

# A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR MOL'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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I am honoured to have been invited to respond to Professor Mol's address, and to be a cocolebrant of Australia's remarkable progress in the field of religious studies during the last decade. It is an especial pleasure to be here again in Sydney, especially as I am on my mother's side a descendant of Lachlan Macquarie.

Professor Mol has pointed to a multitude of ways in which his definition of religion as the sacralization of identity can set in train new reflections and stimulate new researches. In his opening remarks he cautions against cutting religion off from other elements in society, in our trying too easily to abstract religious from non-religious phenomena. Indeed I believe that in many ways it would be healthier if we talked more of the history and analysis of *worldviews* (including their practical and social expression) as a genus of which religions as traditionally defined are the major species, together with secular ideologies. In addition we may also want to stretch sacralization as a concept. It is the solemn loading of identities. So I take it that though for administrative and professional purposes we may characterize ourselves as students of *religion*, our interests are much wider, stretching horizontally to worldviews dubbed as secular, and vertically to the social and cultural context and embodiment of worldviews. And in directing our thoughts, Professor Mol's definition has great heuristic merit.

Also, it may be useful for us sometimes to make use of a Tillichianism in relation to group identity. We can ask of a person or of a collection of people what is her or their *group of ultimate concern*. For whom would they die, sacrifice a large portion of their goods and so on? Usually, today, it is the nation. Often religious or secular ideologies, whether Shi'ism or Maoism, have played a crucial role in restoring, refreshing or reordering national identity and dignity. So in all this I agree with Hans Mol's consistent emphasis, over the last two decades or more, upon the concept of identity in social and religious research.

In responding to him I would like to take up particularly the latter part of his paper where he compares his approach to other ways of studying religion: he lists phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, functionalism, conflict theory, Marxism and deprivation theories. I do not have time to deal with all these, but let me concentrate, albeit briefly, on phenomenology, functionalism and Marxism. I do so because historians of religion have been much influenced by the first and social scientists by the second and third. I might say that Dr Mol does not think of his list as exhaustive, and some of the approaches labelled are more in the nature of theories or models within a general field or method, rather than such a method. But phenomenology is a sort of method (or more than one) and it has influenced us: so I shall begin there.

I myself have in one or two recent papers attempted to evolve what I call a 'position theory' in relation to religious and other traditions and subtraditions, in which

I take up the challenge of producing a 'moving phenomenology' (such a dynamic phenomenology was advocated a number of years back by Michael Pye). It is an interesting study to see how traditions, groups, subtraditions and cultures react when faced forcefully by others and by alien cultural themes, including both ideological (including symbolic) and economic or material ones. Consider the variety of Islamic responses to Western material and ideational incursions. In trying to work out such a theory (e.g. in my *A Theory of Religious and Ideological Change: Illustrated from Modern South Asian and Other Religious Nationalisms*, Arizona State University, Department of Religious Studies, 1984) I have been encouraged by Professor Mol's general approach to problems of identity. It is one way by which phenomenology, i.e. typology or morphology, can be dynamized. There is no reason why we should not collect kinds of changes in worldview as well as the static 'essences' more traditional phenomenology has tended to deal in. In doing such dynamic as well as static typology we are in effect compiling the vocabulary of religious meaning-systems. Here I endorse Professor Mol's question, at the end of his section on phenomenology, about the importance but insufficiency of subjective meanings. I think here phenomenology has quite a different sense from typology: in this second sense it amounts to the call for imaginative and informed empathy in walking in other people's moccasins (to echo a Native American proverb). That is the point of epochē and bracketing.

Next: his worries about functionalism are well taken. Indeed it may be that all theories of large-scale societies which are founded on observations of small-scale ones are problematic, in that it has typically been impossible for large and especially modern societies to exist as tightly integrated groups. It is true that for virtually all modern societies there is the concept of the nation, and we have divided the whole hard surface of the globe, save Antarctica, into sovereign nation-States. But normally each of these societies is highly porous to external influences, and we are finding that even relatively homogeneous societies are incorporating variegations of religion as well as other cultural manifestations into their fabric. Pluralism is, then, the norm. Such variegation helps to promote worry about group identity, as Professor Mol has well noted.

Third: regarding Marxist approaches to religion, Dr Mol rightly points to ways in which traditionally defined religions, including groups such as Methodism and the Salvation Army, had a widely conceived view of human experiences which gave them relevance to human beings caught in the trials of social change and dislocation during 19th century industrialization. This is in effect more of a critique of Marxism as an ideology rivalling religions than as a theoretical approach to the analysis of social problems, alienation and so forth. Indeed one of the crises of contemporary official Marxism lies in the unexpected vigour of religion in a socialist State. Religion persists both because of threats to national identity and because of concerns about personal identity and meaning.

I am not sure, however, that I agree with one of Dr Mol's conclusions, namely that any single-minded attempt at comprehending religion must be culturally relativist and reductionist. I believe, though I shall not argue the point here, that the social scientist and scholar of religion should be methodologically agnostic (assuming, that is, neither the truth nor the falsity of the faiths studied). We do not need to be either methodologically atheistic or theistic (or nirvanistic). I do not think we are correctly described as reductionistic if — as Dr Mol implies — we treat religion sometimes as the *independent* and not the dependent variable. Indeed it seems to me obvious that religious experiences, doctrines, myths, rituals and so on are often active and partly independent in human affairs. If it were not so no religion would be worth affirming and no worldview would be worth espousing. But it is true that dealing

with these matters scientifically and with an appropriate warm dispassion does raise some interesting and disturbing philosophical questions, among them this: whether the experience and encounter with God or Emptiness or Brahman is quite enough, for what more would be added by adding her or his existence?

In conclusion, let me add a point which has only in part been made explicitly by Professor Mol. What is the connection between social and personal identity? It is indicated I think by the fact that the question "Who am I?" is so frequently answered by nominating the most ultimate group which we affirm (e.g. "I am a human being"). But of course some analyses, especially from within religions affirming a transcendent Focus, treat any group including the group of one constituted by myself, as provisional and of secondary importance compared to that Focus.

We should be grateful to Professor Mol for his correct concern with problems of identity in religion and society: for under the rubric of identity most of the important questions can be subsumed.