

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

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

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1908 - 1993

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

II

J. A. Belzen

On Religious Experience: Role Theory and Contemporary Narrative Psychology¹

Sundén and social constructionism

Slow but steady has been the development of the psychology of religion in Europe during the past decades. Since its postwar rebirth in, let us say, 1960, the discipline has been expanding and gained recognition, both in academic circles and in broader segments of society. In recent years substantial theoretical and empirical contributions to the field have been made, quite a number of academic positions have been established and modern research is going on in several locations. And during these days, we are meeting for the sixth time in our own specific, loosely organized way, which nevertheless shows that this way of meeting and sharing experiences has proved itself to be a valuable means of collaboration and presentation

1. This text is an elaborated version of a paper read at the 'memorial session' for H. Sundén during the Vith Symposium on the Psychology of Religion in Europe, Lund (Sweden), June 20th, 1994.

for all of us. European psychology of religion has outlived its childhood and today presents itself as a young and healthy adult science, with strength and ambition for the future. But as we grow beyond our childhood and adolescence, we are changing, transforming and also inevitably losing the self objects of our youth. The pain and bereavement that is forced upon us, in moments of loss of self objects, makes us realize how important they have been for the constitution of our self. This realization dawns on us now as we recall the loss, a few months ago, of an important figure from the youth of European psychology of religion. With the death of Hjalmar Sundén (1908-1993), European psychology of religion bids farewell to one of its founding fathers and to a truly parental figure. Without much exaggeration we can say that almost everyone working in our field in Scandinavia is indebted in some way to Sundén. From reviews of the psychology of religion in the Nordic countries, his enormous impact on theorizing and research is clearly visible (Holm, 1987, 1990). But Sundén's work has been received and widely read in other European countries as well, especially in Germany and in The Netherlands.

With Sundén, we have lost an extremely productive author, an inspiring patron and an erudite and original thinker. His thoughts on religion were clearly the result of a very personal engagement and a specific academic training. His own theory has a clear empirical slant: it deals with what others would perhaps call 'religiosity', or even 'spirituality'. To Sundén, religion is a dialogical relationship, a specific relationship to totality or to life as a whole. In this totality God may be found, due to the specific structuralization of the relationship by religious traditions. It is important to realize from the beginning that with this stance, Sundén chooses a position within a much broader debate. He rejects the view of man as being inherently religious, or of man as being religious by nature. To him the human self, also in its religious aspects, is a social self. This truism, which seems to have been forgotten by large segments of 20th century psychology (Triandis, 1994), but which has been stressed in a tradition from Vico, through William James and George Herbert Mead, to Georg Kelly and Alan

Fogel, has come to be known as 'social constructionism'. It can be summarized in three premisses:

1. Human reality is culturally constructed in processes of human communication.
2. These processes are historical, which means that human reality - although founded on a "biogram" common to the species - shows cultural differences and is subject to historical changes.
3. The foremost important medium of these processes is language, which is both product and producer of human reality.

This view, which is widely accepted in anthropology, ethnohistory, linguistics, etc. (Luckmann, 1990), has only relatively recently been gaining ground in psychology. It is because of his adherence to this 'social constructionist movement in modern psychology' (Gergen, 1985) - although he at first may not have been aware of it himself - that Sundén rejects psychologies like Rudolf Otto's, that start from a religious *a priori* in man. In the same way as human subjectivity is structured by culture, man's awareness of and relation to life as a whole are created by the religious traditions passed on to the individual in different cultures. Religious experiences are the result, and not the starting point, of the religious relationship.

The development of role theory

As indicated already, Sundén's slant was very empirical: it was to living religiosity that he devoted his attention. Throughout his voluminous *oeuvre* - some 30 books and more than 300 articles! - he mainly tried to elucidate religious experiences. To this aim, he turned to psychology and himself made a most valuable contribution to the psychology of religion by what has been called his 'role-taking theory'.

Without doubt, the development of role theory is intrinsically connected with Sundén's personal history. Born in 1908, he had been a brilliant student at Stockholm University, from 1927. His subjects were Literature, Philosophy and History of Religion. In 1930 he changed to Uppsala for various reasons, some very trivial: his theoretical interest in religion had been deepened by his study of its history; he was struck by the sudden death of some very close friends; the theological department in Uppsala offered money for a trip to France. There again, he was doing brilliantly in empirical studies of religion, but not very interested nor successful in dogmatics.

In Sweden there was by that time a strong interest in the psychology of religion as a result of the emphasis that Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931) and his student Tor Andrae (1885-1947) gave it within their work on the history of religion. In studying *Religionswissenschaft* and History of religion, Sundén was obliged to read all the books on the psychology of religion available by that time. He became very interested in psychology, and in later years, as a Ph.D. student, he pursued an extensive course in general psychology taught by David Katz (1884-1953), one of the most prominent general psychologists of the pre-war period, who like so many other outstanding psychologists, had fled the Nazi regime in Germany in the thirties. In Sweden a chair was offered to him at Stockholm University. In the years after the war, Katz planned a handbook on psychology and remembered his former student Hjalmar Sundén, who had by that time become a doctor in theology. His thesis (1940) had been on the philosophy of the eminent French thinker Henry Bergson (1859-1941). Katz considered Sundén to be the proper man to contribute a chapter on the psychology of religion to the handbook. Sundén accepted the challenge and started to read all he could lay his hands on, only to find out - as has indeed been confirmed by historical reviews since then - that hardly anything had happened in the field of the psychology of religion since the thirties. Sundén wrote his review-chapter and moreover decided to develop something new. As a docent for psychology from '48 to '61 at the Police

Academy, he had the opportunity to bring together several psychological approaches that he considered valuable for the elucidation of religiosity, and even more importantly: to develop his own original contribution to the field. For some 9 years he worked on his book, which was to be his *opus magnum*: in 1959 he published his *Religionen och rollerna*, which found its way throughout Europe thanks to the German translation of 1966.

The necessity of a religious frame of reference

Sundén's book offers chapters on the contributions to the psychology of religion by Freud and Jung and on the psychology of personality (here he deals, among others, with Gordon Allport). In the first and longest chapter of the book he develops his own view of religious experience, which he illustrates by extensively quoting all kinds of documents and literature from several religious traditions. Sundén starts by criticizing naive realism: he emphasizes that every perception is determined by the results of social learning. In order to be able to see something through a microscope, you must have learnt a great deal, you must be acquainted with theory and know what to look for. With religion, it is the same, argues Sundén: to be able to perceive something religiously significant, you must have acquired a religious tradition, you must have religious knowledge and know what to look for. In accordance with the results of *Gestaltpsychologie* from the thirties, Sundén supposes that perception is always the result of some ambiguous, or at least multi-interpretable stimulus outside us and of an acquired, culturally and historically determined frame of reference. Religious experience, then, is the result of the ability to perceive religiously in a specific way. Acquaintance with a religious tradition is therefore a necessary condition for religious experience, though not a sufficient one! (But Sundén does not elaborate systematically on the other conditions.)

The shift from a religious perception to a non-religious perception of the same external pattern, even within one person, he called *Phasenwechsel*

(phase-shift), and it is to be understood as analogous to the perceptual shift in the classical vase-face experiment of Rubin. This explains, in Sundén's view, why the same event can be experienced religiously by one person and not by another, or in the case of the same person as religious at some time and non-religious at another time: if A has acquired the appropriate religious frame of reference, whereas B has not, B will not be able to experience an event X as religious, whereas A can. But when A's religious frame of reference is not activated, if there occurs no shift from a non-religious to a religious perspective, then A too will not experience X religiously.

Sundén made his book very readable by recounting all kinds of stories: e.g., an amusing anecdote to explain his concept of *Phasenwechsel*, which tells of the governor of Karlstadt who prayed and cried over the great fire in the city, whereas the bishop cursed and fought the fire. Sundén calls this an example of psychological reality. The comical effect of the story is due to the role reversal of the two officials. For the governor the non-religious perspective is the normal one, but in this extraordinary situation he switches to the religious attitude. For the church official the religious perspective is the normal one, but in this hour of danger he switches to another attitude (Sundén, 1966, p. 99).

So to Sundén, the most important conditions for religious experience are, first of all, the possession of and, second, the actualization of a religious frame of reference. To those who worry about the loss of religious experiences in our days, Sundén suggests that they should investigate whether modern people still have a religious frame of reference at their disposal. And to religious officials, he recommends that they present and teach the content of the religious traditions. Sundén was very critical of much of contemporary theology. In his opinion, theology is in danger of losing its energy in a desperate search for new words and new ways of presentation and of forgetting to transmit the content of the religious tradition itself. He firmly opposed Bultmann's thesis that "one cannot use electricity and modern medicine and believe at the same time in the

miracles of the New Testament" (Bultmann 1948, I, p. 18). Bultmann (1884-1976) errs, according to Sundén: although modern people usually do not reflect philosophically on these matters, they can and do switch freely from one frame of reference to another, provided only that they have at their disposal both a non-religious as well as a religious frame of reference. "Our people were very pious, but modern theology took faith away", Sundén said grumblingly (personal communication). So-called "demythologizing" takes away the specific religious character of the religious frames of reference, and that is why people no longer have religious experiences anymore. It is not a matter of having a problem with modern technology. In this debate, Sundén clearly was deeply influenced by the philosophy of religion of Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) who in a polemic against Bultmann stated: a mythical frame of reference should not be demythologized. "It is a totally different objectivation from a scientific one. For here is no concern with empirical reality in the sense of the world that can be investigated". Myths are concerned with reality in an original way to which any conscious separation of empirical reality and transcendent reality is inadequate (Jaspers, 1954, p. 89). Sundén perceived his role theory to be in accordance with and supportive of Jaspers' philosophy (1966, p. 26).

The introduction of role theory

From his social constructionist point of view, Sundén regards human reality as being constructed by culture. To elucidate the way a specific culture structures human subjectivity, Sundén adopts the psychological role concept, as elaborated by authors like Linton (1936), Sarbin (1954) and Newcomb (1953, 1954). He writes: "The cultural equipment of a human being consists in large part of roles which he has taken from his surroundings. Herein is also included his participation in the religious tradition of his society: the latter in turn may on the whole be said to

consist of roles, in the psychological sense. After all, this tradition concerns humans and gods and the manner in which they interact. To say that it is comprised of roles is therefore merely a technical formulation of a well-known fact. Nevertheless, it is by no means an unimportant formulation. If we consider how much in our own psychic activity probably consists of role-taking (rollövertagande) and role-adopting (rollupptagande), or anticipating the roles of others, as well as the fact that the above mentioned nature of the perceptual process allows a processing of any and all peripheral neural processes such that they in a meaningful manner are included in a motive pattern, then the experience of a god or a spirit should, regarded purely functionally, be at least as natural as the experience of 'things' under the presupposition that gods and spirits are, psychologically regarded, truly roles and that they are relevant for the group in which a person lives" (Sundén, 1966, pp. 10-11: translation by Wikström, 1987, p. 392).

From a social psychological point of view, Sundén perceives traditions as consisting of stories, stories about situations in which God interacted with humans, stories with a typical pattern of roles, specific to that situation. Being acquainted with a tradition enables an identification with a certain personage from the tradition (role-taking). Such identification implies a re-interpretation of one's own situation as being similar to the story from the tradition. It implies therefore an anticipation and interpretation of the conduct or of the role of others including God (role-adopting). When, for example, someone identifies himself with a personage from the Bible, he expects that God will act in the actual situation in the same way as He did towards the personage described in the text. To summarize: when the religious frame of reference is activated, this implies a re-interpretation of the situation, resulting in a disposition to perceive reality in a certain way, and this enables a person, through role-taking and role-adopting, to act and experience that reality in an appropriate analogous way.

The application of role theory

In the hands of Sundén and his students, role theory has proved to be a powerful heuristic tool in analyzing the cultural psychological aspect of religious experiences in past and present. Especially Sundén himself was a master in elucidating all kinds of aspects or episodes from the lives of various religious heroes: Augustine, Luther, Ramakrishna, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Birgitta of Sweden, etc. Let us consider one case to illustrate his approach as well as his theory. In dealing with the life of James Nayler, Sundén first of all points out the great extent to which the biblical mythos determined, by word and act, the life of the 17th century English people. Deeply disappointed with the results of the victory, Nayler returned from a war in which he had participated for religious reasons. In the year 1652 he suddenly had a strong experience, while ploughing alone, and thinking of God. All at once he heard the words "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house", the words of the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12. Nayler identified with Abraham, and at the same time anticipated Jahweh's role and heard God's voice. When he then left his house, wife and children, he met God in all kinds of things happening to him. The identifications changed, however. One may suppose that when he left, he identified with one of the 72 disciples of Jesus, for he took off without money or equipment. When he got into trouble with the government or with other people, he identified with prophets and apostles. Because for every situation the Bible offered him a possibility to anticipate God's action and because the real happening accorded with his expectations, Nayler was absolutely convinced that his partner was a real 'living Other', that his partner was the same God who lived and dealt with the people of the Bible. This God was for Nayler a reality he experienced. While the roles of the biblical persons that he took up, became the guiding principle for his behavior, the role of God as described in the Bible, became the basis for Nayler's perceptual disposition (Sundén, 1966, pp. 16-17).

The restriction of role theory

Starting even from this example, one could raise some critical questions about Sundén's theory. What Sundén's theory makes clear enough, is that, in his own words "to have religious experiences, man must acquire a religious tradition" (Sundén, 1966, p. 4). Sundén's social constructionist approach is a valuable alternative to the distinction between man and world that was characteristic for much of older psychology. That man's subjectivity, his cognition and perception, his experience and conduct are determined by culture seems to have been forgotten in the contributions to psychology of religion made by James, Otto and Bergson (Sundén, 1966, p. 89). On the other hand, Sundén leaves many questions open. How, when and under what kind of conditions a religious frame of reference is activated, and by consequence a *Phasenwechsel* occurs, Sundén does not tell us. At several places in his book, he indicates that there are other factors, not covered by his theory, that are important in evoking a religious experience (for example the use of drugs, fasting, dancing: "all these means have as a goal to inhibit the frame of reference of daily life and to actualize instead the religious one"; (Sundén, 1966, p. 45), but he never deals systematically with these. Again, with regard to role-taking, Sundén states: "which latent role, that a human being disposes of, he will actually play in a given situation, does not only depend on him and his needs, but also and perhaps even to a great degree on the status granted to him by his fellow men or on their conduct towards him" (1966, p. 18). Sundén does not give more than a hint in the direction of a large area of questions and necessary research.

Now Sundén never claimed to have answered all the questions and he himself made an eclectic use of all kinds of other literature from psychology (of religion) to understand the subjective psychological aspect of religious experience. But he never went on to integrate these other insights into his own theory or to enlarge the scope of his theory by means of them. He never presents even his own theory in a systematic way. In his

opus magnum, he deals with all kinds of aspects of the psychology of religion as a scientific enterprise and treats and quotes numerous authors and stories, but does not develop his theory in a rigorously systematic way. In fact, he convinces his readers at least as much by his lucid style and erudition as by scientific rigor. The chapter on role-theoretical aspects of religious experiences takes up 195 pages in the initial presentation (1966), whereas in the later textbook on psychology of religion (1982) he is able to tell the essentials - still using a lot of stories - on 16 pages. Many of his students have been able to summarize his approach on even fewer pages and perhaps the most condensed presentation is his own one-page preface to the German translation of *Religionen och rollerna* from 1966.

Next to an overly narrow scope and lack of systematics, the absence of elaboration or progress within role theory could be mentioned as a critical point. Sundén himself seems not to have made any attempt to enlarge or develop his theory. In his many books and articles - in which, of course, like anyone who publishes that much, he repeated himself - he made use of his concepts to treat very different questions relating to religiosity, but, it seems, to a decreasing extent. It seems as if with regard to role theory he had said what he wanted to say and enjoyed its being applied by others, but he himself went on to look for other ideas and approaches that could illuminate the human documents of the religious traditions. And so he wrote in his own specific, eclectic and amazingly erudite way on meditation, on psychosomatic aspects of religiosity, compared religions in East and West, etc. In his 1975 textbook he brought together - as he had done in *Religionen och rollerna* in 1959 - much new literature within the psychology of religion, and described the use his students had made of role theory, but did not advance the theory itself. Nor does one find much development within the theory in the work of his students. They present Sundén's insights and apply them to historical figures like John Wesley (Källstad, 1974) and in empirical research on glossolalia (Holm, 1976) and with elderly people (Wikström, 1975); they combine the theory with other

approaches (e.g. attribution theory, Wikström, 1987); but the role-theory at large is left unchanged.

The narrative approach within social constructionism

Now Sundén himself clearly indicated that he took the role-concept from authors in social psychology. In recent years we have witnessed in social psychology, as in other domains, the rise of a so-called narrative approach, as a continuation and extension of role theoretical approaches (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Contemporary attention to stories, within the humanities and the social sciences, is broad and diverse. That a narrative approach would be appealing to literary theory is self-evident (cf. Fisher, 1987; Kibédi Varga, 1989). That it would come up in economics (McCloskey, 1985, 1988; Klamer et al, 1988), ethics (DePaul, 1988), in law (Lance Bennett & Feldman, 1981) and theology (Stroup, 1981) was perhaps more surprising.

Surprising or not, the narrative approach has also spread to psychology, first of all to the domain of clinical psychology, especially psychotherapy. In this realm of psychology, counselors and researchers are being confronted with the stories of clients, stories dealing with meaning or the loss of meaning that the patient has experienced in her life, stories that are in themselves a manifestation of the search for and construction of meaning. One Dutch psychoanalyst, Piet Kuiper, already in 1976 called for a new understanding or foundation for psychotherapy. Man, he claimed, lives his life according to his life story and is therefore much more than an organism that can be analyzed with the help of a mechanistic scientific approach. In his opinion, the narrative character of human existence can be much better understood with the hermeneutic approach that is characteristic for psychoanalysis. Nowadays, the narrative interpretation of psychoanalysis has become one of its main currents (cf. Schafer, 1983; Spence, 1982; VanderZwaal, 1990). Strong interest in narrative can also be seen in personality psychology (Hermans, 1987; Hermans & Van Gilst, 1991;

McAdams, 1985, 1988; Tomkins, 1987), developmental psychology (Mandler, 1984), life-span psychology (Cohler, 1982), psycholinguistics (Bamberg, 1991; Bruner, 1986), cognitive science (Lehnert, 1981), and applied psychology (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

One other movement that has been an important preparation for the broad narrative stream, as we witness it in psychology today, has been the hermeneutical thinking of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricoeur and others, who have all stressed the historicity of the human being and the primordial importance of language for personal existence. Ricoeur, for example, has emphasized that narrative accounts are not so much descriptions of (the experience of) the world as it 'really is', nor are narrative forms simply imposed on pre-existent real experiences; rather, narratives are constitutive for and give form to experiences. In the same way that perception is not originally made up of a confused buzz of isolated sense data but consists of already formed objects, so experience does not originally appear as discrete atoms of experience which only at some later time become organized and patterned. Experience forms and presents itself in awareness as narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 68). It will be evident, then, that the narrative approach is congruent with or a sub-category of a broader position with names like social constructionism or cultural psychology, the position held by Hjalmar Sundén. It is the position that emphasizes that culture, and not biology, shapes the specificity of human life and mind, that it is culture that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system (Bruner, 1990, p. 34). As Clifford Geertz puts it, without the *constituting* role of culture we are "unworkable monstrosities ... incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture" (1973, p. 43). Narrative psychology is a corrective to and takes an important step further than "cognitive psychology", not only because it complements the latter's tenuous notion of man as an "information processing system" with the observation that man is a story-teller, but also because it enables scientific psychology to get closer to an understanding of how people in their

everyday life find meaning in and contribute meaning to their natural environment, one another and their own functioning (Bruner, 1990; Jansz, 1993). It may be clear that to situate Sundén's approach within social constructionism and within narrative psychology is more appropriate than situating it within cognitive psychology.

As indicated, narrative psychology is a sub-category of a social constructionist viewpoint: it makes more precise the notion that culture constitutes the human subject. It claims that the narrative is the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful, that the narrative provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning further actions. Narrative psychologists have shown in several studies how human beings act, think, perceive and experience according to narrative structures. From a social constructionist point of view, Averill (1985), for example, challenged the view - widely accepted in Western society - of emotions as brutish, bestial, animalistic, gut reactions. Emotions are not just non-cognitive responses, mediated by phylogenetically older portions of the brain, and manifested peripherally by arousal of the autonomic (involuntary) nervous system and reflexive expressive reactions. Emotions are complex syndromes, composed of many component processes. These components may differ in the extent to which they are determined by biological psychology and social factors, but no component by itself is a necessary or sufficient condition for the entire syndrome. Moreover, the way the components are organized into a coherent whole is determined to a large extent by paradigms (p. 94). These paradigms are provided by culture and have a narrative structure. In earlier publications (1980, 1982), Averill pointed out that emotions can be understood as socially constituted syndromes (transitory social roles) that include a person's appraisal of the situation and that are interpreted as passions rather than actions.

Emotions as social roles are not played *in vacuo*, of course. The great and early role theoretician Theodore Sarbin (*1911), whose work earlier influenced Sundén, has in recent years put forward the argument that roles

and role enactments are integral to social dramas: "anger roles, grief roles, jealousy roles and so on are enacted to further an actor's self-narrative; and self-narratives, like other stories, follow a plot" (1986a, p. 9). In a fundamental paper, entitled 'The narrative as a root metaphor for psychology', Sarbin (1986b) proposed the narratory principle: that human beings think, perceive, imagine and make moral choices according to narrative structures. Hermans & Kempen (1993) took this line of thought one step further and substantiated the view that not only specific human functioning but even the human self should be understood from a narrative psychological perspective. They propose the metaphor of the self as a polyphonic novel: one and the same individual lives in a multiplicity of worlds, with each world having its own author telling a story relatively independently of the authors of the other worlds.

The development of narrative psychology is an important step within the social constructionist tradition. This tradition has always emphasized that it is culture, which by means of language (Berger & Luckmann, 1979), provides the individual with a model and a rationale for behaviour, and that the individual, by conforming to the paradigm, serves to confirm the broader cultural network of which the paradigm is an aspect. Narrative psychology nowadays calls attention to the contribution of rhetorics and to stories in this process. Narrative psychology takes up the Shakespearean metaphor of *life as theatre*. *Life as theatre* is patterned after half-remembered *stories*. "Not taught and learned in any systematic way, the plots of these stories are absorbed as part of one's enculturation" (Sarbin, 1986, p. 20).

From role theory to narrative psychology

Narrative psychology is very close to Sundén's thought. Narrative traditions can, according to Sundén, be seen as language (cf. Wikström, 1987, p. 393). Religious tradition "is a treasure of stories about situations" (1966, p. 13)

in which god(s) and humans interact. Whereas Sundén stressed acquaintance with the roles within the stories, contemporary narrative psychology, without denying the importance of the roles, stresses acquaintance with the *plot* of the story. Hermans & Kempen (1993): "Not only emotions, but also actions are guided by narrative plots. When we tell stories or listen to them, we are involved in the actors and their vicissitudes. Actions, however, are not only *in* the story, they also follow from it. We engage in conduct to advance the plot, particularly when we imagine ourselves as the protagonist" (p. 20). This comes very close to Sundén, who wrote: "Already the knowledge of a story and its retelling entails a certain identification with the persons figuring therein" (1966, p. 13). And again: "All who know this tradition (= the stories, J.A.B.) can identify with one of those persons (= role taking, J.A.B.), and this identification has as a consequence, that they adopt the role of God" (Sundén, 1966, p. 13).

Emphasizing the importance of the plot rather than the role might thus remove the all too static character of Sundén's role theory. It might contribute to a possible 'updating' and make his thought more dynamic. For when people take up a role from a (sacred) story, they do not simply or strictly *copy* the model or just *repeat* the role, as Sundén's terminology suggests. What happens, also in the many examples he provides, is that the *story* including its plot and its roles is somehow re-enacted again, and that the person can interpret and handle his actual situation thanks to the knowledge of an earlier, recounted situation. By identifying the situation *hic et nunc* as similar to the situation described by (sacred) tradition, one can identify with some actor, assign the identities of other actors in the story to fellow men actually present and acting, and even detect and identify God's act. And this is not the same as just repeating the story or re-enacting a fixed role. What is involved here is that the plot, the core, of the narrative is envisaged and relived, no matter in what way exactly the different roles are performed. This is what subjects report in interviews: "I was like a doubting Thomas, but one day I felt Christ's eyes focused on me"; "I was

like Abraham who was prepared to offer his son, but as he helped Abraham, he helped me as well" (Wikström, 1987, p. 395).

Or take a following example from the classic *The pursuit of the millennium*. In this beautiful book on revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the Middle Ages, Norman Cohn tells the story of Hans Böhm, a shepherd, who one day in 1474 heard of the Italian Franciscan Giovanni di Capistrano who a generation earlier had gone through Germany preaching repentance, urging his hearers to put away their fine clothes and to burn all dice and playing cards. Shortly afterwards, Böhm also started to preach. "Exactly like that other shepherd lad who is said to have launched the Shepherd's Crusade in 1320, Böhm declared that the Virgin Mary had appeared to him surrounded by a heavenly radiance and had given him a message of prodigious importance" (Cohn, 1970, p. 226-7). When some time later, Böhm was taken prisoner by the Bishop, his followers marched boldly to the castle at Würzburg. "As they approached it the walls would crumble like those of Jericho, the gates would open and the Holy Youth would emerge triumphantly from captivity" (p. 230-1). Neither Böhm nor his followers simply copied the model they had heard of, but they interpreted their situation as being analogous to the one in the story and they faithfully acted out its central plot.

In another classic from the psychology of religion, Festinger recounts how a group that predicted the destruction of the world got into a situation of confusion and bewilderment after experiencing disconfirmation of their prophecies and how these people were eagerly searching for stories and analogous situations that would make their situation understandable and acceptable, to themselves and to others. One of the leaders of the group got fired from his position, which at first was embarrassing to him and which he tried to hide from his followers. When he came up with the account, he also made use of stories from Christian tradition. (N.B. the group was not a Christian group.) This leader "drew from this action two inferences; that 'the boys upstairs' had arranged his discharge in order to free him for a more important work with them; and that 'the heat was on' not only him

but anyone associated with him. Comparing himself somewhat elliptically to the early Christian martyrs (and, perhaps, to the earliest of them all) he pointed out that the administration [...] must have been very impressed by what he was saying to take such a drastic step" (Festinger, 1964, p. 102). At other times other members of the group also interpreted efforts to make them change or give up their beliefs as testing their faith; one woman "felt she had been tested as much as Christ had been". At another time, they started giving one another "secret names", being names from the Bible.

In research on a case of religious psychopathology with manslaughter in the Netherlands, I was struck by the discovery that the biblical story of Joseph had been structuring the relations in the family concerned. The father of the family did not resist his son who pointed out one of his brothers as a devil to be killed; on the contrary, as 'Jacob', he urged his other children to obey the youngest son, as 'Joseph'. There again, neither the father nor the son copied the biblical role of Jacob and Joseph, but they re-enacted essential parts of the plot: Jacob instead of being obeyed as a father, had to obey his son Joseph who had divine visions and who became viceregent of Egypt.

Also in Sundén's own examples, it is clear that more is involved than just taking-the-role of a biblical figure: as the situations are not exactly identical, it would be inappropriate to copy the conduct of the biblical figure. Sarbin probably gives a correct summary of what happens when (the plot of) a (sacred) story is recognized in or adapted to an actual situation: "once the story is begun, the actor sets out to validate the constructed narrative figure, the hero, in the self-narrative. The self-narratives of the co-actors impose constraints on the actor's efforts to satisfy the requirements of his or her own narrative role. Because the stories of the co-actors may not be compatible with the hero's story, the text - the actual living of the narrative role - is usually a negotiated story" (1986, p. 17). Sundén probably would have agreed, as he came very close to the same opinion when he wrote that acquaintance with the stories of sacred tradition enables the Bible reader to find in these stories human conduct and answers that he

can use in his own situation (1982, p. 38). He himself time and again stressed that a new perception, a new interpretation of the situation (*Phasenwechsel*) is at the heart of religious experience. It might be, then, that his fixation on the role-concept prevented Sundén from elaborating and formulating the importance of the plot to which he in fact came so close. It can also be that the role concept was of enough use to him, as he mostly interpreted religious experiences of a very momentary nature, experiences of a certain moment or a certain situation. His own example of James Nayler shows that there was no total identification with Abraham, with the seventy-two disciples, or with anyone. "Identifications change" (1966, p. 16) is all Sundén laconically says. Of fundamental importance, in Nayler's case, was his unshakeable conviction that his counterpart was a real 'living Other', the God who lived with the people of the Scriptures and who acted there.

The sunny side of Sundén's eclecticism

It would be an injustice to Sundén to present these thoughts or remarks as indications of his shortcomings. Not one thought uttered thus far would have been new to him: on some page in his *opus magnum* you will already find a reference to these ideas. But he never tried to bring his many thoughts and observations together in a systematic and coherent theory. Again, this lack of systematic rigour might be criticized, but it had its sunny side with him: he was too wise to imagine that any scientific approach could ever understand or explain human experiences. His interest was too broad for him to be able to restrict himself to concentrating on one perspective only. Surely, in studying religious experiences, he primarily opted for a psychological perspective, but he never lost contact with the fields of the history of religion, phenomenology, or philosophy. And even within psychology, he was ready to turn to diverse perspectives to understand at least something of the very complex phenomenon that

religious experience is. Within psychology, Sundén's role theory belongs primarily to social psychology, but this did not prevent him from turning to psychoanalysis, to personality psychology and to developmental psychology to shed light on other, equally important aspects of religiosity than 'his' theory could deal with. And even with regard to the perspective of role theory, which was certainly his main original and developed contribution to the psychology of religion, he would admit that many questions are not answered by this theory: how do people acquire a religious frame of reference? Under what circumstances will a phase-shift occur? Why and how do some people, at some time in their life, choose a religious frame of reference other than the one they were raised in? These are all questions Sundén recognized and to which he even drew attention himself. Sometimes he just turned to another psychological tradition to answer some of these questions, but without trying to integrate these views with his own role theory. As a matter of fact, he even disliked being identified with role theory or being seen as its great man: he considered himself to be of a much broader interest, and in fact he was.

We witness the same tendency with his students: in their dissertations there is not much development of role theory and some of them went other ways since then. Holm (1976) pointed out that there is not just a mythological aspect to a role, but also a social one: e.g., in a pentecostal church, there will be strong social reinforcement to take the role of 'being baptised in the spirit'. Wikström (1975) showed that the experience of God's guidance is not just a matter of identification with one single, well defined 'role'; he spoke of the adoption of a 'general God-role' in order to remain within Sundén's terminology. With regard to elaboration of Sundén's initial ideas, Nils Holm's recent paper seems to be the first serious attempt to really integrate role theory with other strains of thought (cf. Holm's article in this volume).

The other side of the coin, however, is the frank and even liberating stance of much of Scandinavian psychology of religion in the wake of Sundén. It is characterized by a clear empirical inclination. It is more

interested in religious phenomena than in theory. Sundén had an enormous knowledge of all kinds of religious traditions, personalities and experiences - and he freely took from psychology whatever could be used to illuminate these. These, clearly, must have been one of the reasons why his book (1966) was so attractive: it presents a narrative style, erudite scholarship and tries to do justice to its objects. For Sundén's approach toward religion was non-reductionistic. One of the lengthiest paragraphs of *Religionen och rollerna* deals with the relation of the psychology of religion to "the real" and Sundén is concerned to show that the religious experience is structured in the same way as any other experience. Any specific frame of reference - be it mythic, scientific, technical or whatever - can and does show variation in history and time and in that sense presupposes some kind of - socially reinforced - 'belief'. Which frame of reference is the best or most valid entrance to reality cannot be decided from a scientific point of view. Only God himself can decide this question, Sundén said (1966, p. 110). For psychology there is no difference in the value of a non-religious, Protestant, Muslim or whatever cultural experience. With Sundén's students, this non-reductionistic stance sometimes has an apologetic bell ring to it, e.g. when it is emphasized that it is a "perfectly natural thing to speak in tongues and thus receive baptism when one frequents a Pentecostal congregation" (Holm, 1987, p. 387). Clearly, an emphasis on the importance of the religious frame of reference and on its being well-adjusted was appealing to many religious readers.

Risks of narrative psychology

The attention given to the religious traditions, to the importance of cultural stories shaping human lives, is admittedly an important cultural psychological insight and corrective to all overly individualistic points of view. But it has its tricky sides too. Contemporary narrative psychology is in danger of overemphasizing the role of stories in the cultural constitution

of the person. People become participants in human culture not just by internalizing stories, but also, and perhaps even more, by *being treated* as members of a certain culture. Narrative psychology seems to neglect the utter importance of the stability and constancy of activities, practices and procedures. To understand the genesis and continuity of the self, it is not enough to point to the plot structures that comprise our humanity. One should recognize that the roles we derive or learn from stories are very often non-reflected sense-making *practices*, procedures or methods made available to us as resources within the social orders into which we have been socialized (Shotter, 1989). It is the specific continued treatment by others which makes the individual a specific member of a specific segment of society and which manifests itself in and through the body of the individual. These practices are often very fundamental in nature but hardly ever articulated by adherents of a specific culture themselves: practices such as how to nurse children, how to show reverence, how to clean the body, how to behave in holy places; practices that we do not learn by means of stories, but by being treated in and introduced to a certain way. It is, therefore, by means of stories *and* practices that a culture incarnates itself in its human members (Bourdieu, 1980).

Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, the human body has an impact of its own in the constitution of the human psychological realm. One of the theories that offers a perspective here is, of course, psychoanalysis. The Freudian concept of drive (or instinct) is an attempt to bring together the biological foundation of human striving with the symbols of the culture that shape it and that manifest themselves psychically (Vergote, 1988; Müller-Pozzi, 1991). It would take us too far afield to elaborate on this, but it is a perspective which psychology should never forget and which the narrative approach too often ignores. Sundén, however, it must be admitted, was not ignorant of this point and of this danger. In avoiding oneness, he turned to psychological approaches other than what is nowadays called the narrative one. We can only admire the variety of the perspectives he worked with and deplore the fact that he never tried to

integrate the different approaches. But perhaps he was not even interested in this or just not possessed enough by what Kant called the "rage" to want to understand. He knew that life would always be more than the best theory. With him we have lost a scholar, teacher and tutor of amazing erudition and breadth of horizon. His seminal book was the start of the psychology of religion as we know it in Scandinavia today and it is still one of the most attractive European introductions to the field. He gave us the best of his energy and dedication and we are deeply indebted to him. May he now rest in peace. We shall cherish his memory.

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