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*Functionalism or Fallacy: Re-locating Hans Mol's Identity Theory*¹

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Abstract

In this paper, the identity theory of religion outline by sociologist Hans Mol in the 1970s is introduced and located among the various competing theories of the mid-20th century. Using such comparisons, particularly with enigmatic sociological figures, it is argued that the original consensus that Mol represented yet another neo-functional theory of religion is fallacious. Instead, it is suggested that his theoretical framework, whilst ambitious and broad, is something other than functionalism and avoids easy categorisation when viewed from a 21st-century perspective on the history of ideas.

Keywords: sociology of religion; Hans Mol; identity.

Richard Nice ends his foreword to the English edition of Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* with sobering words for ambitious social theoreticians: 'The fact remains that a text which seeks to break out of a scheme of thought as deeply embedded as the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism is fated to be perceived through the categories which it seeks to transcend, and to appear contradictory or eclectic (except when forcibly reduced to one or the other alternative)' (Nice, 1977: viii).

¹ Portions of this material also published in: Powell, A. (2017), *Hans Mol and the Sociology of Religion*, Abingdon, Routledge.

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Indeed, Nice's observation rightly illuminates the hazardous road of scholarly advance, a path chosen by many but fruitfully navigated by relatively few. Arguably one of the latter, Bourdieu mined the shortcomings of previous perspectives and offered an original take on the relationship between an individual agent and his or her social structure. We will say more about Bourdieu's system later, but our primary concern in the following pages is to suggest that Mol bravely embarked on a similar journey. With the publication of numerous essays and monographs in the 1960s and 70s, culminating in the composition of *Identity and the Sacred* (1976), Mol adumbrated a general sociological theory of religion which would prove difficult to categorise. In many ways, his theoretical contribution did seek 'to break out of the existing dualism between 'subjectivism and objectivism' in the social sciences. More importantly, Mol proposed a frame of reference that sought to highlight social integration without being 'functionalist' and to recognise the potential tensions between modern social institutions without being a 'conflict theory'. Of course, just as Nice's prophetic words indicate, Mol's work was assessed through the very lenses that he hoped to discard.

Although the historical record denies us a clear consensus from the academic community, the most common (and typically dismissive) response to Mol's identity theory was to denounce its ostensible functionalist reductionism. In other words, the assertions and aspirations of Mol's theoretical contributions were 'reduced to one...alternative.' Mol (1979), of course, vehemently and explicitly denied such a description. Now, benefitting not only from retrospect but also from a new set of conceptual tools and sociological idioms, we are perhaps better equipped to investigate the place of Mol's identity theory in the mid-20th century landscape of the sociology of religion. An undeniably fecund period for the social-scientific study of religion, the middle decades of the 20th century offered influential neo-functional perspectives from figures such as Talcott Parsons and Peter Berger, but the era was also one of innovation and expanding disciplinary boundaries.

Our paper begins by drafting a portrait of Mol's theoretical agenda and intellectual ambitions before turning to an exploration of the web of contemporaneous theoretical notions cast over the field of sociology during the 20th century - in particular, the theories produced by a small number of enigmatic social scientists which eluded straightforward classification. Ultimately, we turn to Mol's critics and their efforts to classify his offerings, illuminating an important question for the history of ideas as it pertains to the sociological study of religion: was the identity theory of Hans Mol simply another functionalist argument for the integrative role of religion in society or is it possible that such criticisms are the fallacious (though, perhaps inevitable)

consequences of inadequate classificatory schemes available to scholars of religion during the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s?

1. Identity and ambition

Among the papers left behind at McMaster University, when Mol retired in 1987, were three pages of handwritten notes outlining a new book². *Squirrel in Quicksand: In Defence of Orthodoxy by a Christian Sociologist* was never written nor published, but its title is both intriguing and instructive. According to the notes, the volume would begin with the telling of an anecdote concerning a heavy-machinery operator stuck in quicksand. There is little to indicate the intended meaning of this opening story, but an obvious link appears between the book's subtitle and the succeeding outline. Organised into five chapters – 'The Self', 'The Family', 'The Community', 'The Nation', and 'The World' – it appears that the study was meant to be a sociologically-informed analysis of the integrative potential of religious conservatism. Perhaps most important, at least for our purpose of illuminating this singular moment in the history of ideas, is Mol's use of a dichotomy between fragmentation and integration in his plans for *Squirrel in Quicksand*. Indeed, Mol (1978a) increasingly interpreted the social world in the light of a dialectic between order and chaos, or 'wholeness and breakdown'.

This intellectual orientation, arguably rooted in his experiences of religious functionality during imprisonment in World War II (Powell, 2015a: 16, 19), informed and propelled Mol's contributions to social theory and sociological explorations of religious identity. The 1976 publication of *Identity and the Sacred*, therefore, meant the dissemination of a new theory of religion in which identity was central and the tension between stability and differentiation fundamental. Mol asserted that identity is 'the stable niche that man occupies in a potentially chaotic environment which he is therefore prepared vigorously to defend' and, somewhat glibly, defined religion as 'the sacralisation of identity' (1976: 1, 65). Attempting to avoid the pitfalls of both substantive and functional definitions of religion, Mol suggested that religion is neither a set of beliefs nor a socio-cultural force but an action. In this way, he was able to turn the analytical lens on the individual's drive for existential balance, bringing into focus the social developments and behavioural outcomes stemming from one's negotiation with life. Interminably unnerved due to an existence

² I am indebted to the William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections of the McMaster University Libraries for dutifully and generously supplying me with copies of hundreds of pages of Mol's papers. In this particular case, I am pleased to possess Mol's notes for this unrealised study.

characterised by a stability/adaptability dialectic, humans, Mol argued, are necessarily involved in identity construction. This is true because, for Mol, identity is associated with stability and order. Therefore, humanity's predilection for religiosity is helpfully understood as a predisposition to making sacred that which provides a sense of identity in the face of potential disorder. Ultimately, religion is understood as that sacralising process.

These assertions, however, were offered in the 1970s – a time of deep cultural questioning in many western societies and a period of distinctive productiveness in the social-scientific study of religion. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann had presented their blend of phenomenology and the sociology of knowledge ten years prior (1967), and the French post-modernists were emerging as outstanding social theorists³. Such a context meant that new theoretical contributions needed not only to blend careful nuance with the responsible attribution of ideas to one's intellectual benefactors but also to reckon with an ever-increasing body of religious data. Consequently, Mol often acknowledged the great challenge of formulating a general theory of religion (1976; 1979). However, awareness does not mean abrogation, and his identity theory of religion dominated Mol's writings from 1976 until his retirement.

Indeed, his was an ambitious agenda, an observation which he admitted readily (Mol, 1979). The new theory was not only ostensibly capable of explaining universal religion but was also intended as an integration of, and corrective for, the multifaceted approaches and findings of the social and natural sciences with regards to animal behaviour and sociality. This breadth and ambition is patently clear in his many essays which range from evolution to medieval history and are interpreted in the light of ethology, behavioural psychology, and philosophy (Powell, 2017). Yet, in this sense, these works simply represent the complete oeuvre, a career's corpus dedicated to introducing and to sustaining the concept of identity within discussions of religion's place in the modern world. Similar notions existed, of course; Orin Klapp and Robert Bellah both – contemporaneously – posited identity as an important concept for social science (Klapp, 1969; Bellah, 1965).

However, the sociology of religion had largely ignored non-rational components of religion from its first inception, affording pride of place to the more rationalistic notion of meaning-making. In many ways, Mol broke vital ground by including identity as an analytical tool useful for elucidating often-overlooked elements of religion and religiosity – namely, the varieties of emotional commitment and ritual reinforcement experienced by practitioners.

³ It is worth noting that the inaugural volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was also published in 1976, the same year as Mol's *Identity and the Sacred*.

Accordingly, this meant a sociological theory uniquely attuned to subjective experience for, as Douglas Davies states, 'identity...roots meaning in the individual' (1984: 7). Although Mol (1976) offered a definition/discussion of *collective* identity and conspicuously relied on religious concepts rooted in the *institutionalised churches* of the West, his emphasis – or, in our estimation, his most original contribution – was often his analysis of sacralisation at the personal level. This even led one of his critics to claim that 'part of religious reality is missing from Mol's argument': the 'community' (Kollar, 1979: 333).

Of course, it would be difficult to substantiate Kollar's assertion – that Mol's theory is devoid of content related to the collective – with regards to *Identity and the Sacred* and utterly disingenuous with regards to the rest of his publications. Mol was a skilful analyst of society with considerable training in the matter. His astute recognition of the import of individual identity for the academic study of religion was not a blinder but a filter, shaping and determining his object of scrutiny, yes, but also beneficially guiding the social sciences into the facets of 20th-century life where religion was a meaningful, lived reality. Just as Evans-Pritchard had done for anthropology – indicating that religion was about 'faith and sentiment' rather than 'experiment and reasoning' – so Mol did for the sociology of religion (Evans-Pritchard, 1965). His process of sacralisation was composed of four 'mechanisms': objectification, ritual, myth, and commitment. In defining the last of the four, however, Mol diverged from his contemporaries (Stark, Glock, 1968; Stark, Bainbridge, 1987); religious commitment was not simply measurable religious participation but was understood to be 'emotional attachment' (Mol, 1976: 11). In fact, Mol asserted that '*faith* is often the theological synonym for what is here called commitment' (original emphasis) (1976: 221). Incorporating religious sentiment and considering individual identity, however, came at a cost. As we will show in our later discussion of Mol's critics and their claims, the price paid for this unusual investigative angle was the measurability of its variables.

It should be noted, though, that this approach was partially a function of Mol's enduring effort to synthesise the many methods and theories vying for consideration and application at the time. What is more, taking the individual as primary presaged many things to come for both the humanities and the social sciences. Before 'the subjective turn' of post-structuralism, and prior to the prevalence of a methodological dichotomy splitting *emic* and *etic* analyses, Mol envisaged a rigorous, sociologically-informed approach to studying religious communities and their members which would do justice to the

human longing for a harmonious existence without stumbling down the well-worn path of phenomenological interpretation⁴.

2. Sympathetic scholarship

Thus, in *Meaning and Place*, Mol identified his own methodological orientation as ‘sympathetic scholarship’: ‘In other words, one can adopt the view that existence is too narrowly conceived when the scientific/analytic/differentiation mode prevails. Leaving room for the religious/synthetic/integration mode extends the horizons. Both compensate for the weaknesses of each other’ (1983: 67).

This ‘sympathetic’ approach was, in part, a reaction to the early disciplinary rift between the ostensibly cold reductionism of sociology and the equally ostensive empathy of ethnography and participant observation (Mol 1983). Although this sort of inclusivity – embracing both the ‘analytic’ and the ‘synthetic’ – engendered few friendships among fellow sociologists, in the end Mol was at least successful in offering a sociological interpretation of religion palatable for some religious believers. Indeed, one review essay in 1977 concluded that *Identity and the Sacred* ‘is gratifying in its scholarship and refreshing in its approach’: ‘Here is a social scientist who takes theological statements and religious expressions with more than the usual seriousness’ (Largo, 1977: 360). This desire to accommodate religious faith in his social-scientific analysis, however, was not simply a countervailing move against dry rationality but was also one more important item on Mol’s list of aspirations. By conceiving of religion as a sort of social-psychological process in which identities are formed and cloaked in sacred significance, he had boldly melded the inferences of ethnologists, social scientists, and philosophers. To welcome, and at times even to explicate, theological and faith-based assumptions was simply to add more chairs around an already teeming table.

Yet, constructing a general theory is a daunting task, correlating massive bodies of data with an equally capacious frame of reference. Beyond that, the endeavour is unavoidably plagued by scepticism from others, as the proffering of a new comprehensive theory implies evident weaknesses in existing frameworks. Even so, Mol’s ambition remained ever formidable, and it was inextricably linked to his firm grasp on the social weight of religious meaning

⁴ Accordingly, his awareness of the complex relationship orienting the individual to his or her social world led Mol to a dubious embrace of the popular secularization thesis in the 1960s. Already in 1965, well before such statements became common, Mol argued that speaking ‘about the secularization process in modern society as though it is a pervasive force is an over-simplification’ (1965: 45).

and self-definition. That being said, Mol was not entirely alone in composing a general social theory and combining disciplinary perspectives to do so – or even in utilising a dialectic as the building block of such an intellectual contribution.

3. Enigmas, general theories, and contemporaries

In fact, the mid-20th century brought with it a number of influential social theorists who not only shared a concern for the place of the individual in society but who also expressed their ideas in strikingly original ways. Some of Mol's contemporaries, such as Harold Fallding, Louis Schneider, and Roland Robertson sought to analyse the social foundations of religion by expanding the functionalist paradigm established by Durkheim⁵. Others, however, maintained a purview wide enough to encompass more social phenomena than just religion, striving to move beyond the classic theories of the social sciences and pave the way for novel approaches.

One of the latter, Robert Merton, served as Mol's teacher and supervisor during his doctoral research at Columbia University. Influenced by the functionalism of his friend Talcott Parsons, but also championing what he called 'middle-range theories' in which social scientists were encouraged to aim for empirically-supported theories instead of large-scale abstraction (Merton, 1968), Merton's considerable contributions to the field of sociology almost certainly shaped Mol's balance of empiricism and theorising. Furthermore, one should note that Mol's work betrays a number of presuppositions which were undoubtedly inherited from his intellectual forebears: humanity possesses an innate drive for order, religion offers an interpretation of reality with the potential to eradicate disorder, and too much focus on social structures – over and above individual agents – could distort the conclusions of social theorists. Emboldened by his mentors, and resting in the plausibility surrounding such new sociological understandings of the world, Mol embarked on the development of a general theory which would

⁵ Fallding published his *The Sociology of Religion* (1974), in which he discusses the concept of religious identity as a tool for understanding modern religion, just two years prior to the publication of Mol's *Identity and the Sacred*. Four years before Fallding's book appeared, Schneider followed his influential sociology reader *Religion, Culture, and Society* (1964) with his most forthright endorsement of functionalism, *Sociological Approach to Religion* (1970). Yet, Schneider's theoretical contribution was eclipsed somewhat by the scope and ambition of Robertson's *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion* the same year. According to one reviewer, in fact, Robertson's work shared certain defining traits with Mol's: force, novelty, and thoroughness (Coleman, 1978).

unashamedly aim higher than Merton's middle-range whilst also placing a notion of balance at the nucleus of religious life. This balance between order and disorder, as well as between structure and agency, was expressed and defended as a 'dialectic', an interdependent relationship in which two opposites are mutually sustained by their antagonism.

4. Dialectics

Largely borrowed from Hegel's philosophy and Karl Barth's early 20th-century theology, the notion of dialectics had already been put to use in the sociology of religion before Mol. In *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*, Roland Robertson highlighted the contingency existing between social structure and culture, describing a dialectical system in which religious culture consists of beliefs and practices which, nevertheless, require a social structure for their expression (1970). Although this was, in many ways, a further elaboration of the discipline's earlier postulation of a sacred/profane dichotomy, Robertson's articulation placed greater emphasis on the manner by which culture shapes social groups and *vice versa*. Even more importantly, Robertson's study was a harbinger of slightly later works such as Mol's which, even if only implicitly, tended to give credit to the philosophical/theological origins of such dialectics.

After the two world wars, western religionists as well as intellectuals in related fields like philosophy, theology, and the social sciences sought effective means for comprehending their newly dishevelled world. From Hasidic immigrants in New York who embraced a staunch orthodoxy because their experiences in Eastern Europe precluded any acceptance of human progress to the 'death of God' theologians who saw no relevance for the modern world in the orthodox notion of transcendence, the dominant pursuit became stability and meaningful identity in the face of dramatic tragedy and undeniable change. Those cultural anxieties also engendered the new social-scientific theories with which we are concerned, and the adoption of the philosophical category 'dialectic' by sociologists is a remarkable example of that reality.

In the introduction to *Identity and the Sacred*, Mol (1976) briefly mentions his background in theology, with its attendant studies of Karl Barth. Although he does not explicitly confirm any indebtedness to his theological training for his later sociological notion of dialectics, it strains one very little to suggest such a connection. Barth rose to prominence as one of, if not *the*, most important theologians of the 20th century after formulating a 'dialectical theology' which emphasised the various dualities and paradoxes in Christian concepts of the divine, such as grace and justice (1919). Mol was first attracted

to theology through Barth's writings, and it is noteworthy that Mol subsequently developed an interest in the relationship of religion and society whilst studying under another dialectical thinker, Reinhold Niebuhr, at Union Theological Seminary (Powell, 2015). Yet, Mol's dialectic ultimately had little in common with Barth's dualistic divine truths. As we have seen, Mol saw a basic dichotomy between sameness and change, or stability and differentiation, at the heart of the natural and social sciences. Thus, his thoughts were more in accord with fellow sociologist Peter Berger's (1973) assertion that the sacred is opposed by chaos.

In that sociological sphere, the Hegelian formula – thesis, antithesis, resolution – was also influential. For example, just as Mol allowed Barth to inform his identity theory, so Claude Lévi-Strauss adapted Hegel for his structural analyses of myth: 'Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution' (1972: 224). In Lévi-Strauss' system, Mol found contemporary affirmation; myth existed in a dialectical relationship with empirical reality, integrating and mending the incongruous objectivities of human experience. Likewise, those lived realities were given expression and comprehension through mythical thought. It was, as Mol (1976) eagerly argued, as though the two binary opposites (*viz.*, empirical reality and mythical intimation) existed in a perpetual state of conflict and complementarity. For Mol, however, this dynamic existed more broadly in nature and in society. The struggle for balance between two opposed forces was found at the macro level, well beyond specific cultural products like myths. His dialectic, pitting order against chaos and stability against adaptation, formed the very basis of evolution as much as it shaped the social structures of human civilisations.

5. Enigmas

Although Mol's passionate postulation of a general theory capable of describing and elucidating these very foundations of human existence – owing something to neo-orthodox Christian theology, nonetheless – may have betrayed an overly ambitious and inherently untenable project, it also placed him in the company of other somewhat enigmatic intellectuals. We have noted the influence of Merton and the similarities with Fallding, Berger, et al. Yet, the unexpected way in which Mol exemplified interdisciplinarity and macrosocial scope in his theoretical musings meant that he eluded easy classification. Applying psychological and ethological concepts – identity and territoriality, respectively – was only marginally unique in the sociology of

religion⁶; think of Durkheim's much earlier discussion of the geographical component of totemism for Australian aborigines. However, combining those with philosophical systems and a recurring argument for the sociological complexity of conservative religious belief so that the result is both an acknowledgement of the harmonising potential of religious membership *and* an endorsement of 'independent identity' in the face of rapid change was arguably quite original (Mol, 1976)⁷.

With the retrospection available to us in the 21st century, it is rather unremarkable that a social theorist would point to the significance of the individual or include a non-rational, affective mechanism (viz., commitment) in his or her theoretical framework. The anthropology of religion, for instance, had rapidly severed ties with its 19th-century roots in social Darwinism and even moved beyond phenomenology to embrace a methodology built on the solemnity, and nuance, of personal experience. It was not long, of course, before post-structuralism gripped the social-scientific baton and sprinted farther down the same track. The line between subject and object, we now grant, is awfully faded.

However, Mol, and those with whom we will argue he had the most in common, appears to have had little interest in testing the waters of the postmodern stream. Among his sociological influences were the fathers of the field, Weber and Durkheim, as well as Merton and Parsons as we have noted. Structural-Functionalism constituted a predominant force and a valid analytical orientation for Mol and most of his peers emerging from Columbia University in the 1950s. We show below that, although he actively sought to unburden himself of the functionalist indictment as his career progressed, Mol's critics remained a nearly united front in hurling that very accusation at his identity theory. Even so, our contention is that Mol offered (and perhaps still does) an unclassifiable perspective closer to the thoughts of disparate international figures such as Erving Goffman, Jacques Ellul, Pierre Bourdieu, and Alberto Melucci than to either Durkheim or Foucault.

⁶ Beyond the field of sociology, of course, the famous scientist (and Mol's contemporary) E. O. Wilson combined sociology with biology to form 'the new synthesis' of sociobiology (1975).

⁷ In fact, Mol published numerous studies intended to espouse the social benefits of orthodoxy. These include his doctoral thesis, later published as *The Breaking of Traditions* (1968). What is more, Mol corresponded with the French social scientist and philosopher Jacques Ellul, telling Ellul in 1981 that students at McMaster are required to read Ellul's writings for their 'analysis of the sociological sophistication of theological orthodoxy' (from personal letter now in this author's possession).

5.1 Erving Goffman and the mystified self

In the case of Goffman, one of the most widely cited social scientists of the 20th century, eluding easy classification came more as a function of an unsystematic approach to social theorising than as a result of ambitious, reductive generalising. As Bernard Meltzer argues, 'We find in [Goffman's] work no explicit theory, but a plausible and loosely organised frame of reference; little interest in explanatory schemes, but masterful descriptive analysis; virtually no accumulated evidence, but illuminating allusions, impressions, anecdotes, and illustrations; few formulations of empirically testable propositions, but innumerable provocative insights' (Meltzer, Petras, Reynolds, 1975: 70).

In this way, Goffman's notions of the 'symbolic interactions' performed by 'acting' humans as they encounter one another in various contexts present themselves as a sort of counterpoint to Mol's concise explanatory model, a general theory of religion which purports to explain a great deal of evidence whilst dedicating comparatively little time to descriptive analysis. Where Goffman is eager to magnify the tacit cues and manoeuvres of human interface so that his audience can see that which was already there, Mol is keen to unveil the social, cultural, and biological drives that manifest as a unified predilection for stable meaning in the face of ever-present disruption – Goffman illuminates; Mol reveals.

This difference in method and approach corresponds with a difference in content and conclusion. Goffman's 'dramaturgical' system is built on the concept of social 'performance' as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (1959: 15). As actors participate in the theatre of the everyday, they are significantly exercised by the disparity between their persona in each scene and their backstage self. In expounding his theoretical scheme, Goffman (1959) seems convinced that individuals' observable behaviours, then, are largely born of the overwhelming desire to control such performances. Mol, however, is more obviously beholden to the roots of the sociology of religion which tend to understand the human experience as a projection of underlying individual and group needs – namely, a deep yearning for meaning. Thus, it is not surprising that Mol criticises Goffman's 'performing self' as being overly concerned with the facade-constructing aspect of the individual instead of the authentic struggle for a clearly demarcated niche of stability (Mol, 1976). The latter, Mol argues, fits the available religious data more closely by accounting for the way in which religious systems – their thought-forms and ritualised activities – are matched to human existential concerns. In other words, whilst it may be the case that

individuals expend great effort to control the manner in which they are perceived by others, such an observation fails to offer a compelling justification for the genesis and sustained viability of a socio-cultural institution as significant as religion. Mol, of course, understands that Goffman's agenda is not to explain the phenomenon of religion but to describe the minutiae of human encounters. Even so, for Mol it is 'identity' instead of 'performance' that integrates and elucidates the social lives of humans.

Limiting our discussion to the disagreements between these theorists, however, would be misleading and unconstructive. Indeed, we name Goffman alongside Mol not only because of the uniqueness of the two but also because of their similar ideas. For instance, long before Mol expressed the important connections between religious commitment as 'an anchoring of the emotions in a salient system of meaning' and ritualized behaviour (Mol, 1976: 216), Goffman noted that emotion is a 'move in a ritual game' which complements the rational element of social interactions (Smith, 2006: 11, 97). Perhaps more importantly, Goffman preceded Mol in recognising the near sacrality of individual identity. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he discusses the 'mystification' of the actor in relation to his or her audience as a highly-manipulated field of meaning surrounding the individual which enables him or her to navigate social life successfully whilst preserving the most essential and continuous aspects of the self by ensuring that the latter remain out of the audience's reach (Goffman, 1959). This closely resembles Mol's assertions concerning 'sacralization', the process by which stability is fortified through the erection of a sacred sphere around particularly effective foci of identity. For both, the sacrosanct quality of personal identity receives pride of place due to the potential for 'identity depletion'; in particular social performances, as in a differentiating society generally, the inescapable presence of destabilising change means that safeguards are sought to eliminate or minimise the loss of self⁸.

Here, we encounter the unexpected harmony between these two theoreticians and ultimately recognise the reason for the awkwardness in 20th-century attempts to label their efforts. One cannot expect or presuppose determinism or conflict, social hegemony or cultural revolution when human identity is indissolubly linked to, and in a dialectical relationship with, social

⁸ We use 'identity depletion' in the sense outlined by Douglas Davies, as the negative effects on identity sometimes engendered by certain socio-cultural phenomena such as excessive individualism and a lack of reciprocity. See Douglas J. D. (2011), *Emotion, Identity, and Religion: Hope, Reciprocity, and Otherness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 68.

structure and changing contexts. Thus, the differences in purview and angle of approach between Goffman and Mol do not preclude agreement on a number of sociological issues and, similarly, do not prevent us from highlighting their comparably idiosyncratic theoretical contributions.

5.2 Jacques Ellul and the erosion of self

Perhaps it is to be expected, then, that the similarities between Mol and Ellul likewise have at least as much to do with being enigmatic generally as they do with possessing analogous views – viz., a perpetual social oscillation in which the individual struggles to locate stability somewhere between the poles of pure individuality on the one hand and unrestrained differentiation (or technological efficiency, for Ellul) on the other. It is instructive, for instance, that Mol includes Ellul in a chapter on identity's 'kindred concepts', specifically positioning Ellul within a discussion of religion's social significance and just prior to concluding that 'there is no escape from the relevance of independent identity' (Mol, 1976: 77-78). For Mol and his French counterpart, as well as for Melucci as we will see, sovereign independence is the compensator (or, at least, consequence) for rapid societal change. That which Mol takes to be stability in the face of forced adaptation, Ellul sees as critical thinking and individualism succumbing to the effects of propaganda and mass technology (Ellul, 1965). Each theorist locates the individual or group opposite society or socio-political movement. Mol's manner of doing so is consumed by his belief in the unrelenting nature of social differentiation: identity is in a dialectical relationship with change. In contrast, Ellul (2004) prefers to focus on one (for him, regrettable) hallmark of modern, differentiated society: 'technique'. 'Technique' refers to the machinations and methods engendered by, and serving, society's devotion to efficiency. As efficiency increases it becomes both the end and the means, ultimately demanding a hospitable environment in which 'technique' is used for its own interminable development (Ellul, 2004). This notion leads Ellul (2004) to a scathing evaluation of technological innovation as the central challenge to a healthy sense of self; technique 'suppresses' both the subject and his or her sense of meaning⁹.

Thus, by suggesting that humans exist in a give-and-take relationship with social realities such as technology, economics, and scientism, Ellul adopts a

⁹ Ellul's most well-known publication on 'technique' is undoubtedly *The Technological Society*. However, we have chosen to reference a later work in which Ellul attempts an exhaustive summary of his theoretical contributions from the full period of his career. It is in the latter (*Perspectives on Our Age*) that the theoretician seems most clear and systematic with his presentation.

dialectical framework which is remarkably akin to Mol's theory of identity. The modern self faces potential erosion by the collective adoration of efficiency *qua* efficiency. This lived reality, however, is of little surprise: 'Ultimately, every living organism has a certain number of forces working to preserve and renew it and a certain number working to destroy it. Hence, there are successive equilibriums between the forces of life and the forces of death. And the person or the organism evolves accordingly' (Ellul, 2004: 6).

In the struggle for existence, therefore, humans must adapt to survive – this imperative is as true for a microorganism robbed of a suitable habitat as it is for an individual robbed of purpose. Turning to Mol, we observe further agreement not only in the perceived desirability of social adaptation but also in the very language itself: 'To us, the dialectic between differentiation and identity (integration) consists of both attraction *and* repulsion, mutual need *and* basic conflict...there is much give and take. Viable religious orientations and organisations develop sophisticated mechanisms to deal with change' (original emphasis) (Mol, 1976: 21).

It is important to note that both Mol and Ellul embrace such an evolutionary perspective and, somewhat unexpectedly, both are indebted to Barth (not Hegel) for their dialectical thinking.

This fact, that both Mol and Ellul owe their basic theoretical foundations to a prominent Christian theologian, goes some way toward explaining (or at least establishing) their unique positions in the arena of social theory. In a manner which has significantly diminished in frequency and acceptance over the past few decades, Ellul managed to present himself to academia as an equally competent sociologist, philosopher, and theologian. In the succinct words of John Coleman, 'Ellul is a bit hard to type, academically' (2011: 44). As an incisive commentator on overlooked socio-cultural phenomena, Ellul's name finds a rightful place alongside Goffman's. As the purveyor of a dialectical social theory in which the self is threatened by those observed socio-cultural movements, he rests comfortably beside Mol. Nevertheless, Ellul's notion that modernity has regrettably created a cult of technology which now corrodes and corrupts personal meaning necessitates that we look elsewhere for a counterpart to the sort of harmonising, and decidedly more hopeful, balance intimated by Mol's identity theory.

5.3 Pierre Bourdieu: self and structure

There is an apparent dourness found in the ideas of both Goffman and Ellul – the conceptualisations of a social world in which nothing escapes severe subjective control and all innocence is lost – which is at least partially a consequence of the way in which they conceive of the self in relation to

society. For both, this relationship is a zero-sum game; society or its structures are only permitted power and influence at the expense of the power and influence of the individual psyche or sense of personal meaning. Thus, Goffman must posit the 'mystification of the self' as a process of self-defence, and Ellul must call for the reconsideration of technological 'advancement'.

For Mol, however, the ever-present threat to identity (personal and collective) is a necessary component of the preservation of that same sense of belonging. In other words, the dialectic entails social stability not only being set against social change but also incorporating that change, neutralising the threat through strategic degrees of flexibility. Although Ellul also highlights the need for adaptation – as we have seen – Mol's emphasis diverges from his contemporaries by underscoring the salutary effect of socially antagonistic forces. Consequently, balance emerges as the ideal; too much order amounts to fatal rigidity, just as too much differentiation leads to the dissolution of meaningful identity (Mol, 1976).

In the years after the publication of Mol's theory, proposing a balance between the individual agent and his or her social environment became more common. We should note, for example, that the mid-1980s witnessed Anthony Giddens' (1986) presentation of 'structuration theory' in which the focus is on the life-world as a combination of external social structures *and* the 'structures' found within the thoughts and behaviours of subjects. Later, Melucci (1996) underscored the centrality of identity in his observation that sociological studies were beginning to understand the interplay between individuals and mass societal apparatuses. Four years before Mol's *Identity and the Sacred* appeared and more than 15 years prior to Giddens' or Melucci's contributions, however, the French sociologist/anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu outlined a theory in which a balance between agency and structure (or, 'field' in Bourdieu's preferred terminology) was afforded primacy. Like Mol and others, Bourdieu explicitly claimed to offer a dialectic, this time as a third option between mechanical determinism and unrestricted freedom¹⁰.

It could reasonably be argued that the comparative success of Bourdieu's theory is a function of his ability and willingness to name the balance he was championing. Unlike Mol, who unashamedly placed the burden on his audience to sort out the implications of a system in which 'identity' is both one half of the dialectic *and* its ideal solution, Bourdieu offered a middle road: 'habitus'. As the intermingling of human agency and ever-generative social

¹⁰ In at least one place, Bourdieu referred to this as 'the dialectic of objectification and incorporation' (1995: 88). In all cases, he seems to intend a perspective that is somewhere between cold rational evaluation on the one hand (agency) and pre-determined passive conformity (structural determinism) on the other hand.

influences, habitus is the living embodiment of humanity's unavoidably social experience: '...the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its productions...' (Bourdieu, 1995: 95). This formulation, then, directs the analyst's gaze beyond the tension of the dialectic where it is encouraged to alight on the domain of habitus. There, Bourdieu asserts, one will find the active complexity of social living in which the incessant production and reproduction of socio-cultural systems contacts the equally interminable constructions of the human agent.

From this perspective, the arena of lived experience is not Goffman's person-to-person or actor-to-audience interaction, nor is it Ellul's zero-sum relationship between meaningful individualism and deleterious societal trends. Instead, embodied reality is there at the nexus of agentive ingenuity and socio-cultural constraint. In a sense, then, Bourdieu's habitus does for social analysis generally what Mol's definition of religion as 'the sacralisation of identity' (1976: 1) does for the sociology of religion in particular; both concepts shed light on the manner by which individuals interpret, sustain, and create their 'realities' (thoughts, perceptions, belief systems, etc.) by integrating external social forces with personal drives. Those external forces, however, are for Bourdieu frequently understood as socio-cultural limits. Structures contribute to habitus by restricting the agency of the person, just as the person contributes an otherwise unbounded will.

5.4 Alberto Melucci and the self at play

Likewise, the theoretical works of Italian sociologist Albert Melucci emphasise the personal negotiation with social limits, connecting that process to an ongoing struggle for identity. In his *The Playing Self*¹¹, Melucci (1996) identifies a number of pernicious, or at least paradoxical, elements in the modern globalising world – highlighting, for example, the irony in our ever-increasing quantities of information and technology which simultaneously establish greater capacities for controlling our lives as well as the necessity of doing so if we hope to retain meaning in the endlessly changing societies we have created. Indeed, he seems to echo aspects of Ellul in asserting that the technological world is one devoid of 'the language of wonder' (Melucci, 1996: 142). Furthermore, his diagnosis of the ills facing one's struggle for identity, as well as his desire to equate identity with 'fixed anchor points' (Melucci, 1996: 2), places Melucci squarely alongside Mol: 'It is above all in situations of crisis

¹¹ First published in Italian as *Il gioco dell'io: Il cambiamento di se in una società globale*, Milano, Feltrinelli, (1991).

that our identity and its weaknesses are revealed – as for instance when we are subjected to contradictory expectations, or when we lose our traditional bonds of belonging, when we join a new system of norms. These conflicts constitute a severe test for our identity, and they may also damage it...The most serious crises may provoke a breakdown, a fragmentation of the self, or a breach of its confines' (Melucci, 1996: 30).

In this formulation, then, identity is something opposed by changing circumstances, the implication being that identity is bound up with a notion of stability or continuity. Mol agrees, of course; a sense of stable order may be stretched too far by the forces of differentiation. However, Melucci also reaches conclusions similar to, but distinguishable from¹², Bourdieu with regards to the self and its 'confines'. Where Bourdieu posits habitus as the world-establishing symbiosis of exogenous constraints on the person, Melucci blends his background in psychology with his sociological analysis to suggest that 'pathology' is found where either those boundaries are penetrated or made inescapably 'rigid' (1996). This is a sort of negative of Bourdieu's habitus, and emphasis is accordingly more on personal psychological wellbeing and less on the construction of our social *Lebenswelten*.

Yet, in Melucci's writings, there is the offer of a solution to the dilemma facing individuals as they 'search for a safe haven for the self' (1996: 2), a challenge which we see at the heart of Mol's dialectic. The resolution is found in Melucci's notion of 'play', particularly as it relates to his concept of 'identisation'. The former is a kind of freedom of flexibility combined with existential creativity; the individual recognises the strains of modern life and extends to his or herself an offer of liberty: 'Our self may learn to play if we allow ourselves to create, to go beyond the limit and open up to the possible still without losing our boundaries' (Melucci, 1996: 139). This process of identity negotiation in the midst of external influences is then called identisation, a term meant to capture the active processual character of identity conservation (Melucci, 1996: 31). If Mol's sacralisation is the ongoing act of creating religion around identity, identisation is the interminable activity of constructing identity in the first place. To be sure, Melucci's theory relies more heavily on reflexive self-awareness, skirting forthright notions of emotional impulse or unconscious fluidities at work in the affinities between self and identity source. Of course, this is likely a consequence of Melucci's

¹² We should note, for instance, that Melucci is much more comfortable with the idea of identity as, in part, an empowered sense of autonomy and 'pure awareness' of the self (1996). This is somewhat at odds with Bourdieu (and Mol) who frequently underscores the regulative check on agentic power represented by social 'fields'.

professional and intellectual blend of psychology and sociology, a trait that underpins the originality of his ideas and justifies his inclusion in our study.

It is, of course, also important to note the striking agreement between Melucci's hopeful assessment of the 'playing' self which attains a certain freedom of movement and thus 'the capacity to *change form*...while still continuing to be the same person (original emphasis)' and Mol's conclusion: '...too much stability, and too much change, can wreck a system. The dialectic as such seems to be a prerequisite for the viability and survival of personal, group, or social identity' (1976: 262). Indeed, despite their differing analytical directives, the theoretical works of Mol, Bourdieu, and Melucci all embrace a sort of dialectical framework and do so – in part – as a means of mediating the opposition between theories of structure and theories of agency. In the mid-to-late-20th century this was a daunting task, but ultimately these sociologists offered sophisticated scholarly correctives. Indeed, our own focus on dialectical thought and its connections to the rather novel concepts of several 20th-century social scientists is largely due to a conviction that there is a sort of 'virtue of the mean' at work in these systems. With regards to Mol's theory, for instance, it does seem that many religious communities persevere when they are able to put external influences to work, integrating outside threats into their stability-reinforcing schemas (ritual lives, thought-forms, doctrines, etc.).

That being said, the dialectic is perhaps useful because – when applied in this manner – it essentially argues that all elements of society (the 'give' and the 'take') potentially benefit that society. In this way, it is both incisive and somewhat circular. Accordingly, those dialectic-based general theories propagated by scholars such as Robertson, Ellul, Bourdieu, and Mol tend to encompass all and, therefore, purport to explain all. Their utility is arguably grounded in the human desire to reduce complexities into intelligible systems as much as it is grounded in any set of observable social patterns. Although dialectics rightly suggest that countervailing forces sharpen one another through that very struggle, they sometimes fall short in explicating the multifarious products of those oscillations. With that in mind, it is important to recognise that Mol departs from most of the aforementioned contemporaries by limiting his general theory to discussions of religion and exerting great effort in the hopes of elucidating the process by which striking a balance between stability and change also means abetting the future resilience of that religious community¹³. Of course, establishing a link between

¹³ For an application of this aspect of Mol's theory to two specific religious communities, see: Powell, A. (2015), *Irenaeus, Joseph Smith, and God-making Heresy*, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

adaptability and a religious group's future viability opens the door for Mol's critics to denounce his ideas as ever so much functionalism.

6. Critics and classification

We end our assessment, then, by turning to those claims of functionalism as well as a number of important appraisals of Mol's thought from both his critics and us. Indeed, our analysis cannot ignore that in the majority of his writings, Mol attempts very broad application of a theoretical approach based on an equally broad synthesis of mid-20th-century discoveries from a multitude of disciplines. This is a risky endeavour – one in which description is easily conflated with explanation, observation with conceptualisation. For example, Mol claims to be developing operational definitions of 'identity' and 'religion', for instance, yet essentially offers descriptive analyses which are not easily testable. This sort of shortcoming plagues many social-scientific theories, and Mol's was no different.

The theory's great scope, however, meant that other criticisms arose as well, and Robert Towler's is particularly stringent. Discussing *Identity and the Sacred*, Towler says of Mol, 'In seeking to advance his own thesis he does justice to none of the writers he discusses' (1979: 1034). In other words, the breadth of Mol's study is so comprehensive as to inhibit (if not entirely preclude) appropriate and satisfactory engagement with the works of his interlocutors. Likewise, Mol narrowly escaped being in the right place at the wrong time. As we have shown, his ideas and approaches were not entirely out of step with his contemporaries. However, his was grand abstraction of a hopeful sort, and it came after more than 15 years of cultural upheaval in North America. It appears that his early empirical work in New Zealand and Australia (1965, 1972) carried him forward when, otherwise, his unique theorising – taken to be a brand of functionalism – would have sunk amidst the turbulence of conflict theories and post-structuralism. Indeed, as Towler's critique highlights, Mol's perfunctory allusions to, and tenuous portrayals of, competing ideas clung like heavy barnacles to the ship that he so vigorously launched.

What is more, at the time of *Identity and the Sacred's* publication reviewers seldom withheld their disdain for neo-functionalism. Indebted to Merton and Parsons, and steeped in the classic thought of Weber and Durkheim, Mol was at home with basic presuppositions such as humanity's innate drive for order and religion's presumed usefulness in providing an interpretation of reality with the potential to ameliorate the disorder lurking in the shadows of society. It should occasion little surprise, then, that Mol was sometimes sharply rebuked for ignoring religion's potentially disruptive effects, a response

typically followed by accusations of functionalism. Theodore Long, for example, expressed his discontent both with Mol's definition of religion and with his focus on its function: 'For him, the 'sacralisation of identity' is both the *defining* characteristic of religion and the social function by which it is *explained*. In this elision of conceptualisation and explanation, common in functional analysis, the conceptualisation of religion is neglected...[and] leaves him with no analytic guidance in defining the focus of his empirical analysis... By limiting the potential social relevance of religion to integration, it excludes by theoretical fiat a whole range of empirical questions regarding religion's disintegrative consequences' (original emphasis) (Long, 1977: 422).

These statements follow his earlier assessment: 'Functionalism is the obvious villain of the piece, for Mol's *theory* is little more than an elaboration of the basic functionalist explanation of religion' (original emphasis) (Long, 1977: 421). Even so, Long is willing to praise Mol's work as 'perhaps the most impressive' of the books seeking to emphasise the 'vitality and importance of religion in secular society' due to its successful blend of 'broad historical and comparative analysis with an elaboration of a general theoretical basis for such interpretations' (Long, 1977: 421).

Other reviewers echoed Long in articulating somewhat contradictory judgments of Mol's work, countering their own contempt for functionalist interpretation with laudatory acknowledgments of identity theory's immense conceptual structure and sweeping implications. For example, Richard Fenn begins with the simple claim that 'Mol considers religion in functionalist terms' but ends by noting Mol's 'impressive imagination and scope' (1978: 67-68). At other times, however, Mol's peers seemed to offer more unequivocal appraisals. Kollar's aforementioned criticism of Mol's concern for the individual over and above the community, for instance, is paired with the basic assertion that Mol 'sees religion in functionalist terms' (1979: 332). A more assenting evaluation comes from Coleman who seems to connect the positive attributes of identity theory to its functionalist bent: '...the book is a rich lode of insight and would repay a careful reading. It contains one of the strongest functionalist treatments of religion available' (1978: 570).

Thus, Mol's various critics and reviewers seemed to speak univocally of his functionalist analysis of religion. Despite his good company and the sizable empirical work conducted early in his career and undergirding the later theoretical contributions, the easy assessment saw Mol as having diverged very little from his teachers' notions of the integrative role of religion in modern society. Although his dialectical framework included chaos and conflict, he seemed to determine his own fate by insisting that stable identity was both opposed to disorder and buttressed by religious commitment. Social scientists and scholars of religion in the mid-20th century drew from a relatively limited

pool of labels, however. In an intellectual milieu largely comprised of functionalists, structuralists, conflict theorists, and an inchoate 'postmodern' cohort, Mol was understandably associated with the first 'school'. Well into the 21st century, though, we are now capable of a more complete sketch of the trajectories of those theoretical paradigms. Mol melded individual identity and non-rational emotional commitment, the collective legitimation of religious myth and the inevitability of social disruption. Furthermore, by positing a social theory of religion in which religion was a process rather than a static cultural object, he sidestepped the potential traps of both substantive and functional definition; religion theoretically referred to an incessant action which was both individually meaningful and collectively-legitimated. This notion of religion not only left room for the presence of conflicting identities (some sacralised and some not, for example) but also implied that religiosity could be located outside of traditional institutions. This suggestion led Mol to reject the secularisation thesis in the midst of its heyday and to deflect the sociological labels hurled at him.

Whilst his incredulity regarding secularisation and synthesis of biology, philosophy, and social science may have been disregarded at the time, intellectual history now suggests that such ideas and approaches were antecedents to (perhaps portents of) concepts like desecularisation and scholarly aims like interdisciplinarity. In the end, of course, the novelty and utility of Mol's ideas are measured by the guild. Social scientists and others who set their analytical sights on religious phenomena and the position of religion in our world will determine the proper, practical place of identity theory. In the previous pages, however, we have attempted to problematise the facile categorisation of Mol's work as mid-20th-century 'functionalism', implicitly questioning whether such a conclusion resulted more from careful scrutiny or from potentially fallacious reasoning in which any notion of religion as a beneficial system was dismissed as naive and antiquated. Highlighting similarities between Mol's publications from the 1970s and other distinctive theorists was a major component of our argument, indicating that hindsight situates his theory of religious identity alongside other enigmatic social-scientific figures – if not in a category all its own.

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