

reviewed by ANTHONY B. VAN FOSSEN

## The Symbols of Man

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**Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology**, by Mary Douglas. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970. Pp. 170. \$5.95

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PLATO and Aristotle realized that it is impossible to have social and political theory without accounting for the primitive. And in beginning serious political philosophy, they conjectured that primitives were savages not in spite of themselves, but savages *in their souls*. Much conservative political theory has not proceeded very far beyond, but instead incorporated a similar philosophical anthropology for a more empirical anthropology. It is in part because of this acutely metaphysical tradition, a profound respect for the irrational, as well as a rejection of cultural relativism that conservative thinkers have neglected twentieth century empirical anthropology.

Mary Douglas, an anthropologist at the University of London, relates the primitive to the conservative in a most intriguing way. She begins by disputing the claims that there is a fated evolution from the sacred to the secular. After all, she says, there are pygmies, Basseri South Persian nomads, and other primitives who are just as materialistic as modern man, if not more so. Instead of a form of gnostic evolutionism (with its often latent contempt for the primitive and frequent antinomian cynicism toward the West), she presents a Thomistic emphasis on a natural cosmology. Societies are different not because they are determined to fall at different points on a pre-

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ted upwardly sloping curve; they are to a much greater degree different by choice. The crux of her argument (generating a dazzling array of deep insights) centers on the proposal of four types of cosmology, again not necessarily in order of evolutionary levels so much as successively more enriched levels of the spirit—1) the Pygmy (the hippy), 2) the African Lugbara (the Manichean), 3) the New Guinea Highlander (the bourgeois American), and 4) the Tikopian South Sea Islander (the Christian). Each cosmology is delineated and related not only to a specific social organization but also to a specific conception of the human body, to certain natural symbols. At the first level, where bodily movement is diffuse, where nomadism (whether pigmy, hippy, or Basseri) is prevalent, there will be weakly condensed symbols of a benign, unstructured cosmos interpreted by personal religion. As bodily movement becomes tighter, social groups more closed, and rituals more elaborate, the soul ascends from the lower reaches. What troubles her is not that the West is approaching more and more closely the primitive (for the primitive can represent the lowest as well as the highest), but that it is approaching the lowest order of the soul as if it were the most advanced. What shocks her is that the most sophisticated ideas of the West are often quite similar to the mental peregrinations of the pygmy. There are "three phases in the move away from ritualism. First, there is the contempt of external ritual forms; second, there is the private internalizing of religious experience; third, there is the move to humanist philanthropy. When the third stage is under way, the symbolic life of the spirit is finished."

This brilliant work might be the most im-

portant book of empirical anthropology well as to the transcultural understanding  
ever written toward the reformulation of of the soul.  
conservative social and political theory as

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