Otherwise we could not communicate with others. In Durkheim's words,

The necessity with which the categories are imposed upon us is not the effect of simple habits whose yoke we could easily throw off with a little effort; nor is it a physical or metaphysical necessity, since the categories change in different places and times; it is a special sort of moral necessity which is to the intellectual life what moral obligation is to the will.⁷

Durkheim argued that social life depends on shared concepts. Societies go to great lengths to ensure that their members see the world in similar ways. By using the term 'moral necessity' he stressed that a society's basic beliefs must not appear arbitrary; they must seem to be natural. Otherwise the social order will not survive.

For small groups this is obvious: sustained social intercourse is only possible if people share notions of reality, right and wrong. Else, face-to-face interactions will fail. But members of complex societies must also hold at least a few notions in common. For example, modern America has room for many religions, but not for those that condemn religious tolerance. Ancient Rome accommodated many cults, but persecuted those that defamed the emperor. According to Durkheim, some ideas must seem so natural that they arouse no controversy. On them, social life can be built.

Two research programs surface here. On the one hand, scholars can concentrate on the processes by which societies convince their members of the rightness of certain ideas. People learn their concepts in childhood, as they learn their language. Individuals must be trained to speak and act in the proper way; so too must they be trained to think. Societies are carriers of thought, passing it down the generations. Much good scholarship has been devoted to understanding how socialization works, and how it varies from society to society.⁸

But this focus neglects the connection between the social order and the specific beliefs it passes on. It is an accident of history that most North Americans speak the English language. Likewise, the theory goes, it is an accident of history whether a group is Catholic or Buddhist, Mormon or Jew. In each case, beliefs and traditions have to be passed down. Socialization theory focuses on how such beliefs are transmitted, not on what they are.

But why do members of some societies find witchcraft plausible, and others do not? Why do some find the world orderly and others find it wracked by change? Is there any systematic connection between kinds of societies and the ideas they find natural—those they pass on to their children? This was a key question for early sociologists, but for decades it languished. Douglas has picked it up again.⁹

Douglas argues for a strong link between the institutional order and the concepts that people find 'natural'. She wishes to show that institutions not only transmit thought-categories, but form them. She does not see institutions and beliefs as mere happenstance companions, as the socialization model implies. Rather she expects that particular types of institution and particular types of belief will always accompany one another.

⁸ For example, Berger and Luckmann (1967), Geertz (1973, 1983).

⁹ For an early effort in this vein, see Durkheim and Mauss (1903). Though Durkheim pursued this strong program, he argued that there is a key difference between societies based on 'mechanical solidarity'—in which beliefs are intimately tied to the social order—and those based on 'organic solidarity', in which they are not. For Durkheim, modern beliefs may be influenced by social factors, but they remain independent of them (Durkheim 1893).

Douglas disagrees. She argues that moderns are no different than 'savages' in the importance of social life for thought. She seeks a 'unified theory of consciousness' (Douglas 1975: xx) that gives adequate weight both to individuals and to social factors.

⁷ Durkheim (1912: 30).

Purity and Danger (1966), Douglas's first theoretical book, focused on what she saw as a universal element of human thought-processes. She noted that all people have a tendency to impose order on their experience. Things which fit in are valued; things which fail to fit are often—but not always—treated as holy or taboo.

For instance, she argued that the Hebrew food taboos in Leviticus effectively classify the animal kingdom. Animals which do not fit cleanly into classes are not to be eaten. Similarly, the Hebrews were to keep themselves separate ('holy') from the societies around them. They were neither to mix socially nor commensally. 'By the rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal.'¹⁰ For the Hebrews, classificatory anomalies were to be avoided.

Other societies, on the other hand, embrace anomalies rather than shunning them. The Lele of Zaire—among whom Douglas did her fieldwork in the early 1950's—accord the pangolin or scaly anteater a central place in their cult. The pangolin violates every rule of the Lele's system of classification. It is scaly like a fish, but it climbs trees. It lays eggs, yet it suckles its young. And unlike other small mammals—but like humans—its young are born singly. In secret ritual, the Lele 'approach, hold, kill and eat the animal which in its own existence combines all the elements which Lele culture keeps apart.'¹¹

Why are societies so different in their attitudes toward their own classification schemes? Why do some societies avoid anomalies while others embrace them and still others pay them little heed? Purity and Danger merely highlighted the problem. Solving it called for a means of classifying groups in such a way that their different ways of thinking could be explained.

'Grid' and 'Group'

Douglas's 'grid/group' theory was an attempt to provide such a classification.¹² In essence, it is a sociological theory of the

plausibility of different forms of religion, worldview and ideology. People in different social settings, Douglas argued, are biased toward different beliefs. They accept what makes sense to them, and what makes sense to them depends in large part on their social environment.

In the 1970 edition of Natural Symbols, Douglas argued that societies can be classed on two dimensions. A vertical dimension ('grid') measures the degree of social hierarchy; and a horizontal dimension ('group') measures the degree of individual- or group-centeredness. A society's cosmology can be predicted by its position on the map formed by these intersecting dimensions.

This version of her theory argued that people's beliefs will parallel their experiences of society. She predicted, for example, that groups in which the dominant social experience is one of order and hierarchy will favor highly classified, hierarchical systems of thought. Those in which individual initiative is the norm will play down ritualism and emphasize individual feeling.

She found it perfectly understandable that lower class London Catholics would favor Friday meat abstinence as a key part of their religion. Strict adherence to rituals reinforced the social identity of this tightly bounded group. Middle class Catholics, whose wider social ties made us-versus-them distinctions less appealing, found the ritual artificial. Indeed, they found all barriers between people artificial. Closed or open social life, Douglas argued, predisposes people to different religious views.¹³

Later version of the theory were different. In Cultural Bias (1978), Douglas stressed that cosmologies are not just statements about the world but are also means of controlling people. People in different social situations will respond to different arguments; so different arguments will be used.

One will not hear calls for group solidarity among competitive individualists, for example; none will respond. Individualists do respond, however, to charges of inequality or unfair access to resources. Inequality threatens the very core of their social contract. Individualists will, incidentally, think that society is founded in con-

¹⁰ Douglas (1966: 57).

¹¹ Douglas (1966: 170)

¹² The major versions of grid/group theory are found in Douglas (1970a, 1973, 1978, 1982a, 1982b) and Douglas and Wildavsky (1982). See Spickard (1984: 172-286, 1989) for an exposition of their differences, and Douglas (1989) for comments

on Spickard's presentation. Gross and Rayner (1985) provide a somewhat positivistic exegesis of her theory loosely based on her 1970 and 1978 versions

¹³ Douglas (1970a: 3-4, 11, 37-38, 42ff).

tract rather than in nature because this corresponds to their social experience. In their lives, all human ties are contingent on individual decisions.¹⁴

Grid/group theory is not without its problems, however. Besides the question of the empirical accuracy of the model,¹⁵ the theory runs into philosophical difficulties. Its attempt to locate all systems of thought on its social map leads to an interesting paradox: the theory 'explains' (and thus relativizes) its own plausibility.

A close look at the constituents of the grid and group dimensions confirms this: they are based on individual thought and experience. These are crucial themes for an individualistic culture such as ours, but they are not universal. As Louis Dumont notes, hierarchical societies treat the universal order as key, not the person.¹⁶ A universal system for classifying the links between beliefs and social life would require dimensions that are plausible to actors in more than one social location. As I have argued elsewhere, grid/group theory does not do this, which brings its cross-cultural applicability into question.¹⁷

On a more positive note, Douglas has worked hard to keep the theory from becoming reductionistic—a failure of many sociological theories of belief. In its early versions, she was not so successful: the first grid/group schema separated social experience from thought, and treated the former as somehow the ground to which the latter conforms. Later versions of the theory were more subtle. They argued that individual thinking is both formed by and contributes to public concepts. And they focus on the relationship between both of these processes and the social relationships in which such concepts evolve. I discuss these matters at length in another article.¹⁸

In light of these and other problems, Douglas has made three moves in her recent publications. First, she has backed away from grid and group as dimensions of a universal social map. Though she

has helped others refine her schema, since Risk and Culture (1982) she has talked about three ideal types of organization, toward which she claims empirical institutions tend. This saves her from the relativist paradox noted above. Second, her unit of analysis is now the institution rather than the society. This makes her work more applicable to complex societies, in which several kinds of social environment coexist.

Third, she has attempted to specify the way in which beliefs form a part of the social action in each of her ideal institutions. This latter move is the most significant for the sociological study of beliefs. It is this aspect of her work that I wish to discuss here. Her argument is found mainly in How Institutions Think, within which, however, it lies not fully exposed. As with most of her works, that book moves on several fronts rather than one. In this essay, I shall attempt to extract a coherent line of thought from her presentation, without following all of her twists and turns.

The Current Theory

Douglas begins by noting that different societies and sub-societies understand the world in quite different ways.¹⁹ Anglos and Hopi have separate views of reality. Buddhists and Jews communicate, if at all, over tremendous barriers. American Catholics and Protestants speak English and share much history, yet often cannot understand one another; their presuppositions are that unlike. The same is true in science. Pre- and post-Darwinian biologists share little except their professional identity. Equilibrium and conflict-theoretical sociologists can scarcely agree on the facts, let alone on interpretations.

Different intellectual traditions—variously called 'conceptual schemes' or 'universes of discourse' in the literature—are built on different assumptions. They disagree about the nature of the world, the role of humans, even the role of intellectual inquiry. They could scarcely disagree more if they lived in different worlds. And in a loose sense, they do. To the extent that our interactions with the

¹⁴ See Douglas (1978: 207-226).

¹⁵ See Spickard (1984: 286-326). There, I evaluate most of the empirical studies which appeared before 1983, and conclude that the theory, in all its forms, is at best not demonstrated. Douglas (1989) lists several more recent empirical applications which she regards as providing at least partial confirmation of her insights

¹⁶ Dumont (1970).

¹⁷ For more details, see Spickard (1984: 327-352).

¹⁸ Spickard (1989).

¹⁹ Douglas (1986: 15ff).

world are structured by our concepts, we 'live in' those concepts. We cannot understand the world without using our conceptual schemes.²⁰

Douglas points out that these conceptual schemes are carried by social groups. Universes of discourse do not exist abstractly; they are embodied in the speech-acts of concrete human beings. The social networks within which humans move support their systems of thought. Individuals are socialized to speak a language. They are also socialized to use particular concepts. Religions are embodied in groups of people: in the common efforts of their members to help each other understand their situations. And religions survive to the extent they pass on these understandings to others. Only the mad think in isolation. As T.S. Kuhn pointed out with his notion of conflicting research paradigms, conceptual schemes are properties of communities, not of individuals.²¹

What, then, is the relationship between beliefs and the communities that hold them? On the one hand, belief depends on community. Conceptual schemes depend on the thought-collective (to use Fleck's term)²² that thinks them. This is generally accepted by sociologists—which is to say that it is an unproblematic element of the dominant sociological conceptual scheme.

Douglas, however, wants more. She argues that not only do beliefs depend on communities; communities depend on beliefs. Indeed, they would fall apart without them.²³ Groups, after all, have a problem. They must convince individuals to work together. As academic studies of motivation note, this is no trivial matter.²⁴ Individuals do not easily contribute to the public good, especially when they must sacrifice to do so. The larger the collective, the less benefit each individual gets.

²⁰ The literature on this topic is too vast to cite. For complementary overviews, see Spickard (1984) and McClendon and Smith (1975). For a biting example from biology see Gould (1988a, 1988b). For a taste of Douglas's views, see Douglas (1986, 1975, 1979b).

²¹ Kuhn (1970a, 1970b).

²² Fleck (1935). See also Douglas (1986: 11-19).

²³ Douglas (1986: 18).

²⁴ See Hardin (1982).

Rational choice theory, in fact, argues that rational individuals will never participate in something from which they do not benefit.²⁵ But this is wrong. People do volunteer. The question is, Why?

Douglas believes that conceptual schemes fill this gap: they induce people to contribute to the public good, giving them, in essence, a reason for sacrifice.²⁶ They are the glue that holds together groups that would otherwise disintegrate. But not just any conceptual scheme will do. Members of different kinds of groups respond to different arguments. They find sustenance in different concepts. Why does one scheme work for one group, and not for another? What are the patterns?

Douglas argues that various groups face varied organizational problems. Bureaucracies have to apportion tasks and rewards. Entrepreneurs have to maximize their gains without scuttling the system that allows them to do so. Members of each type of social organization will be drawn to ideas that justify their mode of existence. They do not practice bad faith; they merely try to wrestle with the problems that arise in their social location. Conceptual systems are part of that wrestling.²⁷

Yet the influence is not one way: in Douglas's view, group structure and belief systems evolve in tandem. Social life generates problems, which intellectual life attempts to solve. People also alter their group life as their concepts convince them to do so. The theory is subtle, yet not so complex. Before diving into it, let us look at an example she provides.²⁸

Take a small religious sect, one that has recently split from a larger religious body. As separatists (by definition), sect members

²⁵ See Olson (1965). Biological theories—those which argue that individual organisms will always try to maximize their reproductive success—also have trouble with altruism. Self-sacrifice is 'explained' as an effort to support closely related individuals. Passing on their genes is, statistically speaking, nearly as good as passing on one's own. See Gould (1980: ch. 8).

²⁶ Douglas (1986: 41,48).

²⁷ Douglas and Wildavsky (1982: ch. 5 & 6 and passim).

²⁸ The example is loosely taken from Douglas (1986: ch. 3) and Douglas and Wildavsky (1982). Douglas does not focus as much on the schismatic nature of sects as do American sociologists of religion (e.g. Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Rather she focuses on their social structure: their high boundary and inner formal equalitarianism. In her analysis, their tendency toward schism follows from this structure, rather than proceeding it.

will be very conscious of the boundary between their group and the church they have left. They will exaggerate their differences with their former comrades. They will perceive themselves as 'pure' and the others as 'impure'—particularly in their allegiance to the God whom they believe only their group understands. Asserting their own purity, they may extend their hatred to strangers. This will reinforce their boundaries by further separating them from the 'evil' outside world.

If this sect is inwardly equalitarian—for example, believing in the priesthood of all its members—Douglas says that it will be faced with certain social difficulties. Specifically, it will lack officials who can settle disputes. Conflicts that arise—and they will—cannot be settled by group leaders, for in theory there are none. Given the group's concern for purity, the antagonists are not apt to compromise. Nor is one faction likely to capitulate, considering the group's dedication to principal. After all, it just left its parent religion over such matters.

Odds are, when conflict arises the majority will accuse the minority of 'betraying God' and will expel it. Such an action makes perfect sense: in a conceptual universe split between 'good' insiders and 'evil' outsiders, trouble can only come from those who aid the evil forces. But such expulsions simultaneously solve the social conflict and reinforce the group's belief in the danger it faces from the outside world. Were there no evil conspiracy to destroy the group, after all, there would have been no conflict! At least that is what group members believe.

In Douglas's view, the organizational problems besetting these sectarians bias them toward conspiracy theories.²⁹ Such beliefs are not irrational; they are a logical result of the situation in which group members find themselves. They are, she says, best treated as a part of the institution rather than as accidental accoutrements. On the socialization model, an equalitarian sect should be able to pass on any belief. But Douglas finds no generous sectarians, no conspiratorial entrepreneurs.³⁰ Different types of institution bias people toward different beliefs, she says. Institutions form beliefs as well as transmit them.

At issue here is the role of ideas in society. Specifically, how do individuals—the efficient carriers of ideas—come to believe things useful for group life? Traditional social science depicts the relationship between people and their ideas in one of two ways.

Rational choice theory depicts the individual as a maximizer, out for her or his own gain. Economics, where this model reigns, describes humans as choosing among their available options to enhance their well-being. Deviations from self-interest are seen as irrational. These result from emotional attachments to non-economic beliefs and values. Many rational choice theorists see religions as sources of such themes. As such, religions are steeped in irrationality. According to this theory, such beliefs overlay a basically rational and self-serving human nature. Society uses irrational ideas to 'con' individuals into acting against their best interests. A sociology of belief based on rational choice would separate rational from irrational ideas, and restrict itself to explaining the latter.³¹

Socialization theory, on the other hand, locates beliefs within the person. They do not start there. Rather, individuals are trained as children to regard certain things as good and true—of which self-interested rationality may be one. On coming of age, they act as they were trained. To use Parsonian language, individuals act according to institutionalized norms of conduct, which themselves are the product of the internalization of normative patterns as need-dispositions. They cooperate with one another because they have absorbed the notion that they are supposed to do so. For socialization theorists, all ideas are fair game for analysis, because they are all learned.³²

Douglas, like many social scientists, finds both theories wanting. Rational choice theory treats religious beliefs as residues—deviations from the way things ought to be. According to this theory, religious ideas do not help individuals grapple with reality; they prevent its rational appraisal. The question of why people in different social locations believe different things becomes a matter of why some are irrational and others are not. Surely this is unacceptable.

³¹ On rational choice theory, see Douglas (1986), Douglas and Isherwood (1979), Olson (1965) and Hogarth and Reder (1987). For a contrasting view see Oliver, Marwell and Teixeira (1985) and Oliver and Marwell (1988).

³² On socialization theory, see Douglas (1979a) and Spickard (1987). Turner (1987) discusses rational choice, socialization and other sociological theories of motivation

²⁹ Douglas (1986: 33-41).

³⁰ Douglas (1982a: 5-7).

Socialization theory, on the other hand, treats individuals as 'judgmental dopes', to use Garfinkel's telling phrase. If social actors merely respond to internalized norms, they are incapable of reasoning and choice. They are so many 'well-trained sheep-dogs picking their way through institutional mazes.' Yet any account of society 'presupposes an active perceiving person, able to read cues and size up situations.'³³ Individuals call on their socially learned stores of knowledge. Yet these stores do not determine their actions. A sociology of belief has to place reasoning individuals at its center.

Neither theory, in fact, helps explain why different beliefs are common in different social settings.

Douglas pointed out the flaws in the socialization model many years ago. As she put it, 'the attempt to avoid inadvertently giving the individuals the status of robots' has been at the root of her theorizing for some time.'³⁴ Her latest work has taken the other path. How, she asks, can one treat social actors as active, willing beings without presuming that their actions on behalf of others are somehow spurious? In *How Institutions Think*, she modifies rational choice theory to show how individuals can rationally choose beliefs which appear to go against their interests. In different social circumstances, she argues, different beliefs will make sense. Self-interested behavior is not absolute. It is relative to the social system in which it is found.

Collective Goods

A sociology based on rational choice has traditionally foundered on the problem of collective goods. This concept was developed by economists to describe goods that escape the price mechanism. It refers to publicly produced goods which benefit everyone. Clean air, public highways, and so on help an entire population. They are available to all, equally. No one person or group can charge for them or appropriate their use; if they do, they are liable to the public for damages.

As Mancur Olson pointed out,³⁵ an individual acting in his or her own rational self-interest will not contribute to the public good more than he or she benefits from it. People will tax themselves to build

roads they will use. But they will not tax themselves to build roads for others. They will appreciate the local parent-teacher organization, but will not work for it unless their children are in school. They want police protection in their neighborhood, not in neighborhoods they do not visit. Rational individuals look to help themselves, not just others.

A little thought shows why this is so. Public goods can only be produced if everyone cooperates. But self-oriented people are not apt to do so. The individual notes that his or her gift is of little value, weighed against the whole. Its presence matters little, its absence likewise. By declining to contribute, one hopes to get a free ride. One hopes also to avoid wasting one's donation, if others do not add their share.

This is the problem facing voluntary organizations. They cannot coerce their members' participation. They cannot reward people for service, at least not in proportion to the effort required to keep them going. Olson argued that without coercion or reward, group life is impossible. Astute individuals simply act for their best interest, not for others. Ultimately, rational choice theory presents a Hobbesian view of social life. Social order is only possible by imposition or purchase. Free, self-oriented negotiators will never produce anything on their own.³⁶

But this is not so! Voluntary organizations may have problems, but they do exist. Citizens' groups meet, public interest lobbies lobby. Not all of their activity is self-oriented. How is this possible, if individuals who rationally choose their actions cannot work for the good of others?

Rational choice theorists say such actions are the result of irrational beliefs and values, often religious ones. Belief in a God who rewards good works or in ancestors who punish transgressions substitutes for worldly honors and threats. In the framework of such ideas, individuals will rationally calculate their profit and loss. If I fail to give, will I burn in hell? Will my crops fail? Will my children die? Coerced and rewarded into participating, social order becomes possible again.

³³ Douglas (1978: 188).

³⁴ Douglas (1989). See Douglas (1979a).

³⁵ Olson (1965).

³⁶ Olson excepts small groups from his analysis, arguing that mutual trust allows people to work together. Douglas (1986: ch. 2) demonstrates that this exception is invalid.

This is, in a sense, classic functionalism. Beliefs tie society together. Durkheim argued that religion, while on the one hand a misidentification of the collective enthusiasm people experience in ritual, is on the other hand an accurate expression of their social dependence. Sacred symbolism makes this dependence manifest. By jointly maintaining an illusion, people jointly maintain their common life. In Douglas's paraphrase,

The character of the sacred is to be dangerous and endangered, calling every good citizen to defend its bastions. The shared symbolic universe and the classifications of nature embody the principles of authority and coordination. In such a system problems of legitimacy are solved because individuals carry the social order around inside their heads and project it out onto nature.³⁷

Unfortunately, this 'solution' only creates the problem anew. Whence come these irrational ideas that make society viable? Ideas are human products, after all, not preexistent entities. If no one believes them, they evaporate; when believed too strongly, on the other hand, they become sources of conflict. People ignore them, or fight and die to preserve them. Like bridges and roads, ideas require maintenance. Why do people bother, given all the trouble such ideas bring?

Ideas, in short, are public goods. Rational choice theory has 'solved' the problem of how physical goods are produced by reference to mental goods, whose production is just as problematic. Anthropologists in general and Douglas in particular have documented the ways people argue about their notions of the world.³⁸ Scholars of religion also know this territory. How do people come to hold common beliefs, if each is out for his or her own gain?

Classic functionalism's problem is that it is incomplete. It argues that ideas make society possible, but fails to specify how they arise. Recognizing this difficulty, most sociologists have embraced one or another brand of socialization theory. At least that theory explains how individuals come to believe what they do. Douglas objects that socialization theory negates the rationality we know that humans

have. Is there not some way that functionalism can be rescued from its imprecision?

Revising Functionalism

Douglas argues that a properly thought-out functionalism not only shows how ideas make society possible, but how they themselves are produced. She starts with Jon Elster's model of functional explanation as a set of rules.³⁹ Following Elster, Douglas claims that: an institution or behavior pattern, X, is explained by its function, Y, for a group, Z, if and only if:

1. Y is an effect of X;
2. Y is beneficial for Z;
3. Y is unintended by actions producing X;
4. Y or the causal relation between X and Y is unrecognized by actors in Z; and
5. Y maintains X by a causal feedback loop passing through Z.⁴⁰

Step 1 moves from X to Y; step 5 moves from Y to X. Therefore X both results in Y and is maintained by it—and in an unintended way. Classical functionalism ignores step 5, which is for Douglas the key to adequate explanation.

An example illustrates how these rules allow the analyst to separate good functionalist arguments from bad ones. Take the claim that rituals enhance social solidarity.⁴¹ Participating in ritual is supposed to produce the kind of emotions that encourage people to cooperate with one another. This might be diagramed as follows:

1. Lineage solidarity (Y) is an effect of ancestor worship (X);
2. Y maintains internal peace and external defense and so is good for the worshippers (Z);
3. Promoters of ancestor worship (X) do not overtly intend to maintain lineage solidarity (Y);
4. Nor do they recognize a causal link between Y and X;

³⁷ Douglas (1986:13), summarizing Durkheim (1912) and Durkheim and Mauss (1903).

³⁸ For example, Douglas (1963).

³⁹ Elster (1983).

⁴⁰ Douglas 1986: 33

⁴¹ See, for example, Radcliffe-Brown (1945).

5. Lineage solidarity (Y) maintains ancestor cults (X) by accustoming lineage members (Z) to work together.⁴²

But this argument fails. Steps three and four are empirically false, and step five presumes what it is supposed to prove—that cooperation easily moves between religious and secular spheres. As Douglas points out, no hidden mechanisms are needed to explain worship's social role.

Praying at the foot of the altar, the ancestor worshippers explicitly declare the ancestors are angered by quarreling among their descendants. They are speaking to one another obliquely. Instead of a bad and incomplete argument about hidden self-sustaining mechanisms, we now recognize a good one about intentional efforts at persuasion.

...

... The priests and worshippers are trying to do the very thing that in Olson's political theory is supposed to be impossible. ... They want to engage in collective action. ... The question is, how do they ever manage to create that collective good—an agreement about ancestors.⁴³

A properly constructed functionalism, Douglas claims, could explain just that. To see how, let us look at the example given above, of a small religious sect.

Douglas sees three interrelated functional loops that drive small sects toward a belief in evil conspiracies. The first explains the groups' weak leadership, the second explains their belief in equality and their high boundary consciousness, and the third shows how all these elements unite in a fear of cabal.⁴⁴ The argument begins with the group's social structure and demonstrates how the beliefs that sustain it arise.

⁴² After Douglas (1986: 34).

⁴³ Douglas 1986: 35-36

⁴⁴ Clearly, not all sects have weak leadership, nor do all believe in conspiracies. But all encourage beliefs that keep members committed. Douglas says that all voluntary groups face organizational problems, one solution for which is the combination of weak leadership and conspiracy belief she outlines. Alternately, the group could develop strong leadership backed by violence (e.g., the Mafia), or garner enough resources through donations and robberies to physically reward its flock. These would change alter the social structure, however; Douglas would expect a different set of justifying beliefs to emerge.

Cycle A is based on the fact that voluntary groups lack the physical means to coerce or reward their members. In Olson's analysis, with no coercion or reward, rational individuals have no strong motives for staying in the group. If the costs of membership increase, they withdraw. The explanatory cycle goes as follows:

Cycle A:

1. Weak leadership (Y) is an effect of a credible threat that individuals can withdraw (X) from the group;
2. Weak leadership (Y) is useful for the members of Z: it prevents unwelcome demands on their resources;
3. Weak leadership (Y) is unintended (and actually deplored);
4. Weak leadership (Y) is unrecognized as an effect of the threat to withdraw (X);
5. By an unseen causal loop, weak leadership (Y) maintains the credibility of the threat to withdraw (X) because it prevents the group from enacting coercive regulations.⁴⁵

So far, of course, this need not be a sect. This equally describes a society of entrepreneurs, ready to break all social ties for their individual gain. But where entrepreneurs play weak leadership for all it is worth, sectarians strive to maintain the group. Each path is a response to Olson's problem of collective goods. People will not invest their time and energy in the group if they perceive others freeloading on their efforts. Either they demand individual rewards for their work—the route of the entrepreneur—or they want everyone to participate equally.⁴⁶ The latter case develops where rewards are scarce, and results in a second cycle:

Cycle B:

1. A stable well-defined group boundary (Y) is an effect of insisting on equality and 100 percent participation in group life (X);

⁴⁵ Adapted from Douglas (1986: 38).

⁴⁶ Alternatively, they could strengthen their leadership. But by rational choice theory, they will not do so unless that leadership can coerce or reward. Douglas argues that the sectarian strategy emerges where rewards and the benefits of coercion are scarce. Sectarianism arises in relative poverty which it perpetuates, she claims, because of its ideological commitment to remaining pure. See Douglas and Wildavsky (1982)

2. A stable boundary (Y) is beneficial for the group (Z), in so far as it consolidates membership;
3. Y is unintended as an effect of X;
4. Y is an unperceived effect of X;
5. The boundary (Y) maintains the equality/participation rule (X), by threatening to expel recalcitrant members and not letting them return if they fail to give their all.⁴⁷

By insisting on all-or-nothing involvement, sects effectively distance themselves from the world. People either participate totally or not at all; there are no shades of gray. Once established, a strong dividing line between group members and others maintains the participation. The cost of slacking off is the severance of all social ties—a price most individuals will not want to pay.

Douglas argues that these two cycles define a particular social type, 'one with no coercive power and no individual selective benefits of a material kind.'⁴⁸ According to rational choice theory, such groups should not exist. But they do, as Douglas's fieldwork and decades of social-scientific inquiry attest.⁴⁹ What makes them possible? They are stabilized and legitimated by beliefs. In Douglas's words:

Because of weak leadership, no consensus can be mustered for formulating or obeying laws or for punishing deviants (Cycle A). The threat to secede can be indirectly controlled by the strong boundary (Cycle B), which automatically insures that exit will be costly. So only oblique political action is possible; hence, there is the tendency to check exploitative behavior by accusing incipient faction leaders of principled immorality. There is nothing else that they can be accused of, since there are no other rules. The activity of accusing, X, reinforces the belief, Y, in outside conspiracy [with which the accused are supposedly in league], but Y maintains X.⁵⁰

Why an outside conspiracy? Because for this type of group, the chief feature of the social landscape is the division between 'us' and 'them'. Since 'we' are good—by definition—any problems must come from 'them'. Thus internal ills are attributed to external sources, a

process which reinforces group structure. Diagrammatically, the functional loop is as follows:

1. A shared belief in an evil outside conspiracy (Y) is an effect of weak leadership (Xa) and strong boundaries (Xb), through the intermediary of accusations of wrongdoing and betrayal;
2. The belief in conspiracy (Y) keeps the group (Z) together;
3. Y is not intended by Z;
4. The causal links are not perceived;
5. The belief in conspiracy (Y) maintains weak leadership (Xa) and strong boundaries (Xb) by actually splitting the community or expelling those of whom treachery is suspected. This produces a history to make every would-be leader nervous.⁵¹

Rather than just using beliefs to explain social cohesion, Douglas has used the problems people meet in a particular kind of society to explain their beliefs. She shows why these people find certain views plausible. Other people, in other social locations, would not find them plausible because they do not correspond to their social experience. The exigencies of life in different societies makes rational people believe different things about the world.

Unlike socialization theorists, Douglas argues that ideas are closely related to social structure. Unlike other exponents of a strong tie between society and belief—Durkheim and some Marxists come to mind—she does not belittle actors' freedom of choice in her sketch of the origins of worldviews. Individuals averse to conspiracy theories may find the social costs of leaving their sects less burdensome than the intellectual cost of staying. They may defect. But they will not thereby avoid the connection between belief and society. They will find other belief-systems typical of other social locations. In Douglas's analysis, belief and society go together, but differently in different arenas.⁵²

Three Ideal-Types

Sects are, of course, not the only kind of institution. There are many. But Douglas focuses on only three, which she treats as different

⁴⁷ Adapted from Douglas (1986: 39).

⁴⁸ Douglas (1986:39).

⁴⁹ See Douglas (1963, 1970c).

⁵⁰ Douglas (1986:40).

⁵¹ Adapted from Douglas (1986:40-41).

⁵² Douglas (1982a: 6-7).

solutions to the problem posed by the theory of rational choice.⁵³ While sectarians solve the problem of collective goods by heightening group boundaries, entrepreneurs provide those goods for a fee. They jettison equality in the interests of getting the job done. Hierarchical societies, on the other hand, delegate such tasks to a few, whom the others choose to follow. Each type of society develops ways to justify its social relations; these justifications, treated as if they were part of the structure of the universe, become people's core beliefs.

Douglas's portrait of sectarian societies is, I think, clear. By entrepreneurial society she means an unregulated individualism, in which people make their own ways in the world, striving on their own behalf. Individuals can negotiate contracts with each other, make or break social ties, and so move up or down whatever the current scale of prestige and influence. She does not just mean modern society—or the stereotype of that society as it appears in mass culture and the leftist press. Many New Guinea tribes are even more individualistic: personal failure and success are central matters, to which everyone is subject.⁵⁴

'Individualists extolling a culture of individualism tend to become more and more uncommitted to each other and more committed to the exciting gamble for big prizes.'⁵⁵ Rather than equality of condition, such societies favor equality of opportunity. Let everyone start equal, they seem to say; then let talent and luck reward the best. Pressed to an extreme, such beliefs depend on an ever-expanding set of resources. Otherwise the failures will outnumber the successes, and the system itself will be brought into question. A 'safety net' may even be installed. But so long as the pie is growing, entrepreneurial societies will find great favor. In an expanding economy, they seem to provide the opportunities that rational individuals will choose.

The following simplified diagram might be applied to such cases:

1. An ideology of individualism (Y) is an effect of the omnipresence of rewards (X1) and the absence of social coercion (X2);
2. This ideology (Y) is useful for the members of Z, who individually benefit from the freedom it grants them;

3. The rightness of individualism (Y) is believed to be universal, not dependent on any particular state of the social economy (X);
4. Individualism (Y) is believed to cause opportunity (X), not the other way around;
5. Individualism (Y) certainly guards against attempts to establish social control (X2): these are seen as violating one's 'God-given' rights. Whether individualism also maintains the omnipresence of rewards (X1) is debatable. Free-market economists would argue that it does. Keynesians and Marxists argue that individualism is self-limiting; as soon as the pie stops growing the free market collapses.⁵⁶

Hierarchical societies are a good deal more complex. These societies delegate the production of public goods to a few, whom the others choose to follow. More exactly, goods are produced by an extreme division of labor, coordinated by a few, who are themselves part of the division of labor rather than rulers of it. Each person—including the rulers—contributes a part to the whole, and each receives a part of the whole in return. But what each receives is undivided: by laboring dutifully on a part, one participates in the coherence of everything. Hierarchical life is a life filled with meaning—if and only if one performs one's part in the play.

At base, hierarchical society transcends the individualism upon which rational choice theory is based. As Louis Dumont points out,⁵⁷ hierarchical societies are organized in terms of the relations between people, not in terms of equality. In India, he writes

the bearer of value [is] the universal order. ... The normative subject as opposed to the empirical agent is constituted not by a single human person, but by a constellation of persons making up a whole. ... Human reality is coterminous with order, not with individual men.⁵⁸

The problem is, how does the analyst do justice to this kind of society while still acknowledging the individual's ability to make decisions? Even in hierarchical groups, people can, within limits, grant or with-

⁵³ Douglas (1982a: 6); for details see Douglas and Wildavsky (1982).

⁵⁴ See, for example, Forge (1970), Newman (1965).

⁵⁵ Douglas (1982a: 6).

⁵⁶ I side with the latter.

⁵⁷ See Dumont (1965a, 1965b, 1965c, 1966, 1970) and Spickard (1984: 329-353).

⁵⁸ Dumont (1970: 141).

hold allegiance to given ideas and social arrangements? A functional diagram brings out at least part of this relationship between belief and this social structure:

1. A belief-system stressing the naturalness of the way things are and the rightness of everything that happens (Y) is an effect of a high degree of social differentiation and control (X);
2. This belief (Y) enhances the stability of the group (Z);
3. Supporters of hierarchy (X) probably believe that such a social arrangement is 'natural' (Y), however they do not work from hierarchy to naturalness, but the other way around;
4. This step is problematic. Many participants surely recognize that a belief in the naturalness of the current order (Y) supports social differentiation and control (X). But they do not thereby suppose that others are getting more than their fair share. Though the causal link is visible, it is hidden by the postulate of its accord with 'the ways of Heaven'. And it is hidden by the belief that even the privileged are merely doing their duty to the group;
5. A belief in the naturalness of the present order (Y) clearly supports any present order, of whatever form. But it specifically supports a differentiated society (X) by identifying it with a differentiated nature, in which every species has its place and the parts cannot exist without the whole. Where individualism treats nature as a war of all against all, hierarchy is more apt to stress interspecies cooperation.⁵⁹

There are, of course, other functional cycles affecting hierarchical groups. Illustration only demands one.

I should point out that the above functional diagrams of the relationship between social structure and belief in entrepreneurial and hierarchical societies are my own. Douglas discusses these social types at length,⁶⁰ but she only draw diagrams for sectarians. Nonetheless, her analysis should be applicable to other cases.

Toward a Functional Theory of Religious Belief

⁵⁹ For a different yet compatible view of the origin of such views of nature, see Gould (1988c).

⁶⁰ See especially Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), Douglas (1978: 205-231).

Though much of her early work centered on religion, Douglas has not to my knowledge sought to apply her new functionalism to religions in a systematic way—other than in the case of conspiracy-oriented sects. Risk and Culture (1982, coauthored by Aaron Wildavsky) and Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences (1985) examine why people in different kinds of secular institutions analyze risks differently. She argues that institutional factors explain why people are blind to some risks and overemphasize others. Unfortunately do not have space to examine this topic here.⁶¹ Without going into great detail, I would like to outline some of the ways Douglas's approach might prove fruitful for a sociology of religious belief, as well as of belief in general.

First off, Douglas ties beliefs to society, without implying that they are superstructural reflections of an underlying social base. She emphasizes the social role in cognition, without denying individuals the ability to weigh the reasonableness of their beliefs or alter the social order of which they are a part. In her conception, ideas arise out of specific types of social order. But these social orders cannot function without ideas. Belief's role is not secondary, as it is for orthodox Marxism; nor is it contingent, as it is for socialization theory. Douglas has a true dual-factor theory. Beliefs solve real social problems; but if such beliefs become implausible, people may change the society whose problems they no longer solve. Douglas's sociology of belief is an actor-oriented sociology, but one which maintains the link between beliefs and specific social forms.

Under Douglas's program, scholars of religion would likely investigate the social-structural origins of religious ideas, as well as their actual social consequences. They would examine the social embeddedness of particular doctrines, attempting to show the concrete problems from which they arise. They would see dogmatic conflicts through a social lens.

At the same time, they would recognize that people's doctrinal choices are not 'bad faith'. Religious language is not just a disguise

⁶¹ See Douglas and Wildavsky (1982); Douglas (1985). Neither book has received much critical acclaim. The former, especially, has drawn fire for its portrayal of environmentalists as 'sectarians' who over-emphasize pollution risks in order to keep their volunteers active and contributions flowing. Though the criticism has merit, reviewers have failed to come to grips with Douglas's underlying social theories—which I have tried to sketch here

for social troubles. It is a true expression of the way people see the world. Religion makes the world plausible and open to action. Religious conflicts do not just express social conflicts; they channel methods of changing them. Resolving doctrinal disputes often alters social practices. Society is transformed. Douglas's sociology adds to our awareness of the ways belief both justifies and attacks social life. It treats religions as living wholes, rather than as disembodied or irrational philosophies.

Second, Douglas's approach reverses a common notion about the relationship between daily life and institutions. In her theory, institutions do not 'just do the routine, low-level, day-to-day thinking', leaving people free to consider deeper matters.⁶² Rather, institutional thinking takes care of the important matters, leaving individuals free for daily life.

An example most clearly shows this point. The right of individuals to equal opportunity, though not to equal social station, is among the most sacred objects in the modern pantheon. We criticize other societies, both politically and morally, that fail to accord this right. But Douglas's analysis ties this belief to entrepreneurial societies. She shows how the worship of the individual regulates social conduct and keeps these societies on an even keel. Equal opportunity is considered so natural that even philosophers fail to question it. Justice theorists such as Rawls and Barry⁶³ depend on it, failing to consider that their notion of equality is a product of history, specific to a particular social era.

Douglas argues that our deepest conceptions of the world are products of our institutional orders. Their institutional function remains hidden from us, precisely because they seem so obvious. Of course individuals are paramount, Westerners exclaim; everything depends on them. Nonsense, members of hierarchical societies reply, the world is a unity, in which all depends on all. You miss the point, say the sectarians; what matters is which side you are on. Members of these societies can communicate about minor matters. Trapped by their institutional thinking, they talk past one another the big questions.

⁶² Douglas (1986: 111ff).

⁶³ Rawls (1971); Barry (1978).

This point leads to a third, now a matter of dispute among students of religion. Some theorists argue that religions are basically approaches to the world; so 'secular' approaches to the world—science, Marxism—are profitably treated as religions. They, too, are fundamental ways of conceiving of and relating to what is.⁶⁴ Other theorists argue for a strict division between secular and supernaturalist views of the world; only the latter are to be counted as religions, in their minds.⁶⁵

Because of her concern with belief, Douglas can avoid this controversy. As she points out, both supernaturalist and secular systems involve beliefs. Douglas claims that whatever their stripe, all such systems work similarly. Individualism may be grounded in a gift from God.⁶⁶ Or it may be grounded in natural law. In both cases, the idea is regarded as sacred. In both cases, it is embraced by and supports an entrepreneurial social system. Douglas is much more concerned with the uses to which ideas are put than with whether they refer to supernatural or natural beings. She would not have us draw our net too tightly, lest we miss some of our catch.

Last Words

As a research program, Douglas's new direction represents an advance over her old. She no longer attempts to locate all systems of thought on the social map, so is no longer subject to the charge of relativism. She no longer treats societies as her units of analysis; instead she allows for intra-society differences based on the varied requirements of life in specific institutional settings. And she if she ever was open to the charge of sociological reductionism, she is no longer; she gives thought considerable weight within the social system, rather than treating it as a reflection of the institutional order.

Compared with the other major theoretical trends in the sociology of belief, in fact, Douglas's theory does quite well. Unlike socialization theory, she is able to explain why particular institutions

⁶⁴ See, for example, McCoy (1980).

⁶⁵ See, for example, Stark and Bainbridge (1985).

⁶⁶ As it says in the Mishnah: "a single man was created in the world ... to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One. ... Therefore every one must say 'For my sake was the Universe created.'" Danby (1933: 388)

go hand in hand with particular kinds of belief. Unlike interest theory, she does not reduce beliefs to a question of 'true' or 'false' consciousness. All belief is treated on an equal footing, non-relativistically.

The chief problem with her efforts, at this date, is that they have not generated much empirical work. Grid/group theory spawned much theoretical interest, but field studies have yet to rule on its validity. Too many of the early studies that tried to confirm it threw doubt on it, or failed to test it in a serious way.⁶⁷ Will the same be true of her current venture? One hopes not. But until such testing is done, the jury remains out. Mary Douglas's revised functionalism is a promising, if untried enterprise.

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⁶⁷ See note 14, above.

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