The Catholic Bias

On the Influence of the Catholic Background on the Study of Ritual, Hierarchy and Lived Religion in the Work of Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi

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Note: In this paper I chose to use the words Catholicism and Catholic, instead of the terms Roman-Catholicism and Roman-Catholic, which might be preferred by some. I have chosen to do this first of all due to its efficiency and secondly due to my experience that Catholics commonly refer to themselves in this manner, only specifying the Roman or Latin distinction in ecumenically sensitive settings. I acknowledge that there are other religious communities who call themselves Catholic, but these are not addressed within the paper.

Introduction

The study of religion has seen some radical changes in its approach in the last few decades. These changes are in part due to the upcoming lived religion paradigm and its aspiration to promote the study of more practical aspects of religion. The lived religion paradigm has become the preferred research strategy for some notable scholars such as Meredith McGuire, Robert Orsi and David Hall. The changes in the approach to religion seem to have primarily originated from certain frustrations with older interpretations of religion. Meredith McGuire argued in the very first pages of her book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* that students of religion have been ill prepared to study religious practices as they appear in real life.[1] Instead of focusing on real, materialized and practical religion, McGuire argued that religion has too often been studied focusing chiefly on its official and standardized beliefs and practices. Some scholars, both inside and outside the lived religion paradigm, felt that at the root of this particular approach to religion stands a set of presuppositions regarding the concept of religion, which is usually called the protestant bias. These scholars share the impression that some common methodological fallacies found in the study of religion are explicitly linked to the protestant religious imagination. Similar to how the Protestant Reformation distanced itself from the Catholic Church, the protestant bias in religious studies implicitly rejects 'Catholic-type' religions.[2] While it is difficult to propose a definitive list, I see some of the main characteristics of the protestant bias as consisting in the rejection of (the meaningfulness and validity of) ritual, a suspicion of organized clergy and hierarchy in general, an overemphasis on sacred texts and a dislike of traditions, in particular those traditions perceived as inauthentic latter additions. The protestant bias theory implies that the protestant background of some of the most

[1] Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived religion: faith and practice in everyday life*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

[2] Winnifred F. Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. (Princeton University Press, 2018), 7.

influential and pioneering scholars in the field of religious studies has had a major impact on the development of the field's methodology in general. I wish to contribute to this discussion by investigating the influence of religious backgrounds on some influential works in the field of religious studies.

While scholars have regularly pointed out the existence of a protestant bias in order to explain certain tendencies in the field, its associated characteristics and scope of influence seem to be rather ill-defined. It is not at all common to find a thorough definition of the protestant bias, even though the notion itself is often used or at least suggested. However, some scholars have provided definitions that are worth to take as a starting point. One of the most helpful and clear definitions of the protestant bias can be found in Winnifred Sullivan's work *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. In this work Sullivan described the interpretation of religion from the perspective of the protestant bias and the implications this had for the perception of religion by religious students.

> Religion – 'true' religion some would say – on this modern protestant reading, came to be understood as being private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed. Public, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted religion, on the other hand, was seen to be 'false'. The second kind of religion, iconically represented historically in the United States, for the most part by the Roman Catholic Church (and by Islam today), was, and perhaps still is, the religion of most of the world.[3]

Regarding the scope of the protestant bias Sullivan notes that: ''the modern religio-political argument has been largely, although not exclusively, indebted, theologically, and phenomenologically, to protestant reflection and culture. ''She adds: ''from a contemporary academic perspective, that religion with which many religion scholars are most concerned has been carefully and systematically excluded, both rhetorically

[3] Winnifred F. Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. (Princeton University Press, 2018), 8.

and legally, from modern public space.''[4] Sullivan made a clear distinction between Protestantism with and without a capital letter. When it comes to the protestant bias, she meant first of all an outlook that developed from protestant reflection and culture, not only restricted to those who profess the Protestant religion. Thus, in Sullivan's understanding, Catholics could just as well be 'protestant' as Protestants can be 'catholic' in their approach to religion.[5] This distinction stresses the universality of this mindset, which can occur in students and scholars of any background without being conscious of it. Sullivan, however, tried to increase the awareness of the considerable influence religious culture has on students of religion. We should not forget that the field of religious studies is historically tied with (principally protestant) theological faculties from the nineteenth century. The protestant bias debate exposes an ongoing struggle with this particular heritage in which scholars used to openly operate from within confessional perspectives.[6]

In recent times, the protestant bias has become one of the big stumbling blocks for scholars working within the lived religion paradigm.[7] Consequently, there has been a renewed interest in the function of bias and its influence on the study of religion. In these researches there seems to be a general tendency towards a negative evaluation of the influence of (religious) bias. In the definition above we noticed how worryingly Sullivan mentioned that most of the world adheres to a religion that does not correspond to the protestant reading of 'true' religion. Indeed, critical research into the protestant bias in religious studies by scholars such as Meredith McGuire and Robert Orsi has shown how the protestant bias contributed to the overlooking of the materialized and practical aspects of religion in particular. As religion scholars are developing new sensibilities and new topics to explore, they are more and more

[4] Ibid., 7
[5] Ibid., 7,8.
[6] Tomoko Masuzawa. *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 22.
[7] Rodney Stark, "Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 2 (1996): 163.

confronted with the difficult relationship between bias and academic research. Despite the sometimes problematic contribution of personal bias on research in the field of religious studies, we can also wonder whether the effects of religious backgrounds are solely negative.

Clifford Geertz famously defined religion as a powerful and pervasive system of symbols, which has the ability to change the way we experience the world around us. [8] Even for those of us who grew up in a highly secularized part of the world, where traditional religious authority has relatively little power to influence individuals, we are shaped by the culture and religion in which we grew up.[9] The influence of religion on scholars becomes even more apparent when such scholars explicitly mention their background or adherence to a specific religious tradition. While some consider this a substantial problem for the credibility of the field, it is not necessarily harmful. The relationship between science and religion has been debated for a very long time. Science was not always considered an enemy of faith, as some people would tend to think nowadays. Religion enveloped all worldly experiences and was the framework for understanding the world of which science was a natural part. One of the most famous examples of the idea that faith and science are not mutually exclusive can be found in the eleventh century Catholic thinker Anselm of Canterbury. He perceived the relation between faith and science as one driving the other as *fides quaerens intellectum,* i.e., faith seeking understanding. It is important therefore to notice that religion and science are not mutually exclusive, and that sound academic work does not depend on one's religious positions. Indeed, despite commonly heard prophecies, religion does not seem to have lost its powerful influence in today's world even after centuries of secularist movements in the West. This tenacious characteristic of religion indicates that religion, and the study of it, is still relevant in the time in which we live. It also means that religious adherence is

[8] Clifford Geertz, ''Religion as a cultural system,'' in *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*, Clifford Geertz (Fontana Press, 1993), 87-125.
[9] Robert A. Orsi, *Between heaven and earth the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 184.

not only contained to the men and women outside the world of academia, but that it can play important roles in the lives of the scholars studying religion themselves. Still after the waves of secularism of the nineteenth and twentieth century, some notable scholars have kept their traditional religions while producing significant and influential work. Other scholars might not confess any adherence to religion, but still admit to having been inspired by their religious background. At any rate, due to the negative reputation of religious bias, it is important to stress that scholars with religious backgrounds are not necessarily ill equipped to contribute to the study of religion, or science in general. Therefore I wish to bring to light some examples of positive contributions of religious backgrounds on influential studies in the field of religious studies.

While the existence of the protestant bias has been attested by various scholars, there has been much less attention to the influence of other major religious traditions on the field of religious studies. This is why I wish to contribute to the research on the influence of the other major religious tradition of the West: Catholicism. Sullivan noted that as Catholics can share in the 'protestant' ideas of religion, Protestants can, theoretically, also share in the 'catholic' ideas of religion. It is however not clear what having such a 'catholic' attitude towards religion would incorporate. I recognize that, at this stage, creating a clear definition of the Catholic bias would be undesirable due to the limited scope of this enquiry. Despite the impossibility of coming to such a definition after such a small amount of research, I wish to contribute to a deeper understanding of the influence of religious backgrounds on academic work as a source of inspiration and innovation and if there can be such a thing as a catholic bias. I will do this by looking into the various ways in which having a catholic background may have inspired academic work on certain topics. I have chosen to study two major students of religion: Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi. I wish to answer the question how their Catholic background has influenced their research of certain topics relevant to religious studies. The research

topics I will discuss in particular are ritual and hierarchy as analyzed by Mary Douglas and the methodology of the lived religion approach as defined by Robert Orsi.

There is one large stumbling block for this research, and that is the dominant negative attitude towards bias (in particular of the religious kind) in academic research. Indeed scholars have again and again warned us against the dangers of religious bias in scholarly work as sources of narrow-mindedness and partiality.[10] Yet the idea that religious bias could be neutral or even beneficial can also be argued. Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi are both examples of scholars who have displayed a more positive attitude towards personal bias as an essential and enduring part of academic research. Similarly I wish to focus on the positive contributions of having a religious background on academic work, while not ignoring the pitfalls that are also most definitely there.

It becomes clear in Timothy Larsen's new study of Anthropologists and the Christian religion that the influence of Christianity has never completely disappeared from the field of anthropology.[11] We find among the most celebrated anthropologists a good few who confessed the Catholic faith. These include notable scholars such as Edward Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas and Victor and Edith Turner. While some of these Catholic anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard, the Turners) converted to Catholicism at a later stage in life, Mary Douglas grew up in a traditional Catholic family. Being a Catholic anthropologist was not considered very appropriate during the period in which Mary Douglas was active. Therefore, she was often confronted with opposition by fellow anthropologists due to her Catholicism and its perceived negative influence on her work. However, in reaction to such criticism, Mary Douglas worked to emancipate the idea that having a bias, and in particular a

[10] Currently influential works concerning the negative influence of bias are for example Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* and Russell McCutcheon's *Critics not Caretakers.*
[11] Timothy Larsen, *The slain God: anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Catholic bias, was natural and not at all necessarily harmful for critical academic work. Douglas explicitly voiced her objections to those who scorned her for adhering to traditional religious beliefs in an interview with Alan Macfarlane in 2006.[12] In this interview, Macfarlane told Douglas that her Catholicism puzzles many, including himself. Mary Douglas reacted with a chuckle and said: ''Does it really, seriously, I think that is a terrible ignorance on their part.''

Mary Douglas is one of the foremost examples of a celebrated modern scholar who, apparently effortlessly, could combine her own traditional religious background with her academic work. I noticed while reading her biographical works that her love of hierarchy and ritual seemed particularly influenced by her Catholic background since early childhood. This love for the traditional Catholic hierarchy and rituals with which she grew up came to full fruition in her later academic work. As we will see, a recurring theme in her work is the justification of hierarchy and ritual as positive contributions to society. It is particularly interesting to see how she justified such concepts in a time when the general mood was anti-hierarchical and anti-ritualist, even to some extent in her beloved Catholic Church itself. Despite her positive attitude towards bias, a natural side-effect from combatting the anti-ritualism of her time was the great issue she felt with the dominant protestant bias at universities. Exposing the dominance of the protestant bias was a very personal mission and some, like Timothy Larsen, have argued that countering the protestant bias was in fact of prime importance in Mary Douglas' personal religious experience.[13]

In the works concerned with lived religion, a paradigm fascinated with the 'second' type of religion as portrayed by Sullivan above, we find another field including some influential scholars with Catholic backgrounds. The second subject of

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[12] Alan Macfarlane, ''Interview with Mary Douglas – February 2006 – part 1,'' YouTube video, 1:01:43, Posted [7 november 2007], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3oMdIRFDs.

[13] Timothy Larsen, *The slain God: anthropologists and the Christian faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 165.

this paper will be a study of the work of one of the most influential students of religion and in particular in Catholicism studies today: Robert Orsi. Robert Orsi grew up in a traditional Italian Catholic family in the Bronx, New York. He experienced many Catholic devotions in own family as a young boy as well as during his adult life. While he admits to not believing in Catholicism anymore as he once did as a young boy, Catholicism remains a major influence on both his private and professional lives. His personal relationship with Catholicism is a common thread throughout his works, which are full of personal stories of the persons he studied as well as his own. He is not afraid to invite the readers to look into his own doubts concerning his religious beliefs and identity, and promotes a more open attitude towards the examination of personal bias. As a modern scholar in the field of religious studies, Orsi has witnessed the disparaging disposition of his students and other scholars towards the Catholic devotions he studies. Like Mary Douglas, Robert Orsi partly puts the blame of these misunderstandings on the dominant protestant attitude in the field of the study of religion. Orsi not only shows us that the protestant bias is still dominant at American universities, but also that important and interesting aspects of religion are willfully being excluded by students of religion because of it.

Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi share some interesting ideas, despite their differences in generation and disciplinary field. A common interest they share is bringing the protestant biases under closer scrutiny, and giving Catholicism and 'catholic type' religions a new and more respected image, more worthy of the attention of students of religion. Mary Douglas' emphasis on ritual complements Robert Orsi's lived religion sensibilities, for both show great appreciation of the importance of practical religion. However, there are also noticeable differences between the two different scholars. While Mary Douglas was in many ways interested in the practical side of religion, she has given equal attention to the 'normative' side of religion. We only have to bring to mind the late works of Mary

Douglas in which she took a more theological perspective in studying Christian sacred scripture. Robert Orsi, on the other hand, never made official teachings his prime research subject and only dealt with Catholic teaching when he deemed it to be relevant to understand the practical consequences for the faithful. Robert Orsi's lived religion paradigm brings an approach which can indeed be very beneficial for the study of Catholicism, yet Mary Douglas reminds us that Catholicism has a strong normative side as well which should not be neglected. We shall see in the future whether lived religion scholars will be able to balance this tension between the 'lived' and official aspects of Catholicism in order to give a good representation of the religion.

While it is not my intention, nor within my own capabilities, to formulate a circumscribed characterization of the catholic bias, I have tried to make a start for possible future inquiries into the influence of the Catholic background on research in the field of religious studies. This study will stay very close to the work of Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi, and will offer some comparisons between them. After some reflection on the influence of the Catholic background on the work of these two scholars, I hope to have shown that having a catholic bias had a positive contribution to the development of their academic sensibilities. Last but not least, I hope to show that the catholic bias is not only relevant as an alternative referential frame to the more prevalent protestant bias, but that religious adherence in general is not an impairment for a good student of religion. To repeat Mary Douglas' words, this assumption would be very ignorant indeed.

1. Mary Douglas

For the Love of Hierarchy

In *A feeling for hierarchy,* Mary Douglas retells the story about the election of the successor of John Henry Hutton as professor of Anthropology at Cambridge University. At the time Evans-Pritchard and the curator of the Pitt-Rivers Museum Thomas Kenneth Penniman were among the electors of the successor. Evans-Pritchard and Penniman's first choice was Meyer Fortes. However, after asking Hutton himself about his feelings towards this candidate, he responded: ''No, definitely not, he is a Jew.'' After this rejection, Evans-Pritchard tried again by suggesting Audrey Richards. Once more Hutton replied dismissively: ''No, she is a woman. No Catholics, no Jews, no women.''[14] While Mary Douglas stopped the anecdote here, Alan Macfarlane gave us the punch line of the story. Evans-Pritchard concluded by saying to Hutton: ''Well, I'm sorry you're going to have either a Jew or a Catholic, because all the great anthropologists are either Catholic or Jewish.''[15] Evans-Pritchard, himself a Catholic convert, asserted that the field of anthropology is largely influenced by Catholic and Jewish scholars. It might therefore be interesting to reflect on this and to ask in what capacity the Catholic religion has impacted the field of anthropology. Consequently, if Catholicism had any influence on the work of these great anthropologists, in what ways, positively or negatively, did it contribute to the studies that continue to be influential in religious studies? In order to make a contribution to this inquiry I will examine the relationship between the religious background and the work of one of the most influential and well-read anthropologists of the twentieth century: Mary Douglas.

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[14] Alan Macfarlane, ''Interview with Mary Douglas – February 2006 – part 1,'' YouTube video, 1:01:43, Posted [7 november 2007], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3oMdIRFDs.

[15] Ibid.

James Heft, *Believing scholars: ten Catholic intellectuals* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 106.

Besides being one of the most widely read anthropologists of the twentieth century, Mary Douglas is also known to have been a lifelong committed and faithful Catholic.[16] Commenting on this continual religious adherence, Timothy Larsen described her journey in the faith as a 'non-story', going against the common narrative which we have grown to expect.[17] Instead of living up to the expectation that life at university would have had a disenchanting effect on her religious convictions, Mary Douglas' loyalty to her religion did not decline. Instead, her religious life can be seen as continually deepening and maturing in tandem with her flourishing anthropological career.[18] This perhaps unusual turn of events makes Mary Douglas a prime example of a twentieth century scholar who retained her traditional religious faith while flourishing in an academic setting.[19] Not only do we see Mary Douglas upholding her faith in solely personal spheres, but we can encounter various ways of how she employed Catholicism in her anthropological work. Indeed, the way Mary Douglas analyzed her own culture and religious background had an important influence on achieving the degree of relevance that characterizes her work. It is evident in Douglas' work that understanding her own culture helped her to study other cultures and that studying other cultures, in turn, helped her to understand her own culture. In her book *Purity and Danger* she gratefully uses many illustrations taken from her own religion, such as Catherine of Siena, Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, as well as dedicating an entire

[16] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 1.
[17] Timothy Larsen, *The slain God: anthropologists and the Christian faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 126.
[18] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 35.
Also see:
Timothy Larsen, *The slain God: anthropologists and the Christian faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 124.
[19] Mary Douglas admits to be teased for 'the hypocrisy of being a Catholic', as well as hearing from a biologist after mentioning she was a Catholic: ''In these days! In this college! To hear a thing like that! It makes your mouth go dry!'' see: Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 28.

chapter to the Old Testament book of Leviticus.[20] Her Catholic background worked somewhat as a treasure trove for examples for explaining the function of religion. Every so often she provided examples and anecdotes from her own experience with hierarchy and ritual in her youth in order to explain such topics. Yet her Catholicism was not just a source of examples, but eventually became the main research topic in chapters and articles of her later period. In these works Mary Douglas' personal religious stances were at times explicitly reflected, which sometimes led to some controversy.

Unlike others who were more susceptible to the expanding secularism of the twentieth century, Mary Douglas did not free herself from influences of the religion in which she was brought up. This persistence in the faith made her, perhaps ironically, a true non-conformist. Her unusual attitude is further underscored by David Martin, who once called her both radically conservative and conservatively radical.[21] Indeed both of these statements are true, for her traditional Catholic ideas can seem both conservative and radically counter-cultural considering the period she worked in. Despite the common idea that religious adherence and true scientific objectivism are not fully compatible (or are at the very least a very awkward combination), we see that Douglas' Catholicism did not stop her from becoming one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century. Due to the continuing importance of her religion during her life I believe it is possible to argue that her successful anthropological works were partly inspired by her deeply felt Catholic religion. Her adherence to the Catholic religion thus created an opportunity for her to develop unique and successful interpretations of social phenomena, in particularly within regard to her ideas on hierarchy and ritual.

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[20] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[21] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas an intellectual biography* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.

Being a practicing Catholic in a cultural relativist field such as academic anthropology inevitably brought along some vexations. Yet, these vexations do not seem to have influenced Douglas' personal religious convictions, but were rather expressions of skepticism of the academic field towards her outspoken Catholicism. Douglas mentions having struggled with an academic climate which considered her Catholic identity hypocritical and even potentially dangerous for her anthropological work.[22] Despite the external opposition against her religion, she never despaired about her faith. Instead, in her own apologetic way, she has tried to point out the ignorance on the part of those who believe that religious adherence cannot go along with serious academic work.[23] Above all, Mary Douglas continuously strove to redeem aspects of culture and religion traditionally associated in the West with Catholicism. The revolutionary aspect of her work is clearly observed in the way she defined words which previously had chiefly negative connotations. Mary Douglas endeavored to give new and positive values to concepts such as hierarchy, ritual, bias and even primitivism. It is striking that these concepts seem to correlate closely with Mary Douglas' own experiences with the highly ritualistic and hierarchical Catholicism in which she grew up. Justifying personal bias as a necessity and possibly even as a positive contribution to academic work helped Douglas defend her own adherence to the Catholic religion. In an article with Deborah Jones, Douglas argues that it is perfectly acceptable to maintain a religious commitment while endeavoring in academic studies. At the same time Mary Douglas voiced suspicion against the possibility of pure objectivism in science, proclaiming: ''nobody has true objectivity, least of all the scientists!''[24] In this way, she repeatedly made clear that

[22] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 15-36.
Alan Macfarlane, ''Interview with Mary Douglas – February 2006 – part 1,'' YouTube video, 1:01:43, Posted [7 november 2007], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3oMdIRFDs.
[23] See for example her reaction to McFarlaine. Alan Macfarlane, ''Interview with Mary Douglas – February 2006 – part 1,'' YouTube video, 1:01:43, Posted [7 november 2007], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3oMdIRFDs.
[24] Richard Fardon,*Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 264.

she did not find her religious background to be a hindrance for her academic work. In fact she continued to expressed her gratitude for being lucky enough to be born into one of the world's greatest religions.[25]

As mentioned before, Mary Douglas' alternative approach to bias is particularly interesting for understanding the relationship between one's religious background and one's academic work. While bias (in particular of the religious kind) is generally considered to be one of the major obstacles to overcome in objective academic work, and often considered synonymous with prejudice, Mary Douglas interpreted bias rather as one's unique perspective or point of view. Instead of suppressing bias, Mary Douglas argued that it should be welcomed and utilized as something useful for our research.[26] At the same time she expresses the necessity of bias by denying the idea that bias-free academic work can be achieved in the first place. To further clarify her interpretation of bias and to emphasize the distinction between bias and prejudice she argues that: ''the special bias of anthropology is its bias against prejudice.''[27] This refreshing and optimistic outlook on bias defends the approach of actively employing one's own bias as a referential framework. It is assumed that, when one prudently employs one's personal bias, it could lead to new and profound insights. This begs the question, if every individual has an enduring social bias in which one orders the universe, what kind of special bias did Mary Douglas employ herself. Due to certain characteristic sensitivities in her work and her own frank remarks concerning her religious standings, I would argue that Douglas' personal bias can be called a type of 'catholic bias'. To defend this, I will discuss the influence of her Catholic background on her personal development as well as on her work, in particularly her work on hierarchy and ritual.

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[25] Richard Fardon,*Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 264.
[26] Timothy Larsen, *The slain God: anthropologists and the Christian faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 145.
[27] Mary Douglas, *Thought Styles: Critical Essays on Good Taste* (London: SAGE publications, 1996), 202.

Under the influence of nuns

As can be expected of a cradle Catholic, the foundation of Mary Douglas' Catholic bias can be traced to her early childhood. Mary Douglas was born on 25 March 1921 in a mixed family of Catholics and Protestants. She recalled the period of her youth as a decidedly sectarian time. The world around her was distinctly divided into Catholics and Protestants. This strong sectarian worldview combined with the dominant authority of Catholic hierarchy left a firm mark on her adult life. Douglas acknowledged that the attendance of a convent school actively instilled her with the feeling of a sectarian sense of superiority.[28] In the first half of the twentieth century, the lives of Roman Catholics in England were characterized by a rich religious culture filled with ritual and hierarchy. The historian and Catholic priest Adrian Hastings described the univocal adherence to the solemn Latin Mass as having a central place in Catholic identity of the time, and further characterized the Catholicism of that period by its:

> Ancient pieties and nineteenth century continental devotional innovations […]. No one questioned that the mass should be in Latin, that lay participation in it should be almost entirely silent, that communion should be in one kind, that priests should be celibate and dressed in black cassocks […]. Within the Church's normal circles any challenge to the whole hard, objective, apparently unchanging order of hierarchy, creed and sacrament was simply unthinkable.[29]

While living with her grandparents for seven years in this highly ritualized Catholic climate, Mary Douglas had her first crucial experience with hierarchy. Regarding the hierarchical structure of her grandparents' house she noted that:

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[28] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013),19.
[29] Adrian Hastings, *A history of English Christianity, 1920-1985* (London: Collins, 1987).

> Living with grandparents is living in a hierarchy. Between this middle-aged couple all the important questions have been settled long ago. There are no disputes, no bad language, no mention of money in front of the children or servants. There are little mysteries, no one knows what they do not need to know, and nothing is quite what it seems. My grandfather is the nominal head of the house, but nobody could doubt that my grandmother is the person really in control. Inside the house is her sphere; outside is his.[30]

Mary Douglas fondly looked back to the hierarchical lifestyle she experienced at her grandparents' house. The German writer Erhart Kästner, speaking of the rituals he observed on Mount Athos, wrote: ''The soul feels good in rites. They are its solid shell […] The head wants novelty; the heart always wants the same thing.''[31] Likewise, Mary Douglas experienced a profound sense of security offered by the hierarchical and ritualistic lifestyle of her early life. She never changed her positive outlook on them. During these early years she experienced how restriction and license were closely correlated with one's age and function in the household. The reassuring hierarchical pattern offered at such a young age had left a lasting impact on her attitude towards hierarchy throughout her life. Yet the comfort she experienced at her grandparents' house was abruptly taken away from her at the age of twelve. When her mother died and her father retired from his post in Burma, she left her grandparents' house to live with her widowed father. While the hierarchical structures of her grandparents' house were not as strongly present while living with her father, she still came in contact with the necessary hierarchy and rituals that came with being raised as a Catholic girl at that time. She recalls how, despite the stern agnosticism of her father, she and her sister attended Mass and laid flowers on her mother's grave every Sunday.

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[30] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 17.
[31] Erhart Kästner, *Die Stundentrommel vom Heiligen Berg Athos (*Wiesbaden, 1956), 65.

Mary Douglas' life as a school girl at the Sacred Heart Convent in Roehampton was arguably even more influential for the development of her future ambitions. The education she received from the sisters at the Sacred Heart Convent, and perhaps even more importantly, the strong hierarchical and ritualistic school life she experienced there had a great impact on her way of thinking about such topics as hierarchy and ritual. Ultimately it introduced her to many of the problems she later wanted to study as an anthropologist.[32] Her mother was an ex-student of the school herself and entrusted her children to the sisters, who lovingly took them in. An act, according to Mary Douglas, that in itself could have been enough to let her remain loyal to Catholicism forever.[33] It was not only the kindness and erudition of the sisters that inspired her and made her feel right at home, but also the fact that the school life directly corresponded with the hierarchy she was used to while living with her grandparents.

In order to get an idea of the life Mary Douglas experienced at the convent school we can turn to Antonia White, who wrote about the daily prayer routine at the Roehampton Convent school in her pseudo-autobiographic book *Frost in May* roughly during the time Mary Douglas lived there.

> The whole day was punctuated by prayers. Besides the morning and evening devotions and the thrice-recurring Angelus, every lesson began with an invocation to the Holy Ghost and ended with a recommendation to Our Lady. Before supper, the whole school assembled to recite five decades of the rosary, and there was usually a novena in preparation for an important feast or a special intention to add some extra petitions to the list. The day ended with prayers in the chapel, and an elaborate examination of conscience under the

[32] Alan Macfarlane, ''Interview with Mary Douglas – February 2006 – part 1,'' YouTube video, 1:01:43, Posted [7 november 2007], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3oMdIRFDs.
[33] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 19.

> heading of sins against God, against one's neighbor and against oneself… On Saturdays every child in the school went to confession and, in the evening, after 'Exemptions', there were special devotions in the vestibule of Our Lady of Good Success… On Sundays all the children heard two masses and a sermon in the morning and went to Benediction in the afternoon.[34]

Perhaps for many of us today who are used to a more secular lifestyle, this near-monastic way of life might seem over-demanding for children. Yet Mary Douglas flourished in it. She had not only found reassurance in the hierarchy which filled the life at school; she actively tried to make use of all the benefits that came along with it. In her retelling of her early life, she claimed to have had at this young age a profound understanding of the underlying functions of the rules she had to live by. For example, she mentioned how she understood that the rule against running in the hallways was a way to secure the safety of all, and that the rule against talking in the hallways was a way of keeping the noise level under control. She also wrote that she saw hierarchy and rules not as ways to keep individuals down, but as reasonable methods for making life in a group possible and pleasant.[35] Hierarchy was expressed in many detailed aspects of daily life. Colors are mentioned as playing a large role in the hierarchical scheme. When a schoolgirl had an appointment with the Reverend Mother, she would have to wear brown gloves. On feast days the brown uniform and gloves were exchanged for white. Mary Douglas wrote that as a result of the hierarchy at school and due to the authority of the nuns, the school environment did not feel competitive to her. There was a strong pressure against personal vanity and showing-off. Instead, discretion and humility were the main virtues taught to the

[34] Gerald Grace, *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets and Morality* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2005), 39.
[35] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 19.

students. Achievements were not rewarded, only obedience to the rules. Douglas did well at school and even became head girl during her final year from 1937 to 1938.[36]

Mary Douglas acknowledges that the strongly hierarchical and stern lifestyle demanded by the school might have led certain students to develop an aversion to hierarchy after leaving.[37] Yet her own reaction was not one of rebellion but of thankfulness, for her time at the convent school gave her a task to work on for the rest of her life. After leaving the school she made it her mission to obtain a better understanding of the functions of hierarchy. Indeed this can be observed in her later works, such as *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols*, in which she extensively grappled with the concept of hierarchy. Considering her strongly hierarchical background, it is not strange to find that when Douglas thought of hierarchy, she first and foremost thought of her beloved Catholic Church.[38] Timothy Larsen goes even further by arguing that her love for hierarchy can be considered an apology for her religion as a whole, as failing to defend hierarchy would mean that she would have abandoned her spiritual mother, the Catholic Church.[39] Not only does the recurring attachment to hierarchy reveal an attachment to the Catholic Church, it also says much about her interpretation of the ideal hierarchy of the Church. Mary Douglas' position towards hierarchy puts her in the more conservative or traditional wing of the Catholic Church. While in some ways hierarchy was deemphasized by the Church in the second half of the twentieth century, she continued to be convinced of the important role of hierarchy in religious communities and warned the Christian community not to forget the unique vocation of a hierarchical church in a time of major reforms within the Catholic Church itself.[40] Her conservative criticism of the

[36] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas an intellectual biography* (London: Routledge, 2001), 14.
[37] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 21.
[38] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas an intellectual biography* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[39] Timothy Larsen, *The slain God: anthropologists and the Christian faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 139.
[40] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 31.

reforms surrounding the Second Vatican Council came to full fruition in her book *Natural Symbols,* which I will discuss later on.

Mary Douglas recalled that the education at the convent school was mainly geared towards humanities, and in particular towards history and theology. Naturally for a Catholic school at the time, Papal encyclicals were extensively taught to the students. Two encyclicals in particular left a deep impression on Mary Douglas; for these were her first encounter with social theory. These two were *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, which was written in a time deeply concerned with social justice and upcoming socialism, and the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno,* written by Pope Pius XI in 1931, which acted as a follow up of *Rerum Novarum* 40 years after its first appearance. Besides the encounter with these papal encyclicals, her Catholic education also provided her with a certain doctrinal framework about the sacramental reality of the world. She learned about the weakness of the human mind to fully understand the doctrinal mysteries such as the nature of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist and the resurrection of the body. She especially noted her early understanding of the communion of the saints as a ''cosmic exchange system across the spheres of the living and dead in which anyone might gain profit from the merits of others, and no one could suffer because of others' sins.''[41] All these typically Catholic teachings have helped shape Douglas understanding of the world, and left a lasting influence on her later anthropological work.

The struggles at the university

Initially, studying at the university was somewhat of an ordeal for Douglas. Her time at the Sacred Heart convent did not prepare her for the hard work that was needed in Oxford. She chose a study program of Philosophy, Politics and Economy (as the nuns were first skeptical of social sciences, thinking there was a link with socialism), yet found it not completely satisfactory. To her dismay, it involved a lot of math and

[41] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 22.

statistics. In 1942 she was sent to the Colonial Office for war service until 1946. In this period she would come in contact with many active anthropologists and, most importantly, had the opportunity to read their works. At this time she also learned about the prejudice of certain anthropologists against those who hold religious convictions. While they, partly joking and partly serious, argued that no anthropologist could be a sincere Catholic, Mary Douglas did not give up becoming exactly this: a sincerely Catholic anthropologist. After the war was over, she could finally do what suited her most: study anthropology in Oxford. Contrary to what she may have expected, she came across many fellow religious anthropologists from all kinds of creeds and traditions. She was relieved to experience such a diverse group of students and even staff who took their own religious background seriously. And perhaps more importantly, she came into contact with the new professor of anthropology Evans-Pritchard, who, like Douglas herself, was a Catholic.[42] The first anthropological work she read at university was Evan-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande,* and from this book her earlier understanding of hierarchy was affirmed.[43]

The importance of hierarchy

Mary Douglas' understanding of hierarchy is made most explicit in the article *A Feeling for Hierarchy*.[44] In this article, she describes ten principles of hierarchy, the understanding of which she argues to have partly developed during her life in the convent school.[45] With this in mind, we can read in these principles the influence of the Catholic convent which likely functioned as the model of her ideal hierarchy. She ordered these ten principles in the following way:

1) Hierarchy is a pattern of positions given in physical and social terms.

[42] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 24.
[43] Ibid., 25.
[44] Ibid., 18-23.
[45] Ibid., 18.

2) As competition would mess up the carefully worked out system, competition is restricted, subject disapproval from below as well as from above.
3) The top position is more ritual than effective, or political. Power is so diffuse that the husband, chief or king has little of it. In this sense it is not what we know as patriarchal.
4) Control of information protects stability. Communication in a hierarchy is characterized by forbidden words, silences and secrets.
5) The top level of authority must never fail to respect the lowest rank.
6) The final balance is achieved by dividing the whole system at every level into counter-poised halves, which have their own distinctive spaces, and are expected to compete collectively within defined limits. (This is the famous historical separation and mutual dependence of the medieval Church and State, and the American constitutional Separation of Powers.)
7) Complementarity is created and imposed by balancing one half against another, at every level, and in carnivals it is shown by regular ritual reversals.
8) A social hierarchy is like hierarchy in a mathematical sense; it is rational organization. It uses intellectual justification worked out by equivalencies and analogies.
9) Every situation at every level is judged and justified by reference to analogies; the body is the stock example of corporate unity, and gender the favorite example of complementarity.
10) The final justification is by reference to a comprehensive, universalizing microcosm.

When we compare the hierarchical understanding of the Catholic Church with the principles laid out by Mary Douglas, it is easy to see the strong resemblances. We observe the importance of knowing one's place as part of the clergy or laity, corresponding with the non-competitive characteristic of hierarchy (#2). Vying for high ecclesiastical functions is frowned upon, and much like the head girl at her

school, the dignities of becoming a bishop or cardinal are ideally only bestowed on those considered virtuous and suitable by the Pope, whose role is otherwise considered more ritual than effective (#3). The pope is first of all the head of the Church and the Vicar of Christ, his ritual presence is fundamental to the unity of the Church (though his administrative role cannot be ignored). At the same time the pope is given the title 'Servant of the Servants of God' (#5). While much less prevalent in the Church now, the control of information was maintained by issuing a list of forbidden books called the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (#4). The silent Canon prayed only by the priest in the Tridentine Mass (which she would have experienced as a girl) could be considered another example of this restriction or secrecy. Douglas stressed the separation and mutual dependence of the Church and secular power, which act as counter-poised halves (#6). The Church is known for its extensive calendar with times of feasts, contrasted by times of fasting, most explicitly on Fridays and during Lent as times of abstinence and having Carnival as a 'venting festival' (#7). The Catholic Church thoroughly rationalizes its hierarchy and compares it to the divine hierarchy of the angels (#8). The Church uses analogies to explain the positions in the hierarchy (#9). The Church is considered the body and Christ the head. The pope is the representative of Christ on earth, and the bishops the princes of the Church. Finally, hierarchy is justified in a universal microcosm. The hierarchy of the Church is the primary channel of the Holy Spirit and the most secure way of spreading grace and reaching the Kingdom of Heaven (#10). One could give many more examples to show how each of these principles directly correlates to aspects central to the Catholic Church, but we are made most secure in knowing their direct influence by Douglas' own testimony, stating that her life at the convent school was indeed thoroughly influential. It is therefore more than likely that Mary Douglas' ideas on hierarchy were inspired by these personal experiences of her own religion. In turn the sensitivity towards these hierarchy principles she developed during her time Catholic childhood could have a positive influence on her work. The

development of a catholic bias had helped her to successfully use a Catholic inspired framework for creating a more general theory on hierarchy.

As mentioned before, throughout her life Mary Douglas never considered hierarchy as a negative concept and instead fought against the misconception of hierarchy as an oppressive force. Mary Douglas did not see hierarchy as a merely top-down form of organization, nor necessarily paired with an oversized bureaucracy, both of which she considers signs of an unhealthy functioning of hierarchy. Rather, it exists out of the responsibility one has for others. Instead of seeing hierarchy as an oppressive system, which she would rather call tyranny, she emphasised how hierarchy first of all offers security. The elementary importance of hierarchy is well presented in her book *Purity and Danger,* in which Mary Douglas went as far as arguing that social beings have a necessary love for order and feel universally troubled by disorder. This was a position she had to nuance in light of the disorderly period she was living in. To Mary Douglas hierarchy was in fact essential for the happiness of humankind, and it needed to be defended now more than ever. However, her defense of hierarchy was not appreciated by many of her contemporaries and her counter-cultural optimistic view of hierarchy made a clash with more libertarian individuals of her time almost inevitable.[46]

Defending form

Mary Douglas' was aware that her positive outlook on ritualism and hierarchy might have even surprised some Catholics. She remarked that: ''If you're brought up a Catholic you can be more anti-clerical and more free in joking about sacred matters than if you're on the outside, tiptoeing politely around.''[47] She was also very much aware that her fondness of hierarchy was entirely counter-cultural. The sixties and seventies of the twentieth century were characterized by a revolution against

[46] Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013), 274.
[47] Ibid., 265.

traditional norms and morals, and resulted in a certain degree of rebellion against traditional ways of life, in particular towards hierarchical structures and sexual norms. Mary Douglas wrote two of her most influential works in this period of cultural turmoil, *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970). Indeed *Natural Symbols* is sometimes called counter-cultural in the sense that it goes against the main counter-culture of its day, the so-called 'flower children' movement of the sixties.[48] The book can be interpreted in a variety of ways, first of all as a critical anthropological study of ritual and hierarchy, and secondly as a more personal defense of traditional Catholic positions on ritual and hierarchy. Reading *Natural Symbols,* it quickly becomes clear that Mary Douglas had a very specific message, or rather a warning, for Western society: preserve common rituals and hierarchy or suffer the consequences. It may be surprising to see that Mary Douglas did not only observe the process of identity making rituals, but actively endorsed their cultivation and conservation. Right from the start of her book *Natural Symbols,* she argues that one of the gravest problems of our day is the lack of commitment to common symbols, the wide-spread rejection of rituals and the revolt against formalism, even against form itself.[49] In the chapter *The Bog Irish,* she even more explicitly shows herself a passionate defender of ritual. She argues that we have underestimated the value of ritual as a fundamental mechanism in identity making. Her main example of an important identity making ritual comes again from her own religion: Friday abstinence. The Catholic practice of abstaining from eating meat on Fridays in remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ on Good Friday, she argues, is an efficient ritual for developing a sense of belonging to a worldwide Catholic community. She paints the situation of Irish immigrants who, thanks to the observance of Friday abstinence, could experience an allegiance to their home in Ireland and to a glorious tradition in Rome while working in hostile non-Catholic territories. At the same time Mary Douglas laments the insensitivity towards these rituals by certain Church

[48] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1996), XIII.
[49] Mary Douglas, *Natural symbols* (New York: Random House, 1974), 19.

reformers, who were active around the Second Vatican Council. These reformers argued from a position quite similar to the protestant bias, revealing the belief that ritual conformity does not contribute to personal commitment to the faith. Mary Douglas herself points out the link with protestant modes of believing by saying: ''There is no need to go back to the Reformation to recognise the wave on which these modern Catholics are rather incongruously riding.''[50] Indeed, Mary Douglas often speaks out against certain decisions of the Church regarding changes in ritual and hierarchical practices after the Council, showing a profound involvement with her own religion supplemented by her own anthropological positions which rather emphasize the meaningfulness of rituals. While in this period the Catholic Church intended to simplify and reform their rituals, Mary Douglas argued that this will only damage the Church. She argued that when one starts to tinker with ritual, the 'flood-gates' of confusion are opened and it might even destroy people's sensitivity to the more fundamental rituals of Catholicism, such as the Eucharist. Rather than simplifying and limiting highly symbolic practices, the Church should try to build and expand on them. Throughout the chapter we get to understand how personally important the subject of ritual is to Mary Douglas by the accumulation of her frustrations towards the anti-ritualists in the Church. At the height of her frustration she noted that it is ''as if the liturgical signal boxes were manned by color-blind signalmen.''[51] We can only imagine how distressing it must have been for Mary Douglas to be torn between her personal convictions on the subject of ritual and her desire to be loyal to the Catholic Church, to which she owed not only her upbringing but also, in part, her anthropological worldview.

Holding a mirror to Western society

Anthropological writings have given us a new framework of experience, and have engraved our minds with a strong sense of cultural relativism. On the other hand the

[50] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5.
[51] Mary Douglas. *Natural symbols* (New York: Random House, 1974), 64.

experiences with the small-scale communities of 'primitive' cultures functioned as a mirror to ourselves. Some Westerners began to argue that we had lost our way in our complex modern individualist societies. In this fashion anthropology has contributed to our sense of cultural alienation and disintegration. While religion used to provide us with common symbols, shared rituals and a stable worldview, it has fallen prey to cultural relativism and anti-ritualism. The rise of cultural relativism created a rupture in the world of religion, of which the writings of the anti-modernist popes and the Second Vatican Council are Catholic examples. One had to choose between accepting this new modern worldview or rejecting it in principle. We can therefore divide religion in the West between those who incorporate the new flexible, individualist and liberal aspects of modern culture and those who act more counter-culturally and try to maintain faith in the orthodox and orthoprax structures of religion. We can see this attitude very clearly within the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council and it thus provided one of the main issues for Mary Douglas both inside and outside her religion.

While she criticized much of the ritual reforms of the Catholic Church during her life, her positive reevaluation of hierarchy and ritualism can be interpreted as some sort of apologety for the traditional Catholicism she grew up with. She argued that her main enemies were the anti-ritualists. Throughout Douglas' work we are warned against these specific pitfalls of modern society: the rise of individualism and the loss of community, hierarchy and common rituals.[52] These warnings are sometimes prophetic in tone. A striking example of this is her description of a future without ritual and hierarchy, which functioned as an attack on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and likeminded philosophers:

> Poor little Jean-Paul Sartre was such an unhappy, anxious child because he was living in a patternless adult world... The heroic

[52] Timothy Larsen, *The slain God: anthropologists and the Christian faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 147.

> figures of individualism ought to be exposed for the unpleasant creatures they were. We are losing community, meaning, shared values and the unity of knowledge. We are losing the ability to engage in metaphysical discussions and instead creating a fragmented world in which crackpot individualists believe in flying saucers and alien space invaders. The final triumph of the anti-ritualists would create a dystopia as bleak as Narnia under the tyranny of the White Witch: It would be always winter and never Christmas.[53]

Mary Douglas thus shows a deep desire to fight the individualist methodology by emphasizing the importance of shared rituals. She sees it as her duty as an anthropologist to prevent the world from taking this individualistic turn. Although she finds that anthropology should work as a force against individualism, instead, she sees that anthropology is being taken over by methodological individualism resulting from the dominance of economic theory in social sciences. In the interview with McFarlane, she once more stresses this:

> What we have to fight, I think, as anthropologists, is the present very strong methodological individualism, which gives us not a chance. We would have a much better chance if we could overcome that very strong bias which results from the hegemony of economic theory in the social sciences.[54]

Similarly, Mary Douglas was sensitive to the Protestant bias, which she felt was dominant in the social studies of her time. Mary Douglas saw the ideology of the Protestant reformation as an important contribution to the increasing anti-ritualism and individualism in the West. Already on the first page of the first chapter of her

[53] Ibid., 140, 147-148.

[54] Alan Macfarlane, ''Interview with Mary Douglas – February 2006 – part 1,'' YouTube video, 1:01:43, Posted [7 november 2007], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3oMdIRFDs.

book *Natural Symbols* she reacts to the work of Jack Newfield by calling it 'Shades of Luther', and again argues that ''we find ourselves, here and now, reliving a world-wide revolt against ritualism.''[55] In this way Mary Douglas directly linked anti-ritualism to traditionally protestant lines of thinking. By now, the suspicion that Mary Douglas' positions were perhaps too deeply influenced by her Catholicism became more widely shared by her critics. She notably received criticism from peers who began to feel increasingly uneasy by her passionate defense of ritual and hierarchy. Amongst them was Edmund Leach who went as far as to say that Mary Douglas was using her erudition in ''the service of Roman Catholic propaganda.''[56]

In conclusion we can argue that Mary Douglas, while recognized as a brilliant anthropologist both during and after her lifetime, has never been able to completely put her Catholicism to the sideline. Instead, her Catholicism has always been central in her life and indeed in her work. In *A Feeling for Hierarchy* she openly admits that her reading of Leviticus is ''not so much an anthropological reading as a reading by a Catholic anthropologist.''[57] And again in one of her last books, *Jacob's Tears: the Priestly Works of Reconciliation,* Douglas mentioned that she has not only taken a vacation in the field of Bible studies; the Bible has been her main interest and central focus of all her works.[58] Her love for her Catholic religion is made explicit in her defense of Catholicism in general. In an interview with the Norwegian anthropologist Frederick Barth, Mary Douglas asked if he thinks there would be a time when Catholicism could be seen in the same benevolent light as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam or African religion, to which Barth replies with sincere doubts. Douglas explained that the Catholic Church has the disadvantage of having 2000 years of dominance over Western culture. The Catholic religion can therefore not

[55] Mary Douglas, *Natural symbols* (New York: Random House, 1974), 19.
[56] Edmund R. Leach, ''Mythical Inequalities,'' in *New York Review of Books,* 28 January, 1971.
[57] Richard Fardon,Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life (London: SAGE, 2013). 35
[58] Mary Douglas, *Jacobs Tears: the Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

benefit from being framed as an ethnic victim of Western hegemony and is consequently largely unable to receive our sympathy.[59] However, Mary Douglas has made her own contribution in weakening the bias against Catholicism by showing us the importance and benefits of hierarchy and common rituals, such as those that are present in the Catholic Church. Her anthropological mission has always been entangled with her passionate adherence to Catholicism. In a later interview she summarized this by saying: ''All I can say is that for me there was always going to be an internal dialogue between religion and anthropology, each illuminating the other. There it is.''[60]

[59] Richard Fardon,*Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life* (London: SAGE, 2013). 15

[60] Richard Fardon,Mary Douglas: a very personal method ; anthropological writings drawn from life (London: SAGE, 2013). 35.

2. Robert Orsi

Towards Greater Understanding of Lived Religion

Robert Orsi is one of the central scholars in the field of religious studies today. As the first holder of the Grace Craddock Nagle Chair in Catholic studies at Northwestern University he is one of the leading Catholicism scholars in the world. As a man who grew up in a devout American-Italian Catholic household in the Bronx and who kept a constant close relationship with the Catholic faithful, he is furthermore well-equipped to understanding the Catholic way of life. Robert Orsi is best known for his books on the subject of Catholic devotions. These works are characterized by a representation style which tries to stay as faithful as possible to the worldview of the subjects. He published influential books in the field of Catholic studies and religious studies in general such as: *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985), *Thank You, St. Jude* (1998) and *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005). As suggested by the subtitle of *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, part of Robert Orsi's interests concerns the way religion scholars relate themselves to their subject. Naturally this means that the exploration of personal biases often comes forward in his work, which often seem studies of himself just as much as the communities he set out to study. As was the case with Mary Douglas, Robert Orsi is a student of religion with an explicit Catholic background. And yet again we can see how this catholic background played a role in his development as a student of religion. The practices of the Catholic religion seem to have played such a large role in Orsi's life that they can be considered to have been fundamental in the development of his methodology. Furthermore, his lifelong experience with the Catholic religion may have allowed him to see things in religion that other scholars might not have been able to see. In order to demonstrate this, I will first discuss how exactly Catholicism is part of Robert Orsi's life, and what traces it left on his work.

Personal experience with Catholicism

Robert Orsi's academic career can be seen as something of a balancing act between the feelings of familiarity and otherness towards the religion in which he grew up. This tension resulted in a recurring theme in his works, which centers around one of the most profound problems of students of religion today: the relationship we have with our subjects. The question Orsi asks is: how do we study ways of living and imagining that we do not share? Even if we have once shared them, and even when we continue to share them, we have trained ourselves to approach them with different questions imposed by an academic methodology that forever changes our relationship with religion.[61] From this background, Robert Orsi foregrounds the question how we can better understand the ways our personal outlook, our personal 'bias' as Mary Douglas might have called it, impacts our work as academics. He naturally starts this investigation with himself. He acknowledges that he has not only struggled to understand others, but also with being misunderstood himself, together with the religion he studies. These frustrations are related to his experience with a particular attitude towards religion, corresponding to the protestant bias, which he felt was dominant at the American universities he worked for.[62] This attitude has made our understanding of Catholicism, as well as similar religions, problematic and thus contributed to the misunderstandings Robert Orsi experienced in reaction to his work. In response to this troubling conclusion, Robert Orsi offers an alternative perspective centering on religion as a web of relationships, while employing an approach rooted in the lived religion paradigm in order to create better ways of understanding Catholicism as well as religion as a whole.

Robert Orsi's methodology stands out as rather unique and experimental. In his works the strict separation between researcher and research subjects is blurred. In *Between Heaven and Earth,* Orsi actively tries to uncover the grounds of his own

[61] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
[62] Ibid., 188.

interest in religion alongside that of others. His books and articles are full of personal family stories, adding an autobiographic touch to his research, in which even his personal existential doubts concerning religion are covered. Despite this, he proved to be excellently capable of upholding a high standard in academic methodology without descending into pure subjectivism. He consistently adds these autobiographical details out of the conviction that it is time for religion scholars to be open about their personal religious background and standing. In *Between Heaven and earth* he invites others to follow his example by saying:

> I've […] long thought that the time has come in the history of the discipline for a season of public autobiographical self-reflection when we explore the social, psychological, and cultural grounds of our work, just as anthropologists no longer occlude themselves in the field. Such critical self-examination I now see as part of the necessary ongoing precritical work of the discipline.[63]

Concerning Robert Orsi's own position in the Catholic religion, we are made aware that he is not an active practitioner of Catholicism in the way his family and the majority of the people he studies are. Yet his personal religious positions towards the Catholic faith are not as straightforward as one might think, for he still shows himself being invested in the Catholic worldview on a deeply personal level. His doubts and struggles about between being both an insider and an outsider at the same time are apparent from his writings and will also come forward later in this chapter.

Compared to Mary Douglas, who showed herself in her writing as a somewhat untypical stronghold of orthodox or traditional Catholicism, Robert Orsi took a perhaps more common path. He exhibits existential struggles with the religion in which he was brought up, while adapting to the methods and ways of thinking taught at university. These struggles, as well as his personal resolutions, are

[63] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 14.

accurately represented in his book *Thank you St. Jude.* Here Robert Orsi provided a very intimate and personal insight into his own doubts concerning his religious participation in a personal reflection whether he should pray to St. Jude or not after being asked to do so by one of the people he interviewed. He doubted whether one, in order to truly understand the devotees of St. Jude, had to experience first-hand what it is like to pray to him. After all, his family had never taught him devotion to this particular saint and he had no personal experience praying to him. He concluded that it would have felt like a betrayal to his unique academic distance which enabled him to understand the cult of St. Jude on another level. He has made the choice not to live the life of a devotee, but rather as a somewhat nearby and personally invested academic. Robert Orsi describes the struggling relationship between his Catholic background and his academic work in the following way:

> My complex autobiographical relationship with the community I was working in was as much a barrier as a meeting ground. I was less inside the tradition than I had thought, or more precisely, I seemed both thoroughly inside and outside […]. There had been a break between me and the world I studied, and the rupture had occurred on the most intimate levels, involving deep intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and existential questions […]. Now it seemed to me that of all the traditions I might study, I was least equipped, emotionally, existentially, and intellectually, to study my own.[64]

This excerpt makes clear that Robert Orsi started developing a certain love-hate relationship with his own religious background. Before, he saw his own Catholic background as a perk to his research, but here he started showing serious doubts about its actual contribution to his academic work. While he sadly concludes that this is the predicament of many scholars of religion, we do

[64] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 149.

not need to consider this struggle as especially problematic considering the contribution of his Catholic background to his unique and critical attitude towards the field of religion studies.[65]

Despite the fact that Robert Orsi is not a practicing Catholic anymore, he still shows personal motives for studying Catholicism in particular. His choice to become a Catholic scholar is, quite unsurprisingly, inspired by his personal experiences of growing up with his Catholic family. As was the case with Mary Douglas, his fascination for religion comes from his early childhood. As a young boy he witnessed the great influence religion had on his parent's behavior. He began to wonder: ''Who or what was so powerful and so real that they bowed to it, pleaded and argued with it, sometimes were bitterly angry toward it, and at other times made joyous by it?'' The memories he has of his childhood chapel are another source of inspiration. ''When I am asked, why do you study what you study? What I think of is this chapel.''[66]

The saints had a particularly substantial influence over both the personal life as well as the professional life of Robert Orsi. Throughout his work on Catholic devotions, the saints keep pride of place as one of the most pervasive aspects in Catholic devotional life. He has not only devoted an entire book to the cult of one particular saint (namely, Saint Jude), but he consistently confronts us with the powerful relationships Catholics have with the saints as a common thread throughout his books. On a personal level, Robert Orsi is no stranger to the powerful presence of the saints in his family life. In the first chapter of *Between Heaven and Earth,* he introduces the reader to his mother, who was gravely ill at the time when he was finishing the book. He describes how his mother was lying in the hospital bed surrounded by the presence of the saints: a statuette of Our Lady of Fatima tightly in one hand and the rosary beads slipping through the fingers of her other hand. Her

[65] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 151.
[66] Ibid., 159.

family would speak about their favorite saints with the nurses, who equally showed their devotion to saints such as Padre Pio and St. Jude.

> So in the hour and a half before a surgical procedure four holy figures crowded in with the humans around my mother's bed – Our Lady of Fatima, Padre Pio, Saint Jude and Our Lady of Lourdes – and this was not a Catholic hospital. The Saints came in rounds of stories and their presence on this day became another story in those rounds.[67]

Another memory displaying his experience with the strong devotion of his mother to the saints recalls his visit with Karen McCarthy Brown, a leading scholar of Haitian religions, to a Vodou celebration. The idea of her son visiting a Vodou ceremony genuinely distressed Robert Orsi's mother, fearing both for his physical and spiritual welfare. At the height of her distress she took out the prayer cards of deceased Jesuit fathers she had known while working at Fordham University to ask for their support.[68] Robert Orsi recalls these experiences for a reason. They have helped him develop his own theory of religion as a network of relationships between heaven and earth. The practical awareness of the ever-present community of saints, a Catholic doctrine that teaches that our human experience is fundamentally connected with the saints in heaven and with the souls in purgatory, stood at the basis of Orsi's understanding that the religious world is made and sustained within networks of relationships.[69]

Lived Religion

As mentioned before, Robert Orsi's works follow the lived religion approach popularized by Meredith McGuire. In the article *Reflections on Anthropology's*

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[67] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1-2.
[68] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 5.
[69] Ibid., 2.

Ethnographic Crisis of Faith, David Snow describes the characteristic change in tone as promoted by lived religion scholars: ''Some critics […], suggest a way out by privileging the voices and discourse of those studied. This implies a shift from authorial voice to informant voice.''[70] This change of voice from authorial to informing is indeed very characteristic for the work of Robert Orsi. We find throughout his books and articles a large expressive space for the people he studies. Even chapter titles take the form of quotations.[71] It is made very clear when we hear the voices of the people Orsi interviewed and when we hear the voice of Orsi himself. He argues that by letting people explain themselves using their own words, he is able to avoid the problem that some people might not be able to recognise themselves anymore in the ethnographies that supposedly represent them. The fear of anthropological research turning into fiction has been experienced by other scholars,[72] but takes a particularly central place in Robert Orsi's work. Perhaps due to the misunderstandings he himself experienced as a Catholicism scholar and the ill-will he perceived towards the religion of his childhood, he developed a strong dislike of imposing and overly authorial scholarship. This sensitivity was very clearly expressed in a critical article towards Russell McCutcheon's book *The Discipline of Religion,* in which Robert Orsi called out the coldness of treating human experiences are mere data for scholars to analyse.

> A devout working class man who kneels to pray at his wife's grave, suddenly uncertain and afraid at the end of his own life of what lies ahead, has attained the status of data; he has become a fit candidate for theorization. A suburban Pentecostal woman speaking in tongues, an Orthodox family preparing for high holy days, a Mexican migrant imploring Guadalupe for a healing, a pilgrim to the shrine of the

[70] David A. Snow, and Calvin Morrill, ''Reflections on Anthropology's Ethnographic Crisis of Faith,''*Contemporary Sociology,* Vol. 22, No. 1 (1993): 8-11.
[71] See for example in *Between Heaven and Earth* chapter one: ''Mildred, is it fun to be a cripple?''
[72] David A. Snow, and Calvin Morrill, ''Reflections on Anthropology's Ethnographic Crisis of Faith,''*Contemporary Sociology,* Vol. 22, No. 1 (1993): 8-11.

> imprint of Krishna's foot: these are our specimens, their words [according to McCutcheon] "heuristically useful, everyday rhetorical fictions." Do the theorized have any voice to speak back to the italicizing theorizer? Can they challenge the assertion that they are in need of theorization or this construal of their lives? Can they protest being made into a theoretician's "fair game"? If they do, McCutcheon never says so, which is a serious omission: the data remain silent, as one might expect of data. A book that sets out to call attention to the dynamics of power/knowledge in the study of religion winds up proposing the most egregious exercise of power as the disciplines' fundamental work. And once again, religious studies can't look its subject in the eyes.[73]

Another typical feature of the lived religion paradigm displayed by Robert Orsi is his distrust of the word 'belief', noting that belief is an inadequate descriptor for the experiences in practical religion.[74] In the introduction to his book *Between Heaven and Earth* we do not only read about the problems he foresees with the too great focus on religion as a set of beliefs, but, at the same time, we can read how Robert Orsi actively blurs the line between himself as a researcher and his research subject by addressing first of all his own beliefs:

> Do I believe in Papa Gede? Do I believe in Gemma Galgani, the guardian angels, the souls in purgatory […]. Do I think they are really there? Are they real? This is what would be so incomprehensible and so scandalous. The word belief bears heavy weight in public talk about religion in contemporary America: to 'believe in' a religion means that one has deliberated over and then

[73] Russell T. McCutcheon, ''It's a Lie. There's No Truth in It! It's a Sin!'': On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from themselves.'' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 74 (3) (2006): 722.
[74] Robert A. Orsi, "Belief," *Material Religion 7*, no. 1 (2011): 10-16.

> assented to its propositional truths, has chosen this religion over other available options, a personal choice unfettered by authority, tradition or society. What matters about religion from this perspective are its ideas and not its things, practices, or presences […]. But belief has always struck me as the wrong question, especially when it is offered as a diagnostic for determining the realness of the gods. The saints, gods, ancestors, and so on are real in experience and practice, in relationships between heaven and earth, in the circumstances of people's lives and histories, and in the stories people tell about them. Realness imagined this way may seem too little for some and too much for others. But it has always seemed real enough to me.[75]

In the article simply called *Belief,* Robert Orsi tackles the issues produced by having too strong a focus on religious beliefs yet again. Noting first of all that the notion religion = belief is relatively recent, and rooted within Protestant biases towards religion, Orsi writes:

> Encoded within the DNA of religion-as-belief, however, was the memory of early modern violence, in particular the mutual hatred of Protestants and Catholics, and especially, with the development of the study of religion in Protestant or post-Catholic contexts, by a fierce anti-Catholicism. 'Belief' named a way of being religious that was the antithesis of Catholicism, of its hierarchy its onerous proliferation of rules and sins, its saints, miracles, rituals, gestures, and above all the Catholic experience of the presence of the holy in matter, in things—first of all in the consecrated Host, and also in relics, in features of the natural environment (in grottos, rivers,

[75] Orsi, Robert A. Between heaven and earth the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. P. 18.

stones, and trees), in statues, images, in the movements and gestures of bodies, in oils and water.[76]

The issues of the protestant bias

The discussion of the concept of belief directly linked Robert Orsi's lived religion sensitivities with a critical examination of the protestant bias in religious studies. In accord with Tomoko Masuzawa's book *The Invention of World Religions,* Orsi acknowledges that there is a strong Christian bias present in the study of religion. Yet, in the article *The ''So-Called History'' of the Study of Religion*, Robert Orsi disagrees with Masuzawa's particular characterization of this Christian bias. Orsi contributes to the discussion by emphasizing the fact that the Christian influences on the field of religious studies were much more complex as they were made to appear by Tomoko Masuzawa in *The Invention of World Religions.*[77] Orsi found that the main complications originated from the development of a ''liberal and enlightened civic Protestant buffer'' in the American field of religious studies starting in the nineteenth century.[78] Central to Orsi's critique of our modern religious studies is the restrictive nature of the concept of religion as understood by many students of religion. According to Orsi this restrictive concept prefers an academic, protestant ideal form of religion and willfully neglects aspects of religion that do not conform to it. He argues that this academic interpretation of religion is as old as the age of the Enlightenment,[79] a remark similar in tone to Mary Douglas' ''shades of Luther''.

Quoting Jonathan Z. Smith, Robert Orsi argues that out of all the binary pairs students of religion apply to their understanding of religion, such as popular/official, heresy/orthodoxy and good/bad, the us/them distinction is the most dominant.[80] The exclusivism in the study of religion, according to Orsi, is precisely due to this

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[76] Orsi, Robert A. "Belief." *Material Religion* 7, no. 1 (2011): 10-16.
[77] Robert A. Orsi, "The "So-Called History" of the Study of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, no. 2 (2008): 134-38.
[78] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 185.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., 175.

''mother of all religious dichotomies us/them'', claiming that the distinction between us/them has regularly constituted a moral distinction between good and bad religion.[81] As a consequence, when one of these unattractive sides of religion rears its head, students tend to exclude it from the sphere of religion by refusing to acknowledge it as being religion. As an example of this, Robert Orsi presents the way the terrorist attacks on 9/11 have been broadly eschewed as an expression of religion and were rather portrayed as a perversion or distortion of the 'true' religion of Islam.[82] Other examples come from personal experiences with the reaction of students following Robert Orsi's classes. Students of various universities in New York, Indiana and Massachusetts have all unfailingly refused to accept the practice of pouring holy water in a car's transmission (which Orsi explains is a common practice for pilgrims to the Bronx' Lourdes shrine) as a religious phenomenon. According to Robert Orsi, the reluctance to call such expressions religion originates in a generally felt antipathy from students at American universities. If this antipathy does not lead to exclusion, such religious practices are otherwise sanitized or reimagined, as can be witnessed in Western Buddhism.[83] The sanitation of religion becomes especially noticeable in the debate surrounding religious violence. Orsi noted that, particularly in the United States, religious terrorism is often argued to be a perversion or distortion of religion. Instead of religious violence being recognized as a feature of religious behavior, religion becomes limited to its manageable and agreeable expressions. ''People want to be reassured that the men who flew their planes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, were not representatives of 'real' or 'good' Islam.''[84]

[81] Ibid., 183.
[82] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 179.
[83] Ibid., 189.
[84] Ibid., 179.

Robert Orsi gives an explanation of how the study of religion and this particular attitude towards religion became intrinsically entangled in the Protestant versus Catholic sentiments.

> Discourse about 'religion' and 'religions,' in which the dilemmas, judgments, hatreds, and longings of modern Christian history were inevitably if unconsciously embedded – nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholarship on 'Hindu' ritual, for instance, echoed with anti-Catholic contempt for corporal religious idioms and revealed less about religious practices in South Asia than about internecine European hatreds – became one medium for construing the peoples dominated by European nations, at home and abroad. […] The epistemologies, methods, and nomenclature of scholarship in religion are all implicated in this history.[85]

Orsi argued that studying religion has become virtually impossible without ''working to establish both a normative hierarchy of religious idioms [...] and a methodological justification for it.''[86] This followed generally adhered ethical principles endorsed in American academia which Orsi called pious non-sectarianism. This pious non-sectarianism then effected what became seen as tolerable religion as well as tolerable Christianity.[87] In order to understand the origin of this view of tolerable religion, we have to take a look at the scholars of the early twentieth century who shaped modern academia. Orsi noted that, despite the fact that these scholars often came from orthodox Christian households, they rebelled against their home faith while continuing to be passionately informed by protestant values. Orsi argues that according to the protestant bias of these scholars:

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[85] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 178.
[86] Ibid., 183.
[87] Ibid., 184.

> True religion […] is epistemologically and ethically singular. It is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats), monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter. It is concerned with ideal essences not actual things, and especially not about presences in things.[88]

Robert Orsi adds to this that they considered only one acceptable methodology and epistemology for studying this religion, namely: critical, analytical and 'objective' (as opposed to 'subjective,' existentially engaged or participatory). Religions that do not fit the 'true religion' characteristics, such as Mormonism, Catholicism and Pentecostalism are often called by other names than religion such as sects, cults, fundamentalisms, popular piety, ritualism, magic, primitive religion, millennialism and so on.[89] In reaction to this, Robert Orsi defends the study of so-called lived religions, religion as it shows itself among the people.

The Catholicism he studied, full of wild and exotic devotions, became his prime example of a religion that would normally be considered intolerable to societies under the influence of the protestant bias. Interestingly, in his book *Thank You St. Jude,* we read how not only those outside of the Catholic Church criticize the cult of saints, such as academically trained psychologists, but also how Catholic priests themselves became vocal against traditional Catholic aspects of religion. In *Between Heaven and Earth,* Robert Orsi experienced the negative attitude towards saint devotion from certain influential Catholic reformers after the Second Vatican Council. After explaining his research on Saint Jude to a prominent Catholic liturgical reformer, he stood up and accused Robert Orsi of bringing back everything

[88] Ibid., 188.
[89] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 188.

they worked so hard to do away with. Another account of a Catholic speaker accusing traditional devotion is shown in *Thank you St. Jude.* Here we read about Jesuit fathers, in particular father Molinari, addressing the ''infantile nature'' of some aspects of the cult of saints, calling them unwholesome.[90] The same ideals which both Robert Orsi and Winnifred Sullivan attributed to the protestant bias (namely that religion should be nonanthropomorphic, strictly monotheistic, emotionally controlled and chiefly preoccupied with mind and spirit instead of body and matter) can therefore also be seen in the criticism of these Catholic reformers. This shows that the protestant bias, in agreement with Sullivan's explanation, is indeed not restricted to Protestants with a capital P.

By studying typical Catholic religious expressions, Robert Orsi followed in the footsteps of Mary Douglas by redeeming aspects of religion that were for a long time primarily considered negative. Robert Orsi felt compelled to come up with alternative approaches to study Catholic devotions which do not follow the same pitfalls leading to moral appraisal of religious practices. Instead of understanding religion from an exclusively rationalist point of view (that is, as a medium people use for explaining and modeling reality), he understood religion first of all as a network of relationships between heaven and earth.

> The least helpful way of thinking about this would be to try to account for what happened when women prayed to St. Jude in the way that last century's scientists explained the cures at Lourdes, finding causes that follow common sense for religious phenomena. More useful is to review how these women created and sustained a world in relation to St. Jude, based on the evidence of the past three chapters, how they imagined reality and its alternatives, and how

[90] Robert A. Orsi, *Thank you, St. Jude: womens devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 193.

> they lived in this imagined and reimagined world through their devotions.[91]

Orsi argued that seeing religion in terms of relationships is a better way to safeguard one's research from the pervasive use of binary pairs. The focus on relationships shows that people and their gods, saints, angels and so on, are caught up in struggles on earth. These relationships are ambiguous, not necessarily beneficial or harmful for the religious practitioner, and foreground the negotiating and compromising aspect of religion. Once religion is seen as a web of relationships, the student of religion might come to understand that he or she participates in them together with the saints (or other divine beings) and the practitioners. Ideally this dynamic approach to religion takes students of religion away from their safe university offices and makes it substantially more difficult to see themselves as solely interpreters of meanings. Ideally we should become aware that being in a relationship with those we have gone to study implies that we do not have to perfectly understand them. Rather, we become aware of our relationships as inflected by needs, desires and feelings drawing on personal histories and experiences. Robert Orsi seems to argue that this is not just an alternative approach to research, but instead a crucially needed awareness for every student of religion since no matter how hard we try we inevitably get caught up in these relationships.[92] Orsi himself has been entangled with the saints since his childhood and even after becoming a non-practitioner of Catholicism he has never stopped being aware of these important relationships that construct religious behavior.

In conclusion, we have seen the powerful influence of Orsi's Catholic background on his perspective on religion. His experience with the multitude of

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[91] Robert A. Orsi, *Thank you, St. Jude: womens devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 185.

[92] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 5.

cults of saints in Catholicism helped him to develop his interpretation of religion as a web of relationships. His approach and outlook on religion are deeply rooted in the lived religion paradigm, moving the focus away from religious beliefs and textual sources and towards religion as practiced and experienced by people themselves. We have seen how Robert Orsi used the lived religion paradigm to redeem aspects of religion willfully neglected by students of religion. We have also read his explanation how this neglect originated in the dominant protestant bias of students of religion at American universities, and how this bias developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The protestant bias in the study of religion is still noticeable in the way reporters and academics have treated religious violence in recent times. Therefore, Robert Orsi's argument is indeed very relevant for our times. Robert Orsi pleads more for transparency of the positions of the researcher, as well as giving our subjects a bigger voice in our studies. In this way the distance between university and reality should decrease, and academics will no longer have a relationship with mere data but with human beings. Robert Orsi's contribution to the change of paradigm in religious studies might help us not only have a greater sensitivity towards all religious aspects, but also to reform the relationship between researchers and their subjects.

3: Birds of a feather

In the previous two chapters I have looked into the ways the Catholic background of Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi influenced their lives and, most importantly, their academic work, in order to answer the question whether and how the Catholic background influenced topics in anthropology and religion studies respectively. As it turns out, the Catholic backgrounds of both scholars had considerable influence over their work. Most of all we found some striking similarities between their individual approaches towards religion, in particular in their efforts to promote more appropriate research attitudes towards the Catholic religion. In both cases these shared tendencies seem to be largely influenced by their experience with Catholic culture and practices during their lives. Now we should ask the question: what are the key similarities between these two scholars who share a similar religious background? And are these similarities enough to start identifying a catholic bias?

We have seen how the experience of growing up in a Catholic background remained important to both scholars whether they continued to consider themselves practicing Catholics or not. While Catholicism played a decidedly different role in their personal lives (certainly in part due to generational and cultural differences) neither Mary Douglas nor Robert Orsi had completely withdrawn from its influence. Mary Douglas has always kept her gratitude towards the Church for her upbringing in the English convent school. She frequently mentioned how she experienced a clear connection between her positive experiences with hierarchy and ritual as a child and her later anthropological work concerning these topics. She has never stopped calling herself a Catholic, and throughout her life as an anthropologist she defended her Catholicism against skeptics. Catholicism was therefore not only the provider of Mary Douglas' personal beliefs and way of life, but also provided her with a *raison d'être*: to stand by her religion by defending the concepts of ritual and hierarchy against the anti-ritualists of her time. Mary Douglas' work has been criticized for its

Catholic tendencies by other anthropologists and her work could even be described as a resistance to the protestant bias. Indeed, Douglas herself has argued that the uncharitable view towards these concepts was directly connected with the line of thinking resulting from the Protestant reformation, and went as far as calling the anti-ritualist and anti-hierarchical attitude of modern culture ''shades of Luther''.

Robert Orsi, similarly, had a strongly Catholic upbringing in an Italian-American family in the Bronx, New York. Like Mary Douglas, Robert Orsi is very open about his religious experiences and positions. While Robert Orsi did not continue to be a practicing Catholic in his later life and wrote in a different methodology, we see him sharing the same line of thought as Mary Douglas in multiple ways. He always remained in close contact with his Catholic surroundings. He demonstrates this continued interest by taking Catholic devotions and devotees as the prime subjects of his academic work. Robert Orsi employed his characteristic approach to religion as a network of relationships in order to better represent the Catholicism his subjects and he himself experienced, after reaching the conclusion that the study of religion was incapable of dealing with Catholic types of religion. Orsi continued Mary Douglas' work in exposing the common antipathy of ritual and hierarchy amongst academics and students today. Similarly he criticized the negative effects these common misunderstandings about religious practice had on the study of religion and in particular on the study of Catholicism. Robert Orsi stressed the importance of rituals and religious practices in the daily experience of religious persons. In this way we see that Robert Orsi continued the same interest in the practical side of religion as Mary Douglas. Thus we find that the Catholic background of Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi expressed itself in similar ways, but chiefly by invoking sympathies towards religious aspects they felt were commonly being neglected or misunderstood. These aspects relate mostly to the 'second type' of religion as described by Winnifred Sullivan: public, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted. It seems not coincidental that their advocacy for the emancipation of these

particular aspects of religion seems to correspond with their feelings that Catholicism has been commonly misunderstood both by general society as well by students and scholars working at universities.

Apart from bringing to light the more positive sides of ritual and hierarchy, we can thank Mary Douglas for reevaluating the concept of bias in academic work. Douglas has shown us that bias is an essential and unavoidable part of our human understanding. This understanding of bias made the concept less intimidating to address in academic research. We found many similarities between Robert Orsi and Mary Douglas in their attitude towards bias. While Robert Orsi does not use the word bias in the same way, I find his openness in sharing personal and autobiographical information to be an elaboration of Mary Douglas' positive attitude towards personal bias. We can genuinely consider this an elaboration, for Robert Orsi, by sharing these personal stories, did not only create more awareness of the existence of personal bias, but actively promoted more self-critical and personal reflection in academic work. The emphasis on more honesty about personal backgrounds and related biases is meant to offer the opportunity for more intimate and direct expressions of both academic authors as well as the people they study. Due to the bold expression of their own personal backgrounds, Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi can be seen as examples of scholars who resisted the dehumanization of scholarly work by offering us intimate peeks into their personal positions and motivations. The lived religion methodology of Robert Orsi and his idea of religion as relationships resonate with Mary Douglas' statements on staying close to the people we study in order not to deface them. [93]

There are, however, some important differences between the work of Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi. Mary Douglas has showed herself more interested towards the descriptive sides of religion than Robert Orsi has. Her personal involvement with

[93] Alan Macfarlane, ''Interview with Mary Douglas – February 2006 – part 1,'' YouTube video, 1:01:43, Posted [7 november 2007], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3oMdIRFDs.

Catholicism allowed her to confidently tread upon the field of theology. Despite the efforts Robert Orsi took to stay as close to the experience of his subjects as possible, he has shown to resist the temptation of simulating their religious convictions. Instead, Robert Orsi has always opted for the unique position of an outsider, albeit being a very involved outsider. The differences in methodology are also expressed in some different struggles they bring forward in their work. While Mary Douglas was trying to free anthropology (and even Western society) from anti-ritualism, Robert Orsi tried to free religious studies from its underlying moralism. In some ways this seems to contradict the efforts of Mary Douglas, who has, in various cases, clearly voiced her ideas of good and bad forces in our society. Despite their different struggles, they seem to have both been influenced by the same concern with the negative influences of the protestant bias.

In the work of both scholars we have noticed a strong sensitivity towards the protestant bias. Both Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi recognized that there is a certain tendency towards religion influenced by a dominant protestant mindset. Both scholars have felt its negative consequences due to misunderstandings of the topics they were interested in. As a form of countering the protestant bias, Mary Douglas taught us to be mindful of rituals and hierarchy, while Robert Orsi taught us to have greater respect for the persons behind the religious expressions. Mary Douglas' and Robert Orsi's critical attitude towards the influence of protestant bias as well as their general optimism towards disclosing personal bias might seem at odds. However, I think that this teaches us to make a fundamental distinction between one's personal bias and the implicit bias which has infected a specific field. If we utilize our personal biases properly, we could use them to expose and neutralize the more dangerous implicit prejudices in the field of religious studies.

There have been many scholars who have felt a dominant protestant bias in the study of religion. Yet, despite the strong criticism of scholars towards the protestant influences on religious studies and even society in general, I do not believe

there is a superiority of the catholic approach of religion as opposed to the protestant approach. Instead, the criticism of the protestant bias seems first of all to exhibit a need for more diversity of approaches in the field of religious studies, in order to develop the necessary sensibilities to research all the various forms of religious expression. Insights in one's own personal bias could bring such sensibilities into the field. The catholic bias for instance has the potential of being an alternative voice to other dominant voices in religious studies today, such as those based in atheist and protestant backgrounds.

In the final analysis can we say there is an identifiable Catholic bias in both scholars? At this moment we can answer this both positively and negatively. We can say they possessed a catholic bias, because the catholic background and even some catholic ideology have shown to have been influential in the work of both scholars. Yet, similarly to how there is not one kind of Protestant or one kind of protestant bias, the catholic bias can only be seen as a rather loose construct formed by characteristics mostly contrasting those of the protestant bias. Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi might have offered us some general characteristics, indeed mostly as reactions towards more protestant sensibilities found at the university, but the research of only two scholars with Catholic backgrounds is not sufficient to define the catholic bias. Without making too many assumptions to the precise definition of the catholic bias and seeing it as simply the influence of having a Catholic background on one's work; we can say that the catholic bias in both Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi allowed them to develop greater attention for neglected aspects of religion. Therefore, the personal biases of Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi were far from harmful to the study of religion. Instead, they have displayed that personal biases can be of fundamental importance to uncover the more dangerous pitfalls of studying religious behavior that is unfamiliar to us.

Conclusion: The Future of the Catholic Bias

From this research I could find some convincing indications that the experience with their Catholic background inspired Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi to develop interesting alternative ways of dealing with religion. Despite the inadequacy to bring forth a clear definition of the Catholic bias at this stage, I find that the notion itself could be helpful for further investigations into the influence of Catholic backgrounds in the work of other scholars.

One of the most remarkable similarities between these two scholars is their approach to personal (religious) biases. Following Mary Douglas' argument that every researcher has his or her own indispensible bias, Robert Orsi asks us students of religion to share them more openly and to explore them. The danger in ignoring our personal bias can result in hidden agendas and unfairness in our approach to religious expressions that are less appealing to us. The frankness of Mary Douglas and Robert Orsi has been confronted with some skepticism, but we must recognize the sympathetic contributions of their remarks and be bold ourselves in following their example.

The similarities in Mary Douglas' and Robert Orsi's sensitivities towards the protestant bias and the study of rituals, despite the large geographical and generational differences, demonstrate that future research into the catholic bias could be fruitful. Research into this particular bias will also help uncover the important link between having a religious background and the approach of students of religious studies. I argue that the increase in awareness of the influences of personal biases on academic work will help change the implicit prejudice towards having a religious background in the field of religious studies. Therefore, even if we fail to develop a working definition for the Catholic bias in the end, the fruits of knowing that religious backgrounds are not necessarily harmful will be just as valuable.

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