

# Critiques on Mary Douglas' Theories

## : From the Perspective of Theories of Religion

Yoo, Yo-han\*

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## I. Introduction

Since Mary Douglas published *Purity and Danger* in 1966, this book has influenced many other scholars' descriptions of purity, providing a new paradigm of understanding this issue. The field of religious studies has not developed new theories of purity that surpass Douglas' insights. Though Douglas has continued to change and develop her theory of purity since that time in a series of books and articles, her theories in *Purity and Danger* still dominate the field. However, from the perspective of ritual and religious theories

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\* Ph. D. student of Dept. of Religion at Syracuse University

that have developed over the four decades since *Purity and Danger* was published, Douglas' theory of purity, especially as it relates to ritual, should be reconsidered in several respects.

In this paper, Douglas' theory of purity will be examined from the perspective of theories of religion. The first part of the paper situates the place of her theory both within the study of religion and anthropological ritual theories by articulating both her influence on the study of purity and the background of her theory. In the second part of this paper, I will critique the theoretical problems in *Purity and Danger* from the perspective of the comparative study of religion. In addition, I will also address how Douglas has tried to overcome these problems in her recent works.

I believe that this work will help lay the basis for a new theory of purity for the field of religious studies.

## II. Purity Theories in Religious Studies and Douglas' Influence on the Field

Theoretical research on purity and pollution has not been highly developed in religious studies. Comparative theorists usually do not focus on purity as an independent issue. Though it is true that studies of religious traditions have dealt with this issue seriously, theoretical explanations for purity ideas and purification rituals of each tradition have not been developed enough. Both studies of traditions and comparative studies have one thing in common in theory: the two major branches of religious studies rely heavily on Mary Douglas' theory of purity and pollution in *Purity and Danger*.

Scholars of particular religious traditions have treated purity

matters in considerable depth. This is especially true of Judaic studies and biblical studies which have produced many important books and articles on purity and purification rituals. Also, works on Greek religion, Japanese religion, and Hinduism often have extensive discussions of purity ideas or purification rituals. However, studies of each tradition have not developed a theoretical understanding of purity very much. For example, books of Judaic studies that treat purity and pollution in the Hebrew Bible and Talmud usually work at the level of exegesis. For a theoretical framework, they still rely on Mary Douglas' work of four decades ago, *Purity and Danger*. After summarizing the history of research on purity and pollution in Judaic studies, Jonathan Klawans says,

It need hardly be said that Mary Douglas's work has proven tremendously influential in the field of anthropology and religious studies in addition to inspiring lasting interest in the topic. *Purity and Danger* also laid the theoretical foundation for all subsequent work on ritual impurity in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1)</sup>

Klawans' own work considerably depends on Douglas' symbolic understanding of purity system.<sup>2)</sup> Even in the famous commentary of Jacob Milgrom on Leviticus, *Leviticus 1-16*, Douglas' influence is clearly shown. Not only Milgrom often cites Douglas for the issue of purity, his premise that "the ritual complexes of Lev 1-16 make sense only as aspects of a symbolic system"<sup>3)</sup> is one of the "lasting achievements of *Purity and Danger*."<sup>4)</sup> A more recent book of

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1) See Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 7-8.

2) See *Ibid.*, p. 8, 10, 19, 25, 32, 36, 39.

3) Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 45.

4) Klawans, *Op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities*, also depends on Douglas' theory. Her main thesis that "in ancient Jewish culture, the paired terms 'pure' and 'impure' were employed in various ways not only to describe but also to inscribe socio-cultural boundaries between Jews and Gentile others" clearly shows Douglas' influence on her, as Hayes herself admits.<sup>5)</sup>

For another example, it is worthwhile to glance over research into purity that has been made in the study of ancient Greek religion. In 1951, even before Mary Douglas, E. R. Dodds suggested his own theory on Greek purity ideas, which made a great effect on many Greek religion scholars. In *The Greeks and The Irrational*, Dodds argued that the idea of guilt develops from the practice of purity ideas and purification rituals. He says, in the second chapter of the book that is titled as "From shame culture to guilt culture",

And while catharsis in the Archaic Age was doubtless often no more than the mechanical fulfillment of a ritual obligation, the notion of an automatic, quasi-physical cleansing could pass by imperceptible gradations into the deeper idea of atonement for sin.<sup>6)</sup>

Walter Burkert summarized Dodds' theory, "from the practice of ritual, in the figure of impurity, a concept of guilt develops: purification becomes atonement."<sup>7)</sup> However, scholars do not accept this theory any longer. Robert Parker points out that, "in the sphere of values, a question arises about the relation of pollution to

5) Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Inter-marriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 3, p. 223 nn. 2-3.

6) E. Robinson Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), p. 37.

7) Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985 (1977)), p. 77.

morality: the irrationality of the former, perhaps, makes it hard for a rational system of the latter to develop."<sup>8)</sup> Changing his theoretical position, Burkert also rejects this theory in his more recent book, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*.<sup>9)</sup>

Parker's monumental work, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, examines Greek purity ideas and purification rituals. However, Parker does not develop his own theory in this book. Rather, this book focuses on meticulous explanation of Greek purity by applying old theories such as those of Tylor, William James and Douglas. In addition, when Parker and Burkert introduce the social function of purification that maintains the social order and unification, Douglas influence on them is obvious.<sup>10)</sup>

On the other hand, most comparative theorists of religion do not deal with the issue of purity seriously. This becomes clear when one examines the well-known books of comparative religion, most of which do not include purity as an independent subject. In Joachim Wach's posthumous book, *Comparative Study of Religion*, "purification" is mentioned just once. This pioneer of the Chicago School asserts that purification is a preparatory ritual for the central cult like prayer, sacrifice, and sacraments.<sup>11)</sup> Wach's famous three categories of religious experience' do not have room for purity ideas or ritual. Mircea Eliade sometimes deals with the issue of purity: he

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8) Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 2.

9) Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 125-126.

10) Parker, *Op. cit.*, p. 19, p. 24, Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 77-79.

11) Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), Chapter 4. This book was edited by Joseph Kitagawa who published this book after Wach's death in 1955.

recognizes the symbols of purity in religion, for instance, the purificatory function of water:<sup>12)</sup> he briefly says that the meaning of ritual purifications is “a combustion, an annulling of the sins and faults of the individual and of those community as a whole” and that they help the individuals and the community construct cosmic time.<sup>13)</sup> However, he does not treat purity as an independent subject. Most recent books that are used in introductory religious studies courses follow the example of their forerunners. For instance, Ninian Smart’s six dimensions of religion do not even mention purity or purification rituals.<sup>14)</sup> Nancy Ring and the other authors of *Introduction to the Study of Religion* do not deal with this matter, either.<sup>15)</sup>

In this sense, William Paden’s *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* is an exception in that it devotes one chapter to “Systems of Purity”. He clearly differs from Wach by arguing that the concept of purity is “not limited to such motifs as chastity or ritual preparations for worship.”<sup>16)</sup> Paden, as a scholar of the comparative study of religion, tries to utilize the terms of religious studies to describe purity. Most of all, he applies the Eliadean concept of “religious experience”. To him, the impure is equated with the “feared profanities” and “what is incompatible with

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12) Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, 1987 (1957)), p. 131; *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996(1958)), pp. 194-197.

13) Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991 (1949)), p. 54.

14) Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999 (1983)).

15) Nancy C. Ring (ed.), Jennifer A. Glancy and Fred Glannon, *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 1998).

16) William Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 142.

the sacred”, and purification is regarded as “the exorcism of profanity”.<sup>17)</sup> Thus, Paden emphasizes the role of purity ideas in “the separation of the sacred and the profane”<sup>18)</sup> more strongly than Douglas who tried to overcome Durkheim’s strict distinction between the sacred and the profane. While Douglas argued there is “no clear-cut distinction between sacred and secular”,<sup>19)</sup> Paden in other ways simply recycles Douglas’ theory and terminology. Just as Douglas did in *Purity and Danger*,<sup>20)</sup> he starts explaining the concept of purity by criticizing Sigmund Freud’s and Robertson Smith’s out-dated explanation of purity that distinguished “between primitive and modern systems of cultural order.” He introduces and summarizes Douglas’ argument that “any system will have its own version of pollution and danger.”<sup>21)</sup> Following Douglas, he also emphasizes the importance of “social order by saying social order is often the infrastructure of religious order.”<sup>22)</sup>

Thus it is fair to say that the studies of religion, both research on particular traditions and comparative theories, have much depended on Mary Douglas when, if at all, they have dealt with purity issues.

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17) *Ibid.*, pp. 141-4.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 141.

19) Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2001(1966)), p. 41. Also note that just as Paden does in this chapter, she starts the first chapter of *Purity and Danger* by mentioning Eliade's notion of “the sacred”. But she focuses on “the ambivalence of the sacred”, citing from *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, “the sacred is at once 'sacred' and 'defiled' (8).” Her pollution is “matter out of place (41).” Note that my citation in this article is from the 2001 edition.

20) *Ibid.*, pp. 10-23.

21) Paden, *Op. cit.*, p. 142.

22) *Ibid.*, p. 144.

### III. Ritual Theory in *Purity and Danger* and its Theoretical Background

In Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, she probes deeply into the social functions and roles of ritual, articulating some critical characteristics of ritual. According to her, ritual provides a method of mnemonics and formulates experience. It is necessary for controlling human experience at a societal level: "as a social animal, man is a ritual animal (63)"; "there are some things we cannot experience without ritual (65)." Through the function of ritual, people symbolically create a unity which is a total universe that orders all experience (70). It is ritual that maintains "the cosmic outlines and the ideal social order (73)." In short, according to Douglas, ritual creates a symbolic universe that unifies a society, simultaneously playing the role of maintaining the society's order.

In this sense, Douglas agrees with Victor Turner and Claude Levi-Strauss that "ritual is creative", offering "meaning to the existence of life (73)." When she published *Purity and Danger* in 1966, this new paradigm<sup>23)</sup> of ritual theory was just beginning to appear among some anthropologists.<sup>24)</sup> Turner kept developing his

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23) Douglas cites Victor Turner, "An Ndembu Doctor in Practice" in *Magic, Faith and Healing* (ed.) Arikiev. Glencoe (Illinois, 1964) and Claude Levi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale, Magie et Religion* in Chapter X, "L'efficacite Sybolique" (1958), originally published under same title in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 135, No. 1 (1949).

24) Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), p. 117. Grimes argues, "The most general claims for ritual have been ... the traditional religious, Durkheimian sociological, Freudian psychoanalytic, and Cambridge school theories which have dominated modern ritual theory ... until the advent of" Levi-Strauss.

theory, asserting that religious ritual can “create or actualize the categories by means of which man apprehends reality.”<sup>25)</sup> According to Ronald Grimes, Turner was emphasizing ritual’s creative function, challenging the assumptions of Malinowski and Eliade “who would interpret ritual and myth solely as presentations of static paradigms .”<sup>26)</sup> Clifford Geertz also does not ignore the creative force of ritual. Citing an example of a Japanese rite that was “blind to the major lines of social and cultural demarcation in urban life”, he argues that “a ritual which failed to function properly” can create cultural ambiguity and social conflict.<sup>27)</sup>

More recent theorists, including Catherine Bell, argue more clearly that ritual not only informs meanings but also makes meanings. This is the main point of “the study of ritual as practice” or “the practice theory” that Bell advocates. She says that a basic shift in the way scholars study ritual is needed:

... the study of ritual as practice has meant a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural pattern to looking at it

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For Levi-Strauss' more elaborated definition of ritual, see Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Naked Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 667–682. Concerning Turner, Grimes says that Victor Turner was the first to look upon ritual as having creative and critical capacities: *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice. Essay on Its Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), p. 21.

25) Victor Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Process Among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 7.

26) Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, p. 150. Grimes thinks that Turner's theory is distinct from theirs because “these two great mentors of anthropology and religion” emphasized “the backward-looking nature of myth and ritual” and thought that rituals and symbols “point us backward to a timeless origin.”

27) Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 2000 (1973)). p. 146, p. 168.

as that which makes and harbors such patterns. In this view, ritual is more complex than the mere communication of meanings and values: it is a set of activities that construct particular types of meanings and values in specific ways. 28)

It is Roy Rappaport who most boldly and strongly asserts that “religion’s major conceptual and experiential constituents, the sacred, the numinous, the occult, and the divine, and their integration into the Holy” are entailments or creations of ritual.<sup>29)</sup> According to Rappaport, the logical properties of ritual create these constituents. In the process of the formation of humanity, language as symbol appeared. Language runs intrinsic risks of falsehood and alternative formulations. Here, the constituents of religion that are generated by

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28) Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 80.

29) Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 3, pp. 12-16, pp. 52-57. According to Rappaport, this problem-solving process through ritual can be expounded deeper by messages that are transmitted by ritual. He suggests two message streams in ritual (52-57). Canonical messages, which are already encoded in liturgy, are invariant, impersonal, concerned with the universal and the eternal, and often provided with elaborate propriety. On the other hand, self-referential messages contain information that is transmitted by the participants concerning their own current physical, psychic or social states to themselves and other participants. Canonical messages are not encoded by performers though transmitted by them. They are only found upon symbols, though they employ icons and make limited use of indices. In contrast, self-referential messages may be more than symbolic and be represented indexically. Here, “index” is very important. Rappaport’s index is “a sign that refers to the object it denotes by being really affected by that object (54).” Index signifies the presence or existence of imperceptible aspects of events or conditions through perceptible aspects of the same events or conditions (55). When the problem of falsehood that is generated by symbol becomes serious, it is overcome or ameliorated in ritual by using indices instead of symbols.

ritual are indispensable for the development and existence of human sociability because they ameliorate these intrinsic problems of language. Rappaport goes further by asserting that ritual has creative functions in two different senses: not only does ritual inform participants of meanings, but it also sometimes transforms them or their surroundings.<sup>30)</sup> Ritual contains within itself a paradigm of creation.<sup>31)</sup>

Considering that *Purity and Danger* was published in 1966, Douglas can be considered as one of the pioneers who launched the new paradigm of ritual theory.<sup>32)</sup> Furthermore, since most ritual theorists have not delved into purity matter in relation to ritual, no one can deny that Douglas' work is remarkable. Douglas brilliantly relates concepts of purity and pollution to ritual. She criticizes "anti-ritualist prejudice" that has made it difficult to find instances of ritual uncleanness in Christian practice (62-3). In contrast, she emphasizes the significance of ritual to understanding purity ideas, articulating that her conception of purity is symbolic ritual cleanliness. She understands uncleanness as "matter out of place", which can be understood through order (41). According to her,

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30) *Ibid.*, p. 109, p. 114, p. 125. Rappaport uses dubbing ritual as an example. Dubbing does not tell a youth to be a knight, nor does it let him know how to be a knight: "it makes him a knight." He calls this the "performative" force of ritual. To perform ritual is not only to conform to its order but also to make the order substantial (125).

31) In ritual, forms, by which Rappaport means verbal aspects of liturgy, and substance, by which he means the material components of ritual are united, completing each other (153). Using many examples of creation myths, he shows that creation is usually represented as the informing of substance and substantiation of form, a union of form and substance. In this sense, he concludes that ritual resembles accounts of creation (155).

32) See Grimes, *Ritual Criticism*, p. 21. Grimes thinks that this new understanding of ritual as having creative capacities began in the 1960s.

impurity or pollution falls under disorder or danger, which should be excluded from a culture in order to maintain it (41). It is ritual that controls social disorder, namely, impurity: "ritual controls the danger of the disorder, recognizing the potency of disorder, finding posers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort (95)."

Here, I would like to point out one problem in Douglas' understanding of ritual. According to her, purity rules constitute a symbolic system. Pollution is "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (36)." Douglas argues that this system is generated by the mental process of perception which organizes all objects or ideas. Conceptual symbolization seems to dominate ritual process in Douglas' theory: "in short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications (37)."

However, while ritual can sometimes be a symbolic activity involving the conceptual process that asks for further interpretation,<sup>33)</sup> it is simultaneously the instrumental behavior of everyday life.<sup>34)</sup> Recently, some scholars have raised strong objections to the symbolic interpretation of ritual. Talal Asad has argued that ritual activity indissolubly links visible signs to invisible virtues.<sup>35)</sup> Asad asserts that the symbolic understanding of ritual is a product of modern European scholarship and that ritual should be understood as

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33) See Geertz, *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

34) Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 55. Though Asad emphasizes ritual as the instrumental behavior of everyday life and criticizes Geertz and Turner's symbolic understandings as a modern European creation, I believe that both theories are important in understanding ritual behaviors.

35) *Ibid.*, p. 67.

the instrumental behavior of everyday life.<sup>36)</sup> Fritz Staal, even more strongly, denies the symbolic meanings of ritual. In "The Meaninglessness of Ritual", Staal daringly argues that ritual has no meaning, goal, or aim, refuting the widespread assumption that ritual is composed of symbolic activities that refer to something else. For Staal, ritual is pure activity for its own sake. In ritual activity, it is the rules that are important, not the result.<sup>37)</sup> Though it is not easy to agree with Staal's radical argument,<sup>38)</sup> the idea of ritual behaviors as "the instrumental behavior of everyday life" should not be ignored.

#### IV. Theoretical Problems from the Perspective of Religious Studies

Douglas' theory and methodology can be critiqued from the perspective of religious studies. I will focus on three problems within her theory: the Durkheimian presupposition of society as a unified entity; her acceptance of the texts at hand as evidence of a society's purity ideas without considering the ideology behind them; and her comparative method that attends to "sameness". Not only *Purity and Danger* but also her more recent works will be examined.

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36) Asad, *Op. cit.*

37) Fritz Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual", *History of Religion 20* (1978), pp. 2-22.

38) Most scholars, including Jonathan Z. Smith, do not deny that ritual has aims and meanings. See Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual", *History of Religion 20* (1978), pp. 125-126.

#### IV-1. Douglas' Theoretical Presupposition : Primitive Societies United by Ritual

Douglas' theory presupposes primitive cultures in which unity is created by means of ritual, without clearly defining what is primitive.<sup>39)</sup> She argues, "each primitive culture is a universe to itself" (*Purity and Danger*, 4). The matter of purity is explained in the context of "a total universe (70)" of primitive cultures. According to her,

For the Bushman, Dinka, and many other primitive cultures the field of symbolic action is one. The unity which they create by their separating and tidying is not just a little home, but a total universe in which all experience is ordered. ... Our rituals create a lot of little sub-worlds, unrelated. Their rituals create one single, symbolically consistent universe. (*Purity and Danger*, 70)

In short, she believes in a unity or "consistent universe" which is created by ritual within each "primitive culture". She often alternates between the terms the unity of a culture and social order. According to Douglas, ritual behavior creates social order and pollution is a by-product of this social process. Though she sometimes sees the social conflicts in a culture and modifications of rituals according to them (especially in chapter 9), she focuses on how ritual and purity

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39) In the fifth chapter of *Purity and Danger*, she enumerates characteristics of primitive worlds that are "pollution-prone (74)", "personal (81)", and "man-centred (82)". The standards for this demarcation are abstract and ideal. She freely uses the term, arguing "our professional delicacy in avoiding the term 'primitive' is the product of secret convictions of superiority (75)." To her, just like the Bushman, the Ndembu, and the Dinka, the Israelite society that produced *Leviticus* is primitive. She does not articulate the boundary between "primitive" and "us".

ideas help the society overcome conflicts.

Three decades ago, Geertz pointed out this problem in the sociological or functional approach to studying ritual which stemmed "originally from Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*."<sup>40)</sup> Geertz calls this "a bias in favor of 'well-integrated' societies". He says, "in analyses of religion this static, ahistorical approach has led to a somewhat overconservative view of the role of ritual and belief in social life." Using a Japanese example, he meticulously shows how ritual can create cultural ambiguity and social conflict.

In the preface of the 2002 edition of *Purity and Danger*, Douglas acknowledges this problem and says that she should have added "radical taboos" that change social order. According to her,

The examples of taboo that I gave to illustrate the themes in *Purity and Danger* are mainly conservative in effect. They protect an abstract constitution from being subverted. If I had anticipated the political implications of taboo, I could have mentioned radical taboos. ... If I were to write the book again, I would know what to look out for to balance the original account.<sup>41)</sup>

She recognizes her theory's conservativeness. While Douglas has continued to develop and change her own theory of purity, the field of studies of religion, which has heavily relied on Douglas' theory of purity of four decades ago, has not.

## IV-2. Texts as Evidence without Ideology

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40) Geertz, *Op. cit.*, p. 142. See through pp. 142 -169.

41) Mary Douglas, "Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition", in *Purity and Danger* 2002 edition, pp. xix-xx.

In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas accepted texts and ethnographical researches as evidence without examining the ideological or rhetorical intention behind them. She believes that the total structure of ancient Israelite society and the systemic nature of conceptions of defilement can be understood by the means of analyzing the biblical texts of *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*. She articulates the importance of the texts for understanding the purity system of a culture. She even argues,

*The only sound approach is to forget hygiene, aesthetics, morals and instinctive revulsion, even to forget the Canaanites and the Zoroastrian Magi, and start with the texts.* (*Purity and Danger*, 50, emphasis mine)

In the face of this argument, we have to ask a critical question: can one expect texts to properly and fairly represent the notions of purity and the rituals of a culture? The answer is no. Texts cannot be used as “the only sound approach.”

Many theorists have argued that texts do not show the meaning of ritual per se, but provide ideological interpretations of rituals or rhetorical arguments about them.

J. Z. Smith has argued ceaselessly that one should not accept the description of the text at hand without doubt. According to Smith, “no privilege should be granted to any block of material.”<sup>42)</sup> Data are what scholars choose for their arguments; he asserts, “in culture, there is no text, it is all commentary.”<sup>43)</sup> According to Smith, the ritual suggested in a text does not show the real systems of the

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42) Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Domestications of Sacrifice”, in *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly: Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 209.

43) *Ibid.*, p. 196, 207, 209.

culture but represents, at most, the ideals of the culture.

In a recent book about medieval rituals, Philippe Buc provides an example that supports Smith's views of ritual. In *The Dangers of Ritual*, Buc shows that the modern idea of ritual is not the same as that of early medieval texts. He asserts, "texts were forces in the practice of power. They should not be decrypted for (elusive) facts about rituals and then set aside."<sup>44</sup>) Since historical facts are hidden behind the intentions of medieval writers, Buc concludes that we cannot accept the text as it is. According to Buc, a majority of the medieval sources are "the product of interpretation or of attempts to channel interpretation."<sup>45</sup>) Just like J. Z. Smith, Buc concludes that this problem can be overcome through a specific and contextual approach.<sup>46</sup>)

James Watts argues that the rhetorical purpose of the texts, rather than their symbolic meanings, should be considered. According to Watts, an ancient text's meaning may not be related to the ritual's meaning and function in ancient culture. The rhetoric of the texts, he says, is more likely to "commend" a ritual than to "explain" it. Watts suggests that the rhetorical goals of ritual texts in the Torah may include: "the validation of the ritual and its form on the basis of ostensibly ancient textual authority; and/or persuasion to motivate performance of the rituals; and/or persuasion to accept the whole text's authority because of its authoritative instruction on ritual performance."<sup>47</sup>)

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44) Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 259.

45) *Ibid.*, p. 9.

46) *Ibid.*, p. 251.

47) James Watts, "Ritual Text and Ritual Interpretation". A paper presented to the ISBL 2003, Cambridge, England, p. 6.

Douglas' use of ethnographical research as evidence has the same problem as her dependence on ancient texts. She accepts the data as evidence without considering possible ideological intentions behind it. Methodologically, scholars should not rely solely on texts when making conclusions, but consider all other possible conditions and circumstances, as J. Z. Smith, Buc, and Watts suggest.

This methodological issue is considered more in her recent books and articles. Douglas seems to be paying more attention to the circumstances and rhetorical purpose of each text. That is, in *Purity and Danger*, she did not hesitate in using *Deuteronomy* as evidence that can support, in her view, the dietary rules of *Leviticus*, even though she briefly mentioned the Priestly author's attention to order. By contrast, in *Leviticus as Literature*, she argues that in *Leviticus* the unclean animals are not abominable while *Deuteronomy* equates unclean animals with the abominable.<sup>48)</sup> Douglas makes clear the differences between each text of Pentateuch, explicating the rhetorical intentions of Priestly authors of the Second Temple period (12). She concludes that the ritual impurity of *Leviticus* is related to the writer's reverential attitude to "God's order of his creation (151)". However, this methodological elaboration does not entirely change Douglas' theoretical position. Douglas is still Douglas. I will deal with this later.

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48) Mary Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 137. And also see "Impurity of Land Animals," Poorthuis, M. J. H. M. and Schwartz, J. (eds.) *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus*. (Leiden: Brill, 2000); *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1993)

## IV-3. The Comparative Method: Focusing on Sameness

As Douglas articulates in the "introduction" of *Purity and Danger*,<sup>49)</sup> one of the purposes of this monumental work was comparison between various religions or cultures. She uses the comparative method through the whole book in order to support her general theory on purity and pollution. Many exemplary cases in this book are suggested so that she can prove her theory. In this process, "differences" between the objects of comparison, among which historical and geographical circumstances are important, are neglected: she focuses on the "sameness" or "likeness" of many different cultures.

Interestingly, she argues that her comparison is based on differences, as well as sameness. According to her, "the right basis for comparison is to insist on the unity of human experience and at the same time to insist on its variety on the differences which make comparison worthwhile (78)." However, these differences seem to be a dichotomy between primitive and modern. She continues:

The only way to do this is to recognize the nature of historical progress and the nature of primitive and of modern society. Progress means differentiation. Thus primitive means undifferentiated: modern means differentiated. (*Purity and Danger*, 8)

*Purity and Danger* is full of her description of primitive ideas of pollution that is contrasted to modern ones. For instance, the depiction of Saul's divine power in *The Book of Samuel* is compared with the sorcery beliefs of Central Africa in terms of "likeness"

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49) Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 6. She says, "an understanding of rules of purity is a sound entry to comparative religion."

(Chapter 6): She finds “likeness” between the Indian purity system and that of Polynesia and that of Judaism (Chapter 7).

Her “primitive” is similar to Eliade’s “traditional societies” and “homo religiosus.”<sup>50)</sup> Both Douglas and Eliade set primitive/traditional against modernity and try to enumerate examples of the likeness of primitive/traditional cultures. They suggest theory first and then provide examples from many cultures constituting various times and places.

This kind of comparison is what J. Z. Smith called “the morphological” type of comparison, which does “not take historical, linear development into account.” He says, “comparison may thus occur between the individual and the archetype; comparison may also occur between analogous members of an atemporal series.”<sup>51)</sup> In addition, according to Smith, the tendency to emphasize congruency and conformity in the scholarly enterprise of comparison is based on rhetorical and ideological intention. However, since comparison of likeness or sameness swallows up the differences that would make a chain of comparisons interesting, little of value can be learned from it. He asserts, what is required is the development of a discourse of ‘difference,’ a complex term which invites negotiation, classification and comparison, and, at the same time, avoids too easy a discourse of the ‘same’.<sup>52)</sup>

Douglas’ new work is not as comparative as *Purity and Danger*. As she came to believe that the Israelite purity system is distinctive from others, she has paid closer attention to Israelite purity ideas

50) See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 14-17, 200-202.

51) Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 258-259.

52) Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 42-53.

and ritual in Hebrew literature. At least in the Israelite purity system, she seems to discover the importance of "difference". Then, does this mean that she has realized the theoretical problem of emphasizing sameness in comparative enterprise? The answer would be negative. She says,

But the more that pollution theory developed, and the more that pollution was seen as the vehicle of accusations and downgradings, the more I was bound to acknowledge that it does not apply to the most famous instance of the Western tradition, the Pentateuch... General pollution theory still stands, but its application to the Bible is limited.<sup>53)</sup>

While she admits that the Pentateuch has a different purity system from other cultures, she still believes that her general theory should not be denied. She thinks that the case of the Hebrew Bible is just an exception to her general theory.

## V. Conclusion: Purity Theories in Religious Studies

Recently, the status of the field of the study of religion has been seriously challenged as an independent discipline by some scholars who advocate a rigorous social-scientific methodology.<sup>54)</sup> Criticizing

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53) Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, viii.

54) Concerning this movement, see Charlotte Allen, "Is Nothing Sacred? Casting out the Gods From Religious Studies", *Lingua Franca* (November 1996), pp. 30-40, Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), and Timothy

Eliade's concept of the sacred as "an ahistorical, Christian concept", they define religion as "a social way of thinking about social identity and social relationships."<sup>55)</sup> These scholars, most of whom are members of North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), oppose the idea of defining religious studies as a branch of the humanities, arguing that its proper place is among the social sciences.<sup>56)</sup> They assert that the scholars of religion have to follow the methods of sociologists or anthropologists.<sup>57)</sup> They believe that the study of religion has not been academic and scientific (Wiebe 113) or that there is no "non-theological theoretical basis for the study of religion as a separate academic discipline (Fitzgerald 3)."

In fact, *Purity and Danger*, which is written by an anthropologist, can be an exemplary work of this argument for "methods of sociologists or anthropologists." As I mentioned above, in this book, societies, social systems, or social order are overemphasized. Mary Douglas even appears to be obsessed with the idea of society, which, to her, is "a powerful image" and "potent in his own right to control or to stir men to action (115)." She focuses on the function of ritual in a society. In particular, she relates purity systems to functions of the social order, including social hierarchy (97, 126, 140). To her, "all spiritual powers are part of the social system" and "the power of universe is ultimately hitched to society (114)." Without a social process that makes order, nothing can be explained: "Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of mind, it was a by-product

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Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

55) This is Ron Cameron's argument, who suggests "methodological atheism" in an interview with Allen. Allen, "Is Nothing Sacred", p. 30.

56) This is Wiebe's idea described by Allen. Allen, *Op. cit.*, p. 32.

57) McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, p. 175, Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 10, pp. 50-53.

of the creation of order (162).”

It is true that there is a conspicuous change in Douglas' explanation of the social function of biblical purity. In her recent work, Douglas argues that the Israelite ritual impurity system does not work for maintaining social order: “in so far as the Levitical rules for purity apply universally they are useless for internal disciplining. They maintain absolutely no social demarcation.”<sup>58)</sup> However, it is important to see that Douglas is still emphasizing the social functions of purity rules. According to Douglas, the Israelites' purity rules are based on their religious beliefs in the order of Creation which is related to Israelite social order.<sup>59)</sup>

In as much as ancient people did not distinguish society from religion, Douglas' argument may be right. Yet, contrary to her argument that “all spiritual powers are part of the social system” and that “the power of universe is ultimately hitched to society,” religious beliefs, which include the belief in spiritual power, cannot be explained only in relation to society. One should not totally ignore Geertz's argument that culture and social structure are different and that there are often radical discontinuities between them.<sup>60)</sup>

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58) Mary Douglas, “Atonement in *Leviticus*”, *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1, no.2 (1993/1994). pp. 112-113.

59) For instance, see *Ibid.*, 110, and *Leviticus as Literature*, pp. 176-194. Klawans summarized three other points that prove an overall unity in her work: she still emphasizes the importance of body symbolism; she is still interested in structures; she remains engaged in a critique of “anti-ritualistic” understanding of religious behavior. See Klawans, *Op. cit.*, p. 19. Besides, Douglas herself argues for the interrelatedness of her work. See *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985) ix-x, and her introduction to the 1996 edition of *Natural Symbols* (London: Routledge, 1996(1970)).

60) Clifford Geertz, *Op. cit.*, 114-145.

I am not trying to argue which methodology of religious studies is right and which is wrong. However, I am suggesting that there are realms which only the study of religion can delve into even by using "the anthropological methods". J. Z. Smith's suggests a good example for my argument for an approach from the perspective of the study of religion. He briefly deals with the purity ideas of the religious groups in the Late Antiquity in *Drudgery Divine* in a way that is distinctive from a socio-anthropological study, which focuses on society, for understanding purity and pollution. While he tries to maintain the anthropological perspective, which sees cultures "from the outside",<sup>61)</sup> he pays attention to what most of socio-anthropologists have overlooked. That is, Smith relates the types of purity ideas of Mediterranean religions in Late Antiquity to the soteriology of each religious group.<sup>62)</sup> He argues for the presence of two world-views in Mediterranean religions, the "locative" and the "utopian". He terms the locative traditions "religions of sanctification". The soteriology of such a view is two-fold: emplacement is the norm; rectification or cleaning, which is closely related to purification, is undertaken if the norm is broken. The major cause of uncleanness in this tradition is "corpse pollution - the mixture, the contact, of the living and the dead." In contrast to this emphasis on sanctification, the utopian soteriology emphasizes "resurrection" or

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61) Smith, *To Take Place*, pp. 98-99. Smith thinks that an anthropological method that sees culture from the outside is the proper way to see religion. Concerning the views on religion, he says, "Claude Levi-Strauss has written: 'Anthropology is the science of culture as seen from the outside,' that 'anthropology, whenever it is practiced by members of the culture it endeavors to study, loses its specific nature and becomes rather akin to archaeology, history, and philosophy.' He makes an important point."

62) See Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, pp. 118-125, pp. 132-133.

"rising". Salvation is achieved through acts of rebellion and transcendence. When some of the mystery cults of archaic locative traditions adopted the utopian model, the majority of the hints of the process occur "in the context of purification": there were "the shifting from a language of 'dirt' to one of 'sin' and the shifting from locative rituals productive of purgation to utopian goals of salvation."<sup>63)</sup>

Focusing on soteriology, Smith suggests a different way of categorizing purity ideas from that of sociologists or anthropologists who mainly pay attention to the function of ritual in social structure. Purity ideas and purification ritual should be studied not just in relation to society but also in terms of a religion's central doctrines. This is impossible without a deep understanding of religion itself, and should be the starting-point for students of religion in studying purity ideas and purification ritual. It is time for interpreters of religion to develop their own theories of purity, rather than depending on Douglas' work.

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63) *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

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