

**Sundén's Role Theory –
an Impetus to Contemporary
Psychology of Religion**

Nils G. Holm & J. A. Belzen (Eds.)

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Gulman Sundén

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Introduction

In June 1994, at the invitation of Professor Kurt Bergling, a conference on the psychology of religion was held in Lund, Sweden, at which the first session was dedicated to the memory of Professor Hjalmar Sundén, who had passed away on 30 December 1993. At that conference, three separate papers were presented which related to Sundén's scholarly achievement: Nils G. Holm's paper on religious symbolism and role-taking; J. A. Belzen's paper on role theory and narrative psychology; and the paper by H. A. Alma and M. H. F. van Uden on the relation between role theory and symbolic interactionism.

After the conference, J. A. Belzen suggested that these papers should be collected and published, in homage to Hjalmar Sundén's scholarly contribution to the psychology of religion. We decided to jointly co-edit the publication. Subsequently, it emerged that a number of other articles dealing with Sundén's achievement had also been written at about the same time as the conference. These have also been included in this commemorative volume. The contributions by Professor Owe Wikström and Dr. René Gothóni are both of a more personal character. Wikström recalls his first encounter as a young student with Sundén, and what this has subsequently meant for his own scholarly career; Gothóni offers a highly individual description of the experience of visiting the monastic peninsula Athos in Greece in the role of a pilgrim, and an analysis of this in terms of role theory. Gothóni's approach to explicating his own experience displays similarities with Sundén's own descriptions of his reactions to the horrors of the Second World War, which he wrote for his collection *Sjuttiotredje psalmen och andra essäer* ('Psalm LXXIII and other Essays', Stockholm 1956). It was in this book, incidentally, that Sundén first seriously set out

his role theory. Finally, among the more theoretically oriented contributions we have also included an essay by Hans Stifoss-Hanssen, in which he draws a comparison between role theory, attribution theory, and certain forms of psychodynamic theory formation.

Sundén's contributions to the psychology of religion are today recognized virtually throughout the world, but within the Nordic countries they have taken on crucial significance. Although the psychology of religion had earlier been encouraged by scholars such as Nathan Söderblom (subsequently Archbishop of Uppsala), it was not until Sundén's achievement that the discipline acquired such weight and solidity that in 1967 a personal Chair was created for him at the Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University. This Chair was subsequently reconstituted as a regular professorial position. Since Sundén's tenure, it has been occupied first by Thorvald Källstad, and is currently held by Owe Wikström. A Chair in the psychology of religion has also been created at the University of Lund, currently held by Kurt Bergling. No other Nordic country has created a professorial post dedicated to the psychology of religion; but the importance of the discipline has been recognized in many other ways, due not least to Sundén's contributions, e.g. within scholarly subjects such as comparative religion, practical theology, psychiatry, and general psychology.

Sundén's influence also reached the European continent and the impact has left traces behind; several of his books were translated into German and in The Netherlands he was 'discovered' by Han Fortman, professor for the psychology of religion at Nijmegen University. Jan van der Lans, a student of and nowadays successor to Fortmann, worked with Sundén's role theory in his dissertation and inspired several other researchers to apply this theory in their work. When some years ago at the University of Amsterdam a chair was established for the psychology of religion, the internationally attentive Board of the University oriented its interest not only to the impressive work of Antoon Vergote in Leuven (Belgium), but also to Scandinavian psychology of religion as it had developed itself in the wake of Sundén.

Both editors of this volume have been influenced greatly by the work and personality of prof. Sundén. This is especially so with Nils G. Holm, who had the pleasure and the privilege to study under him, and even more so to come to know him very personally. Over a period of about twenty years, they spent many splendid hours together. This introduction to a commemorating volume may be an appropriate place to express some thoughts on our personal relationship to prof. Sundén.

It was the German translation of Sundén's opus magnum, *Die Religion und die Rollen*, that initially attracted Jacob Belzen to the field of psychology of religion. His first personal encounter with prof. Sundén was in 1982. In subsequent years, Belzen visited him on several occasions at his home in Stockholm and every encounter turned into something special. Conversation with prof. Sundén conveyed intellectual delight: he would talk, or better: lecture, on each and every topic, he was charming, personal and fostering. He never permitted one to leave him without having had a great meal together. On one of these occasions, he would note in jest that in the Grand Hotel they still don't know how to deal with Pinot in a real french aperitif - though he had told them already back in the thirties...! In 1991, Belzen spent a week with Sundén, interviewing him extensively on his scientific development and life history. It was very impressive to witness how this bright man would be indulged in scholarly work until his last days, how he was still reading original biblical languages and having imaginary dialogues with great thinkers before him. He changed back and forth in his use of languages: when dealing with Freud, he talked German; telling about the time he spent in Paris and about his work on Bergson, he changed to French; only to switch over into English when he discussed developments in the contemporary psychology of religion. On Belzen's last visit to him in september 1993, Sundén handed over to him what was probably his last manuscript: on Teresa of Avila. It is scheduled now for publication in *Studies of Spirituality*. Teaching nowadays at Amsterdam University, Belzen time and again finds Sundén's work to be still one of the main sources of inspiration to students.

Nils G. Holm's interest in the psychology of religion was aroused during his undergraduate studies at Åbo Akademi University during the 1960s, when he read theology in the Faculty of Theology; music, and comparative religion in the Humanities Faculty. After completion of his licentiate thesis, on the sound structure of glossolalia, serious difficulties arose in the way of his further study at Åbo Akademi University, and it seemed natural to him to turn to Professor Hjalmar Sundén at Uppsala University, whom he had met briefly already earlier. Studying with Sundén was an exhilarating experience. As a professor he managed to create a dynamic and theoretically conscious research community that hardly had an equal in the Nordic countries. Pride of place in this research community in Uppsala belonged, of course, to Professor Sundén. In countless postgraduate seminars, religion was discussed and probed from a psychological perspective. The atmosphere was extremely open-minded, marked by the application of theories drawn from a very wide range of sources. Often the meetings evolved into veritable festivals of learning, as Professor Sundén would throw himself into powerful and inspiring expositions of points from his own research history: question such as Henri Bergson and his relation to Sigmund Freud, literature and philosophy in 19th-century France, the interpretation of passages from the Old Testament and of Jesus' parables, not forgetting, of course, the major figures both from depth psychology and also from mysticism and literature. This was a tremendously rewarding and enjoyable working environment. Nils G. Holm has been a member of this research community since 1973, when he registered as a postgraduate student at Uppsala for the doctor's degree.

Not only was Professor Sundén an excellent academic mentor; he also displayed considerable personal goodwill. In the spring of 1976, during the final year before the doctoral disputation, Holm visited him several times at his home in Bromma, where they together would probe the psychological depths of glossolalia, while Mrs. Sundén created culinary surprises of impressive proportions. Later, Holm often had the opportunity to visit Professor Sundén at his home on Ersta, and to realize that his own culinary

skills were in no way inferior to those of his wife; he would clear a space at on side of the desk for food and drink, and the two of them would reminisce over old times and enjoy the fruits of the table. Indeed, the last time Nils G. Holm saw him was at his home on Ersta, on 9 November 1993, where - after he had first delivered a two hours' lecture on everything essential in psychology of religion - Wikström and Holm took him out to a proper meal at a restaurant, in honour of his impending 85th birthday on 28 November. A few weeks later, he sent a thankyou card. It was to be his last message. The picture on the card was his own photograph, which has been reprinted in his volume.

Psychology of religion owes much to prof Sundén. And, as may be clear, so do many psychologists of religion also personally. Some of these are present in this volume. We like to thank them for their contributions. We have been happy to work on this project to honour the memory of that dynamic professor of the psychology of religion, Hjalmar Sundén. Through his books he will continue to instruct us.

Åbo/Amsterdam 9 November 1994

Nils G. Holm J. A. Belzen

I

Owe Wikström

The Integrity of the Religious Experience: The Role of Hjalmar Sundén as Teacher and Mentor

Recently I have spent many hours poring over almost-illegible diaries from my early years at university in the 1960s, in quest of the impact of Hjalmar Sundén. From the corridors of memory, smells, sounds, friendships emerge; but where are the seminal influences? What I find is an unruly mess of notes about appointments, exams, tennis, money and other trivialities. For many days, there are no entries at all. A few lectures each week — that is all.

A few weeks earlier, on my way up to the main University building to matriculate, I had walked past the History Department. Fascinated, I had watched the jackdaws circling around the spires of the Cathedral: in my home town of Luleå, in the north, no such creatures existed. The reason that I recall them so vividly is that I stood there a long time, pondering which subject I should take first for the career which I had mapped out for myself as a teacher in Swedish and Religious Education: Literary History (as it was

called on those days), or Theology. Just opposite the statue of Geijer, I tossed a stone, to allow chance to decide, and Theology won. Later, I learnt from Hjalmar Sundén that Chance is really Fate drained of meaning: a secularized religiosity; but that was an interpretation I had not yet achieved.

Through these messy diary pages, sounds long-since silent come back to me: the cawing of the jackdaws, heard very clearly from the Theology Department lecture hall, as they gathered in the evening in their fluttering, screaming flocks; or the somnolent rumble of the Fyrius River, heard in the background from the reading room at the City Library; the tempting birdsong and the rustle of the breeze when, early in spring, the windows were opened at the University Library. Only a moment away, there was the heat of early summer. And I can still hear Sundberg, the porter at the Theology Department, shuffling along the corridor in his slippers to scribble in pencil on our loan slips.

As I attempt to reconstruct that time, it seems to me that it was above all external, structural factors, and my fascination with Hjalmar Sundén, which shaped my interest in human life and the psychology of religion. Those university years stand out as a privileged free zone between the worlds of school and work, a time of steadily widening perspectives and dizzying insights into the complexity and variety of religious worlds, and the continuously expanding confrontation with the Unknown. At university, the neatly parcelled daily timetable of school had given way to whole days devoted to reading. The books we had to read were crowded with Indian and Ancient Nordic gods; Christian dogma was confronted by classical and mediaeval philosophy; semantic analyses of religious utterances were crammed into our heads alongside Hebrew grammar, early Christian architecture, and the basics of hymnology. Theology, I began to realize, was one of the most comprehensive forms of education; and it became harder and harder to trust simple answers.

Most of our lecturers and teachers, however, left me unmoved. Obviously, they must have affected me; but between those for whom systematic theology was synonymous with well-intentioned Lutheran

apologetics, and those who had surrendered to positivist paranoia, replacing theology's claim to truth by questions concerning the philosophical meaningfulness of religious utterances or language game theory, only Hjalmar Sundén stands out.

Academic theology was only one of the three main thrusts of 'reading' which claimed my attention; more important was the exploration of literature, but even more crucially, my theological reading was completed through the 'reading' of individual human destinies in long, rambling discussions out at Ulleråker Mental Hospital, where I worked for a time as assistant to the Chaplain, among the depressed, the burnt-out, and the angst-ridden.

These concerns are reflected in two entries in my diary, which read: "The strength in Alyosha's silence!" and a few days later: "The man who holds the axe is ignored." These refer to two books which have remained sharp and clear in my memory: Feodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*. A brief lecture by Hjalmar Sundén during our basic course at the university had re-alerted my attention to these books. Ever since my school days, I had from time to time spent an evening with Dostoevsky's characters: Prince Myskin, Stavrogin, Mitya, Sonya, Sosima and all the rest. The world of their thoughts and experience seemed to me, at times, more significant than that of my living friends. At times, I didn't merely 'read' his books; rather, I lived them. For one entire winter, when I was starting my ordination training for the ministry, I debated with the atheist Ivan Karamazov; and his little brother Alyosha, who was planning to become a monk, has remained in my memory ever since. I used to eavesdrop on their conversation in the Café Metropol in old St Petersburg; and when I take down *The Brothers Karamazov* from the shelf, that discussion is still going on.

Ivan, the elder brother, speaks long and intensely about the senselessness of believing in a living God in this absurd, cruel world. If God is so stupid as to have given man free will, while in His omniscience also knowing how appallingly man will abuse that freedom, how can we be expected to

believe in His omnipotence? Is mankind's freedom worth the price of the abuse and murder of children? No, says Ivan, I return the admission ticket to Our Lord. I would rather put up with the loneliness, with the tragic and the absurd. But a good God — never! Pious Alyosha does not argue back. Instead, he makes his appeal not through rationality, but through his naive, trusting goodness; hence my outcry: “The strength in Alyosha's silence!” Subsequently, I have come to understand the part which Alyosha plays in Dostoevsky's project, his quest to describe the Good Man without resorting to heroic idealism. Maybe I was already sensing that it was not the logical and rational side of religiosity which was to command my attention, but what Hjalmar Sundén had touched on in one of his lectures: man's inner life; religion not as ratiocination, but as experience.

That spring, I re-read Raskolnikov's story in *Crime and Punishment*. The plot is roughly as follows: after prolonged hesitation, Raskolnikov surrenders to his Übermensch idea: that under certain circumstances, it is right to kill. He decides to murder a pensioner, in order to use her money for a good cause. He has planned the deed very carefully, waiting on the stairs. Through Dostoevsky's icy description, we see the scene unfolding from behind the axe held in the poor student's thin hands, as the murder is carried out. My old paperback is full of underlinings; but what is this comment about the man who is ignored?

In that moment, mentally, Raskolnikov kills himself. He hides the money he has stolen. Sometimes, he is acutely aware of his guilt; but for the most part, he suppresses it. The rest of the book is a mixture of psychological exploration, thriller, and an analysis of religious philosophy. Raskolnikov alternates between remorse, compulsive behaviour, a trancelike state, and an irrational collapse of courage, which shifts in turn to the grey sadness of distorted nightmares and daydreams; but through his encounter with the reckless goodness of the prostitute Sonya, he begins to achieve an insight into his guilt. Sonya does not condemn Raskolnikov for what he has done to the old woman, nor for sinning against God; instead, when she realizes

that it is Raskolnikov who is the murderer, she cries in despair: “What have you done to yourself?”

For Dostoevsky, Raskolnikov's interior life is like some kind of mental laboratory. Theology, Philosophy, morals, the Devil and God are not mental baggage — they are integral elements in a human, highly concrete, experiential world.

On the Ethics course which I attended that spring semester, we studied the basis of duties and rules; we reviewed alternative ethical models; but what happened to the irrational, the emotional, all the covert and subconscious motivations for our choices, transactions and acts of faith? Who notices the man behind the hand which held the axe? Are people merely behaviour patterns, bundles of responses to interior or exterior stimuli, or are they hidden behind the mystery which we call autonomy and freedom? How is their freedom compromised by emotional conflicts, loyalties and unconscious impulses? While Dostoevsky asserts the strength of freedom, he also understands the burden which it represents; he recognizes both the necessity, and the dangers, of irrationality. His psychological realism pre-empted Freud and the later psychoanalysts.

Sundén's gloss on Dostoevsky encapsulates many of the problems which I have subsequently addressed in scholarly terms: the demarcation between healthy and sick behaviour; mankind's absurd situation, thrust into a freedom we can barely cope with, yet which is simultaneously our distinctive feature; the strength of humility; the symbolism of evil; the function of religion; and the trap of cold rationality.

The comments “ignored”, and “the strength of silence”, both reflect dissatisfaction with academic theology. What happens to the *person* who experiences existence as religious? How should one interpret altruism, or the function of goodness? Dostoevsky was a philosopher, criminologist, and theologian who — almost clinically — explores man's *experience* of God, the Devil, guilt, envy, pain and death through superlative storytelling. Instead of analyzing these complexes of problems in abstract, theoretical terms, he weaves them into character descriptions. As an artist, rather than

a scholar, he claims the artist's privilege to mirror the general through the unique individual case.

Within academic theology, I had not at that time yet encountered anyone who took this experiential aspect seriously; nor did an early reading of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* do much to change this general impression, and I therefore turned my attention to medicine, sociology, psychology and psychiatry. Theology seemed to be isolated within its own theory and history.

Many of the schizophrenics that I met while working at Ulleråker Mental Hospital had religious delusions, sometimes brilliant, but usually absurd, inchoate, legendary and mystical. Where could one systematically examine and attempt to understand the experience of living and suffering *persons* in their wrestling with the unbearable lightness of being, with God's presence or absence? Theology, the church, and religion all seemed to operate in a sphere remote from actual people and society. For the theologians, the psyche of doubting persons was irrelevant; and on the other hand, academic psychology had long since reduced man to a bundle of behaviours, a cognitive structure or a psychosexual apparatus. By contrast, what Dostoevsky's worlds offered was the living of theology, the experience of doubt, the weight of guilt.

These powerful, profoundly existential experiences offered very few points of contact with academic theology. Through the reading of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, however, a model slowly began to take shape. Yet where was the idea to be found which would *both* respect humans in all their complexity, *and* simultaneously justify religion? Increasingly, theologies came to look like powerful ideological systems, of interest only for the professionals, but for the majority of mankind, bizarre and exotic. How, then, could one make sense of the way people turn to religion for support? And when does it become a burden? Gradually a schism was opening up: psychiatry by night, theology by day. Sometimes, out at Ulleråker, I would sit up through the night reading Karl Jasper's *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. Although it was unfashionable at that

time to dabble in philosophical psychiatry (the current 'scientific' approaches focused on topics such as psycho-pharmacology and neurotransmitters), for me, the important question was to understand the manner in which the border questions of existence were experienced, and how this experience could mutate into pathological symptoms.

Gradually, my concerns were shifting away from question such as the existence or non-existence of God, towards examining the psychological needs and functions fulfilled by religious belief. Why, for example, did Swedenborg's *Dream Book* become so important for Strindberg? Evidently, he is avoiding his own responsibilities by dabbling with alchemy and the occult. And on the other hand, why does religious belief sometimes become permeated by the utterly human drive to act in direct opposition to people's own comfort?

Eventually, increasingly dissatisfied with the narrow obsession of theology with internal ecclesiastical questions, I switched to read psychology for a few semesters. Theology came to seem peripheral in comparison with more basic questions such as "Why do people believe at all? How is man's faith affected by his needs and his situation?" And, above all: "From the individual perspective, isn't religion relatively homogeneous? What diverges is interpretations."

And then, as I shuffle through these old memoranda, a few weeks later it suddenly says: "Sundén" — underlined several times, and with several exclamation marks after it. It was autumn 1968, and there were around thirty of us taking his seminar. The encounter with Hjalmar Sundén, recently appointed as Professor of the Psychology of Religion, changed my plans.

Sundén's style of lecturing was striking. When he came in, he would often sit hunched over the lectern, with his hands clasped together. Turned in on himself, he would begin to speak in his low and slow bass voice like a private monologue, leading us into the psychology of the mystics, the physiology of the brain, Freud's Jewish background, the psychological function of religious rites, or the visions of Ramakrishna. Often he would

half-doze, and then, in the quiet, fascinated room, as if from an inner slumber, he would alternately tell stories, critiques, or analyses. Occasionally this monologue would be interrupted by a pedagogical eruption: an (illegible) sentence might be written on the board; or he might stand up and theatrically act out an improvised play in order to illustrate a thesis about the psychology of role-taking.

Not only was his manner of presentation impressive; more significantly, so was the content. This was a learned man. One-sided Christian perspectives were shattered by cross-religious approaches, philosophical questions were confronted by psychology, and the balancing act of the standard curriculum was cast aside in order to explore the question: "Why is man religious? or why does he become so?" At other times, he would dip into literature, throwing out references to the art critic Bergson, the playwright Strindberg, the poet Lagerkvist, or the philosopher-novelist Camus.

For the first time, I had now encountered an academic discipline which could address the complexes of problems which I had been pondering over, and invest them with scholarly legitimacy. Instead of problematizing the ontological status of religious statements, or surveying the historical development of religion, Sundén asked functional questions — not from the macro-perspective of sociologists such as Durkheim or Weber, but from that of the individual. Sundén's question was: "How can it be that man experiences existence as religious?" Why is it that some regard existence as pure chance, and some speak of the interplay of contingencies, while others speak of fate, and others again perceive an intention in the experiential, finding themselves in contact with the Other or Another. How is such a religious world of experience possible? Is it possible to reconcile the assumption that religion has a compensatory function with its role of social criticism?

Oversimplified explanations evaporated in Sundén's presence and multiple-pronged approach. Freud, Jung, James, and Otto were marshalled for review; above all, from masses of examples, what we learnt is that

religion is a consequence of adopting various 'roles' from the religious tradition to which we have access. The only topic not open to question was role theory. Suddenly, it was acceptable to study literature in the Theology Department, for Sundén had studied literary history, under Professor Martin Lamm, and Sundén's own teacher and mentor, Tor Andre, had also been very interested in literature. For one semester, a seminar was devoted to Camus' poetry; later, another to Strindberg's late plays.

Sundén's masterwork, *Religion and Roles*, had come out in a new edition in 1966: 600 pages, including 200 pages of notes. For years, he had been gathering material about religious experience, and now presented this assembled round his own conception of religion as role-taking. That book is still a goldmine. For me, the most important was not his argument about 'roles', but his deep interest in and respect for the individual's experience of his religion, and the part played by language and symbols in shaping religious worlds of experience. Here all my own other interests each fell into place, and were thus marshalled into the form of an academic discipline.

Sundén's research seminar in the early 1970s shaped a group of professors and scholars who are now spread out the academic world. What was it that fascinated us? Was it that tremendous vitality and breadth, which enabled us to handle within the same seminar the relationship of Krishna and Vishnu in Indian mythology, to read the views of the great German reformer Luther and the northern Scandinavian pietist Laestadius on atonement in terms of the resolution of an Oedipal drama, and to explore the psychological context of shamanism? Or was it his magnum opus, *Religion and Roles*, which in those formative years came to function for me as a collation of the functionalist perspective which I had fumblingly and unsystematically been adumbrating? Or was it the trans-cultural perspective? Certainly on our other courses it was rare to hear about the universality of religion or its social and cultural bases. Sundén's interpretation latently foreshadowed George Herbert Mead and subsequent sociologists of knowledge.

But above all else, what was impressive was his enthusiasm: his empathy and respect, far removed from scholastic exercises, for ordinary popular piety. This is not to ignore the fact that much of what he wrote in *Religion and Roles* has subsequently been overtaken or reformulated; science and scholarship advance, as is known, in a zigzag fashion. The problematique has subsequently been formulated more precisely; some has been trimmed away; new areas have been opened up for exploration. Yet all that comes later. Twenty five years ago, the awakening of these questions is Sundén's achievement.