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

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

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Hjalmar 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*

H. A. Alma & M. H. F. van Uden

Sundén's Role Theory of Religion and Symbolic Interactionism*

Introduction

In his role theory of religion, Sundén makes use of symbolic interactionist viewpoints. His description of the process of role-taking is in agreement with the role-taking theory of George Herbert Mead, who is regarded as the precursor of symbolic interactionism. There are further similarities between the thinking of Sundén and Mead: both of them reject an idealistic and introspective psychology; they both stress the importance of language and of the acts of people in concrete situations; their conception of perception is similar. Notwithstanding these similarities, the interactionist points of view in Sundén's role theory have received little attention. More stress has been placed on the interfaces of role theory and attribution theory (Wikström, 1987). In this contribution, we will try to apply both a symbolic interactionist approach to religion and Sundén's role theory. We will illustrate this by analyzing two case studies (van Uden, 1985), which we will present in the first section.

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* Paper presented at the 6th Symposium for Psychology of Religion, Lund, June 1994.

1. *The religiosity of Mr. Cox and Mrs. Kuipers*

Mr. Cox has had a perfect marriage, with a perfect wife who was a perfect mother as well. His own mother was, if not perfect, at least first class. Mr. Cox lost his wife 19 years ago and his mother 10 years ago, but they still play an important role in his life. His wife is still with him: he feels her presence and prays to her. She acts as a mediator between him and God, whom he prefers to speak of as the Supreme Being. When his wife was ill, Mr. Cox asked God not to let her die. Now that she has died, he asks God to let him die as well, so that he will be able to join his wife. But it seems as if the Supreme Being does not respond to human requests. The process of mourning that Mr. Cox undergoes is problematic: he does not pick up the threads of his life in order to get on with it, but continues to live in the past. One can ask, however, to what degree he had formerly succeeded in building up a life of his own. As a sickly child, he grew up socially isolated and dependent upon his mother. During his marriage his wife was of paramount importance in his life. Since his wife's death, it is his religious devotion to her that keeps him going.

Mr. Cox is 60 years old. He was born in Indonesia, where his father worked as a professional soldier. Due to his father's work, the family had to move frequently. They moved to the Netherlands when Mr. Cox was fourteen years old. In a certain sense, however, Mr. Cox has continued to wander: he did not complete secondary school and he has held several jobs. When he had been married for twelve years, he moved with his family to the United States and returned to the Netherlands after his wife died. It is characteristic both for his lifestyle as a whole and for his religious life that he is unable to settle down. He was raised as a Roman Catholic, but has always been interested in other religions as well. He became acquainted with several religions: first when he lived in Indonesia and later on when he worked as a guide in a museum for cultural anthropology. He attends the services of several religious communities but is most attracted to a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. He is looking for the perfect religion. He

does not believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; he does believe in and is devoted to the Virgin Mary, whom he invokes for help every day. Nonetheless, she is second best. After the Supreme Being his wife ranks highest. He has made a house altar in his living room with a picture of his wife, candles and flowers. Although Mr. Cox calls himself a 'sort of christian', he has made a new religion for himself in which his wife plays a major role.

Mrs. Kuipers is one of the youngest in a family of 7 children. The atmosphere in her parental home was rather cold and hard; her parents did not display their feelings. Her mother died when Mrs. Kuipers was 13 years old. As of this age, she had to assume responsibility for others and stand up for herself: until she was 21, she ran the household. At an early age she decided to enter nursing, despite the objections of her father. As soon as she had come of age, she carried out this plan. Her way of life is characterized by looking ahead, planning and consciously arranging her future. To her, life is a task and she tries as hard as she can to make the best of it. Taking care of others is a central theme in her life, but she has also been the recipient of such care in her relationships with significant others (a friend, her husband) and in her faith.

Mrs. Kuipers was almost 40 years old when she married a widower. After three years, her husband died and she was left with their little son who was only a few weeks old. Her responsibilities and her desire to do the best she can help her to cope with this loss. She has to take care of her family (her own baby and the two youngest children of her husband's former marriage) and this keeps her going. Moreover, her faith supports her and enables her to adapt to her situation.

Her husband is still with her in a certain sense. She does not believe that he is actually present in any real sense, but he is still alive in her feelings, day-to-day experiences, and decision-making. Mrs. Kuipers strongly believes in a hereafter in which she will be reunited with everyone she has lost. In this beyond, her husband's first wife will be there as well.

Mrs. Kuipers experiences God as a father figure who encourages her and stimulates her to assume responsibility in the situations facing her. Religion and the Roman Catholic church have always played an important role in her life. In her process of mourning the parish priest, the Masses she attends, and religious texts have been of help. She strongly believes she has to handle problems herself, but she is just as convinced that her life is embedded in a greater whole that gives it purpose and meaning. The Christian belief she has come to know through her parents and in the church provides a sufficient basis for coping with critical life events and enables her to have faith in the future.

Both Mr. Cox and Mrs. Kuipers have had a difficult start in life and both lost their respective spouses in their forties. Religion is important to both of them, but in quite different ways. How is the religiosity of Mr. Cox and that of Mrs. Kuipers to be interpreted?

2. *A means-or-ends approach to religion: a questionable opposition*

Mr. Cox uses his religion in a magical way to cope with the illness and loss of his wife; his religious orientation might be called extrinsic. During his wife's illness he did not put his trust in God, but tried to exact her recovery from God as if he had control over life and death himself. When this failed, God became for him an authoritarian Being on whom he is totally dependent but who does not pay any attention to mortal beings. His religious life now focuses on his wife, whom he regards as a saint and his intercessor with God. In this way, he has constructed a private religion that meets his need for security.

As to Mrs. Kuipers, she does not expect God to solve her problems. He takes care of people by helping and encouraging them to live their own lives and to take care of one another. Mrs. Kuipers experiences this encouragement especially when she attends Mass. She goes to Mass every

Sunday, not because it is expected but because it is an integral part of her life. Her faith is a source of meaning and guide for her everyday life. One might say that Mrs. Kuipers has an intrinsic religious orientation.

Batson and Ventis have termed the extrinsic religious orientation 'religion as means', whereas the intrinsic orientation is known as 'religion as end'. In his article "Of means and ends: Religion and the search for significance" (1992) Pargament criticizes this polarization of the means and ends of religion in studies on intrinsic, extrinsic and quest orientations. According to him everyone who is religious *uses* his or her religion. Pargament defines religion as "(...) a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (1992, p.204).[1] He points out that every search involves both means and ends. In his view, even the most exalted spiritual end requires a method to attain it, and as means to valued destinations, religious paths may develop a spiritual significance of their own and become cherished ends in themselves (1992, p.205, 207).

Pargament holds that thinking of religion as means **or** ends detracts from the more important question of *how* religion is involved in the search for significance. This question calls for an approach that does justice to several dimensions of religion: a) the relational context of religion, b) the content of a person's religious approach, and c) religion as it is experienced in everyday life.

Starting from Pargament's, means-**and**-ends approach to religion, the central questions of this paper are whether and in what way religious people make use of their religious frame of reference in coping with critical life events. It will be argued that an integration of Sundén's role theory of religion and symbolic interactionism yields a fruitful approach to the above-mentioned aspects of religious life.

3. *Sundén's role theory of religion*

In Sundén's role theory the content of religion and its relational and experiential dimensions are closely related to one another. For this reason,

his theory is promising for studying how people use their religion to cope with critical life events.

3.1 Religious role-taking

According to Sundén, religion can become important in a person's life only if he becomes acquainted with a religious tradition that enables him to identify with role models. The biblical stories, for example, are about existential situations and experiences, the way people have coped with these situations and experiences and the answers they have received from God. Biblical characters are role models with whom people can identify, an identification that puts them in a position to anticipate the actions of God. Sundén describes this as a process of role-taking, as defined by the symbolic interactionist Turner: "(...) to put oneself sufficiently in the other's place to anticipate how the other will respond" (Sundén, 1966, p.9). Biblical stories provide people with guidelines for their actions and enable them to place these actions in the meaningful context of their interaction with a divine partner.

Taking the role of a biblical figure, however, not only enables the person to control his actions, but also provides him with a frame of reference that guides his perceptions. People perceive their world within frames of reference that are provided by the role systems of their society; the religious tradition is one of these role systems. According to Sundén, the individual's religious frame of reference is constituted by the religious roles he has come to know through his social environment.

Sundén holds that from a psychological point of view the religious experience is a way of perceiving. Perception should not be conceived as recording sensory stimuli photographically. Perception always depends on both perceptible stimuli in the environment and the patterns or frames of reference the person uses to structure and give meaning to the perceptible content. Most of the time our perceptions are guided by a secular, technical-scientific frame of reference. We perceive the world in its multiplicity and

we pay attention only to those aspects of our reality that are of benefit to us. Someone who is acquainted with religious roles, however, can identify with one of these roles when his own situation corresponds in some way with that of the biblical figure. In this way, the role of God becomes his frame of reference.[2] The result is a strong religious experience, in which the world is perceived as a unity, a totality that reveals God as a living, acting Other with whom the individual can enter into a personal relationship.

Sundén emphasizes that taking the role of God is always mediated by identifying with a human role. This mediation guarantees that God is experienced as 'totally different': the pious person cannot identify with God but experiences Him as the ultimate Other. The role of God provides him with a new perspective that differs radically from the human perspective.

When a religious tradition has been transmitted to a person, whether it will be activated as a frame of reference in specific situations depends on the role models it offers and the person's personal needs. The way in which the religious tradition is presented to a person by his parents is decisive in this regard. Sundén distinguishes between a *total* and a *merely verbal transmission*. In a total transmission the parents give expression to their faith in their prayers and conduct, and they acquaint the child with the tradition as a totality of role models with whom he can identify. In this case the experiential dimension of religion precedes the explanation of religious content by the parents. In a verbal transmission, on the other hand, the child is first acquainted with the word 'God' without any reference to the child's own experience. The prayers of the parents do not enable the child to experience the presence of God, for the parents pray from sheer force of habit. A verbal transmission stresses the religious dogmas, commandments, and prohibitions instead of the stories and role models.

Sundén also distinguishes between non-confident, confident and overly confident mediators. A non-confident as well as an overly confident transmission of the religious tradition can produce a negative attitude towards religion or a problematic religious life. According to Holm (1990) these types of transmission can result in affective anthropomorphisms: the

religious beliefs are totally determined by the close, and often negative bond with the father, mother or another member of the family. Strict, demanding parents may so strongly influence the child's image of God that it becomes impossible for the child to relate himself in his own way to God, religion and the church. God cannot be met as an Other who differs from the parents. This may result in a distortion and a lasting dependence on a significant other. For example, the image of God corresponds with the image of the child's father; according to Sundén this kind of image has nothing to do with the role of God that can be found in the biblical tradition and be related to in a religious experience.

Yet the transmission of the religious tradition does not totally depend on the parents. Other members of the family, church members and especially the pastor or priest may function as *social roles* through which the person can identify himself with the *fixed roles* of the religious tradition. In this way, religion is freed from the person's dependence on a specific significant other. It may enable the person to gain independence and to transcend his social bonds by relating himself to God as an ultimate Other.

3.2   Sundén's role theory: application to the case studies of Mr. Cox and Mrs. Kuipers

Does Sundén's theory help us to understand the religiosity of Mr. Cox and Mrs. Kuipers? The first case study offers an example of a person who does not have the fixed roles of the religious tradition available to him. This may be due to a merely verbal transmission by non-confident mediators. Mr. Cox complains that his parents forced him to go to church and to put the Catholic religion in practice. It has never become clear to him what religion meant to his parents and how the Christian faith could be meaningful in a person's life. He did not become acquainted with a Christian frame of reference that offered him identification models apart from the Virgin Mary, who approximated to his mother and later to his wife. His 'self-made' religion is strongly coloured by his dependence on a mother figure. The Christian tradition with its strong emphasis on God as a Father and His Son

does not offer Mr. Cox the opportunity to meet this God through the mediation of Christ. An important symbol for Mr Cox's mother religion is a little statue that he owns and regards as a symbol of fertility: it is a statue of a woman with a shopping basket, hand in hand with a little child.

The place of prominence in Mr. Cox's religious frame of reference has been given not to the fixed roles of the Christian tradition but to the most important social roles in his life. In conformity with Sundén's role theory we find that these social roles do not enable him to meet God as a personal Other. The women he claims to be his intercessors for God are in fact so dominant and specific that they do not really refer beyond themselves to God. The word 'God' is meaningless to Mr. Cox: he has never felt God's presence and he prefers to speak of Him in a depersonalized way as the Supreme Being.

Mrs. Kuipers has had an 'old-fashioned' Catholic upbringing. She had to go to Mass every morning and there was a strict daily pattern of prayer. The demands of Rome (the Pope) and the parish priest had to be followed unwaveringly. Yet, the religious life of her parents was not limited to an external obedience. Mrs. Kuipers experienced the religious attitude of her parents, especially that of her father, as authentically devout. She did not feel obliged to engage in personal devotions because they were so strongly rooted in the family life.

Mrs. Kuipers experiences God as a personal Other to whom she can relate, a father figure who helps her when necessary but expects her to devote herself to her tasks and to carry them out as well as possible. Several role models seem to influence this experience. God resembles her father in that He does not directly help her to reach her goals. Both fathers oblige her to deal with problems herself. Yet, the image of God does not correspond completely with the image of her father; there are other role models through whom she came to know the role of God: an uncle in a religious order, the parish priest, a religious teacher. Mrs. Kuipers does not refer to biblical role models; she probably has not been sufficiently

acquainted with them. To her regret, reading in the Bible has always been uncommon in Roman Catholic families. She expresses the hope that her son will be taught about the Bible in school and that she can read it with him.

Mrs. Kuipers's religious attitude is strongly cognitive. The rather cold atmosphere in the parental home has given rise to a rationality that is characteristic for her attitude to life. Yet, Mrs. Kuipers is sensitive to being appreciated and being cared for, and is receptive to elements of her religion that satisfy these needs. Although her life history does not allow her to have a religious experience in the sense of a restructuring of perception, it has provided her with enough role models to have more of a daily experience of God's presence.

As we have seen, the conditions for a religious commitment have not been fulfilled in the case of Mr. Cox. Yet he does not seem to be hindered by a preoccupation with Christian dogma. Mr. Cox seeks to fill his empty religious frame of reference with self-made religious roles. This draws our attention to a flaw in Sundén's role theory: it does not make clear how the significant others that act as mediators for the religious tradition put their mark upon the process of religious role-taking and can even replace the religious roles in a self-constructed frame of reference. In a certain respect, this can be seen in the case study of Mrs. Kuipers as well. Her relation to God is more strongly influenced by the social roles of several religious significant others, than by the fixed roles of the biblical tradition. From this we may conclude that Sundén's role theory helps us to understand the religiosity of Mr. Cox and Mrs. Kuipers, but it does not suffice. Even though the theory combines the content of religion and its relational and experiential dimensions, the relational dimension does not receive sufficient emphasis. This gap is due to an ambiguity in Sundén's conception of roles.

3.3 The role concept in Sundén's role theory
Sundén makes use of structural and interactional role theories to develop his concept of role. There are, however, important differences between these

two approaches (cf. Stryker & Statham, 1985). Key terms in the structural conception of role are social structure and social position. To *play a role* means meeting the requirements that are connected with a certain social position or status. Key terms in the interactional conception of role, as derived from Mead's role-taking theory, are attitude and perspective. *Role-taking* means taking the perspective of another person in order to anticipate the other's behavior and to tune one's own behavior to this anticipation. Whereas *role-playing* refers to behaving, acting, performance, and overt activity, *role-taking* refers to a strictly mental, cognitive, or empathic activity, to putting oneself imaginatively in someone else's position (cf. Coutu, 1951).

Sundén makes use of both conceptions. He states explicitly that identifying oneself with a religious role (in German: Rollenübernahme) is a form of role-playing, while taking the role of God (in German: Rollenaufnahme) is a form of role-taking in the Meadian sense. Unfortunately, the German concept of *Rollenübernahme* is commonly translated into *role-taking*. To distinguish this process from *Rollenaufnahme*, the latter concept is usually translated into *role-adoption*. By translating Sundén's central concepts this way, the agreement of his role theory with Mead's role-taking theory is lost. The following quotation taken from one of Sundén's articles, however, stresses this agreement: "Rollenübernahme, *role-playing*, ist hier das Beten, 'the overt enactment of what one conceives to be one's own appropriate role in a given situation', Rollenaufnahme, *role-taking*, 'the imaginative [construction][3] of the other's role'" (1969, p.134; italics added).

The tension between a structuralist versus an interactionist approach in Sundén's concept of role, however, is not just a problem of translation. It is deeply rooted in his own thinking. From an interactionist point of view, roles are constructed imaginatively in the interaction between the self and the other. According to Sundén the role of God, however, is not constructed in this way: it is a fixed role that confronts succeeding generations through the biblical tradition. It follows the structuralist concept of role in the sense

that it is a given, unchangeable, static role. Sundén points out that the tradition provides people with patterns and thus gives them something to hold on to in their constructions of roles. Only when a religious experience can be verified by the tradition and by the experiences of others it can be regarded as a real experience that supplies knowledge of God. The importance of the tradition for the construction of roles is a relevant element in Sundén's psychology of religion, as we will see in section 5. Sundén, however, does not pay attention to the fact that the religious stories can only obtain power of expression when they are told. The religious education does not start with the child himself reading the Bible. In fact, the child will only be interested in the Bible when he has become acquainted with biblical stories through his parents or other significant others. The question arises as to what way the story-teller, the mediator, influences the processes of role-playing and role-taking.[4] To answer this question, more attention should be paid to interactional and hermeneutical processes in religious role-taking. Symbolic interactionist approaches can be helpful in this regard.

4. A symbolic interactionist approach to religion

The relational context of religion has been the central focus of researchers who use the theory of symbolic interactionism in studying religion. Estus (1966) has studied the decision-making of members of religious organizations from an interactionist perspective and his conceptualization has been used to study the role of religion in bereavement (Van Uden, 1985). Both studies used George Herbert Mead's theory of self-development.

4.1 Role-taking and self-development
According to Mead (1934), the self develops in a process of *role-taking*: the individual takes the role, or the perspective, of the other in the interaction

situation and evaluates his own behavior 'through the eyes of the other'. By taking the perspective of another person, the individual becomes self-conscious. He learns to reflect upon himself as an *object*. This part of himself of which the person is conscious, is the 'me'; it comprises several self-other systems, corresponding to the important relationships in the different areas of his life-world. In this process the person can take the role of a *specific other* or a *generalized other*. The generalized other represents a group to which a person belongs or wants to belong. For the development of the self it is very important that the person learns to take the role of a generalized other, by which means he learns to anticipate the expectations and reactions from the group. By internalizing these expectations and demands in the 'me', the person is able to act in conformity with them. The 'me' represents our adjustment to an organized world. Our ability to take the role of a generalized other makes us relatively independent of specific others in particular situations. However, the 'me' can comprise specific others as well.

The 'me' enables us to be members of our society, but it cannot determine the way we behave as social beings. It provides the self with an inner representation of the social structure that limits our actions. The action itself, however, depends on the 'I': the part of the self that is inaccessible for immediate reflection. We only get to know the 'I' indirectly, via the reactions of others to our actions. The 'I' gives our behavior an element of unpredictability: it is always slightly different from our anticipations. By our actions, however well prepared, we create new situations that cannot be completely predicted. The 'I' is the creative, innovating aspect of the self; it gives us a sense of freedom and initiative. Even though we are only partly aware of our possibilities, it is this unknown aspect of ourselves that we try to realize in our actions. The 'me' constitutes the structure that makes this self-realization possible.

Mead rejects the view of the self as an independent entity or unit in the person. The 'self' should be understood as a process, as a continuing inner dialogue between two different but connected 'voices': the 'I' and the 'me'.

Raiser (1971) refers to the 'I' and the 'me' as to two phases in the self-process, identity and sociality respectively, that have to be brought in balance again and again in different situations: one has to adjust himself to different interaction-partners without losing one's own identity.

Notwithstanding the importance of the 'I', Mead pays more attention to the development of the 'me'-aspect of the self through role-taking.[5] For this reason, some of his followers have abandoned the 'I'-concept and use the concept of 'me' as synonymous with the 'self'. For others the 'I' is an important concept for refuting the criticism of social determinism leveled at Mead's role-taking theory. In our opinion, the conception of the self as consisting of two distinguishable phases does more justice to the common experience of the unknowability and unpredictability of oneself and other persons than the conception of the self only in terms of a 'me' that controls our actions in adjustment to our environment. Traces of the 'I' can be found in the form of central themes in the person's life history, as they take shape on the basis of biological urges and early experiences in the interaction with primary others and as they are enacted throughout one's life in various social roles.

4.2 *Role-taking and meaning-giving*

In his introduction to *Mind, self, and society*, Morris points out that according to Mead, the human being is a 'role-taking animal' (1934, p.xxi). Role-taking is the process through which the person reflects upon himself and gives meaning to his actions and his environment. Mead refutes an idealistic conception of meaning as being located in the person, independent of an external reality. On the other hand, he also refutes the deterministic point of view in which external stimuli determine the individual's behavior. Mead holds that meaning *emerges* in the interaction between a person and his environment. Mead's interactionist approach to meaning can be illustrated by his own example of poisonous toadstools: the notion 'poisonous' is meaningless apart from the fact that animals become sick when they eat them. Yet the poison is not located in the head (or stomach)

of the animal but in the toadstools. 'Poisonous' is only meaningful *in the interaction* between the organism in search of food and its environment.

Thanks to their ability to use symbols, human beings are not only able to give meaning to their environment through selective (in)attention, as animals do, but they are also capable of meaning construction. Symbols arise from social interaction through the process of role-taking: by reacting to his own behavior as the other in the interaction does, the person's behavior becomes meaningful to him. He learns to act 'on purpose' and to anticipate the reactions of the other. The act becomes a symbol that has to be interpreted. The main symbols are given in language: words allow more subtle distinctions than any other form of expression. Objects and activities are named and placed in more general categories. Names enable us to experience objects that are not present, and to manipulate hypothetical situations.

There is no unlimited freedom for constructing meaning, however: a human being is always confronted with an external reality that influences the process of giving meaning. His behavior becomes meaningful only through the reactions of others in a social environment. Meaning emerges in a process of anticipation and reaction; it depends on a given social structure and on the previous experiences of the meaning-giving person.

Meaning, in Mead's view, refers to the empirical, thoroughly social reality. He rejects every conception of transcendence in the sense of an other, ultimate reality. Yet the question of transcendence in a broader sense can be raised with regard to his conception of role-taking. Mead holds that one can only speak of a self when a person is able to transcend the particular perspectives of various specific significant others by taking the role of a generalized other. In this way the person acquires a frame of reference that helps him make sense of his social world and enables him to cope with it.

The person develops a more complete self when he learns to take an increasingly universal perspective that integrates a growing number of particular perspectives. This self-development is a process of *horizontal*

extension: even the most comprehensive perspective, that of the universal generalized other, is a *human* perspective. This process can be one of self-realization when a person is able to realize his own identity through his contribution to a common goal. When this is the case, there is a fusion of the 'I'- and 'me' aspects of the self: the attempts of the 'I' to realize itself coincide with the social demands of the 'me'. Mead uses the concept of *identification* to refer to this fusion: the reaction of the 'I' in the social situation is identical to those of others as represented in the 'me'. In this way the person realizes himself by identifying with the others in his social situation. When the actions of the 'I' harmonize with the role-taking of the 'me', the person experiences a temporary release of the sense of control, which may result in a sense of (religious) exaltation. This, he feels, is the meaning of life (cf. Mead, 1934, p. 274).

Meaning, whether implicitly in little everyday aspects of life or more explicitly in a search for the meaning of life, always emerges in the interaction between the sensitive individual and that which comes to him from his environment. Meaning, in the existential sense of the word, depends on the sensitivity of the person ànd on a source of meaning that affects him in this sensitivity. The part of the self that the person seeks to realize - the 'I' - can be viewed as his sensitivity; the part of the self through which this identity can be realized - the 'me' - can be viewed as consisting of several sources of meaning (the above-mentioned self-other systems).

A person's sense of identity and his ability to identify with others through role-taking enable him to commit himself to a goal that transcends the self: self-realization is a kind of self-transcendence. The highest form of self-realization is reached by the person who takes the perspective of the universal generalized other and realizes himself by taking his responsibility in the universal community.

The goal that is sought can be secular, as might be the case, for example, with people who participate in the human rights movement. The goal can also be related to one's religion: a pious person can try to realize himself

by contributing to a goal he adopts from his religious tradition. In this case, religion functions as a source of meaning for the person in his attempts to realize his identity.

4.3 Secular and religious sources of meaning

Self-realization can be seen as the (temporary) experience of being affected in one's sensitivity, in the part of the self that one unremittingly tries to realize in one's actions. Whether the source of meaning that affects one is secular or religious, the structure of the person's meaning-giving, or rather *meaning-finding*[6], is the same. This existential experience of meaning-finding can be called a *spiritual experience*. Yet there is an important difference between secular and religious meaning-finding: religion as a meaning source relates someone, in accordance with his own sensitivity, to a transcendent ultimate reality. Religion brings about a process of *vertical extension*. When a person realizes his identity by relating himself to an ultimate Other, we define this as a *religious experience*. The vertical extension that is characteristic for such a religious experience is the result of the person's taking the role of God. This differs from Mead's taking the role of a generalized other in that the reality to which the person relates himself, is given a specific interpretation derived from a religious tradition and is experienced as transcending the profane world.

Necessary conditions for such a religious experience are the passing on of the tradition from one generation to another, and the sensitivity of a particular individual to a specific religious content. Symbolic interactionist approaches to religion pay more attention to the latter condition, while relatively neglecting the importance of the religious tradition.

The person's sensitivity to religion can be studied by making use of the model of the individual meaning system that was developed in a study on the role of religion in bereavement (Van Uden, 1985, 1986). In correspondence with Mead's conception of the self, the *individual meaning system* comprises several *self-other systems* that are based on the interaction of the self with significant others, and that function as meaning sources.

The meaning sources that the person acquires and which one he uses depend on his life-history and the specific situation in which he finds himself. Notwithstanding the fact that the person makes use of different meaning sources in different situations, he experiences himself as an unity, as a single person. This is due to the *primary self-other system* that integrates the many sources of meaning into a totality of meaning, while it is in turn affirmed and given content by the meaning sources. In accordance with Mead's line of thought, one might stipulate that the sense of unity is due to the 'I'-aspect of the self - the person's identity that he seeks to realize through his several self-other systems.

In the individual meaning system of a religious person religion is one of the potential meaning sources. Whether and in what way religion will be used by the individual, depends on his specific need in a particular situation and the identity he seeks to realize. It is supposed that religion will be especially important in situations of ultimate concern, such as illness and bereavement. Religion can only function as a source of meaning, however, when it provides the person with possibilities to enact his primary self-other system.

The results of the above-mentioned study draw attention to the fact that if one is socialized in the context of a specific religious tradition, this does not automatically mean that religion functions as a source of meaning. Whether religion serves this function depends on the totality of self-other relations of which it forms a part and through which the person tries to realize himself. A strong bond with a specific significant other makes the person less sensitive to other sources of meaning than this self-specific other system. People who are able to take the role of a generalized other (horizontal extension) are more likely to realize their identity in several self-other systems, but they do not necessarily relate themselves to an ultimate Other (vertical extension). In a pluriform, dynamic society especially there are many competitive, secular meaning sources. Yet, on the base of this research we can conlude that horizontal extension - self-

development by taking the role of a generalized other - is a prerequisite for vertical extension - self-development by taking the role of God.

4.4 Identity and meaning-finding: an illustration

We can illustrate the central concepts of this section by referring to the cases of Mr. Cox and Mrs. Kuipers. In these case studies we see two examples of persons who define themselves as religious, but who differ dramatically with respect to their self-other relations and individual sensitivities.

Mr. Cox's life history shows clearly that he has not had many opportunities to take the role of a generalized other. Socially isolated as a child, he has always seen himself through the eyes of specific significant others: his mother and his wife. These circumstances have strongly influenced Mr. Cox's way of coping with critical life events and his religiosity.

His major self-other relations with his mother and his wife are not competitive but rather alternating meaning sources: after his wife's death his mother is the only person to whom he can write about his loss. His various other life domains (work, family, leisure activities) lose their meaning as soon as his wife dies. His meaning system is totally dominated by this primary relationship and no other source of meaning enables him to enact his dependence on a mother-figure. As he has not been able to transcend his own needs by taking the role of a generalized other, he cannot realize himself by committing himself to a goal he shares with others.

The identity that Mr. Cox does try to realize in all his relationships - the dependent son of a perfect mother - marks his religion as well. It is an idiosyncratic religion that cannot be shared with others, and that does not allow him to relate himself to the Supreme Being in a process of vertical extension. Although he claims to be looking for the perfect religion, one may suppose that Mr. Cox is looking for the perfect mother who will protect him and tell him how to live his life.

In the case study of Mrs. Kuipers, two central themes can be found: the strong wish to be autonomous, responsible and reliable, and the desire to receive (fatherly) care. These themes can be traced back to the relation to her father, with whom she identified and against whom she reacted. The early loss of her mother may have intensified her father's influence. Apart from a friend and a sister, women on whom she can rely and with whom she can identify are absent in her life. Notwithstanding the importance of the relationship with her father in her meaning system, Mrs. Kuipers is not caught in a relation of dependence with this specific significant other. Thanks to her early participation in church and religion, she finds new role models with whom she can identify and she is able to realize herself through commitment to goals that transcend her own situation. This horizontal extension comprises her own family, the broader circle of the religious community and her work situation, and a sense of global responsibility.

Her desire to be taken care of, due to a lack of warmth in her parental home, does not result in a lasting dependence on a specific significant other. Instead, it is translated into assuming responsibility for others, in line with her striving for autonomy, responsibility and reliability, which expresses itself in a certain rigidity in her work and family. On the other hand, this orientation towards control and order is compensated by her need for care. In this way, her two central identity-themes are brought into balance. Care also seems to make her sensitive to the experiential dimension of religion, notwithstanding her rational attitude. Religion functions as a source of meaning that touches her in two tender areas: God asks her to assume responsibility for her life and that of others, and God takes care of her. In this way, her involvement in religion brings about a process of vertical extension in which she enters into a relationship with God.

5. *Discussion*

In the third section we tried to make clear that Sundén's role theory can contribute to a multidimensional approach to religious life. Yet his theory does not suffice to answer the question whether and in what way religious people make use of their religious frame of reference in coping with critical life events. Sundén emphasizes the importance of the transmission of the religious tradition, but he pays no attention to the hermeneutical process of storytelling. He assumes that people can become familiar with the religious tradition in a direct way, provided that their parents have put their faith in practice and have not burdened their children with premature explanations; Christian believers of all ages were and are able to take the role of God as it is revealed by Christ.

From a symbolic interactionist point of view, however, role-taking cannot be regarded as taking a fixed role and thus anticipating God's actions. Role-taking takes place in a process of interaction between the person in his social-cultural context and the given tradition. In this complex interaction, religion can become a source of meaning in the individual meaning system. Therefore, this religious meaning source cannot be isolated from the totality of the person's significant relationships. The transmission of religion by significant others in various life domains not only influences its function in the search for meaning, but its content as well: roles are selected and interpreted by both story-teller and listener; roles are coloured by the relationship between story-teller and listener; roles are constructed in the interaction between story-teller and listener.

By stressing the importance of the biblical stories, however, Sundén does make an important contribution to understanding how people use their religion in coping with critical life-events. The religious content threatens to become neglected by the more functional approaches to religious life from a symbolic interactionist point of view. An integration of Sundén's role theory and a Meadian conception of meaning does justice both to the

importance of religious stories and to the hermeneutical process of storytelling.

Religious stories are more flexible than in Sundén's account. They appeal to a variety of listeners or readers and are applicable to divergent socio-cultural situations. The tradition is always heard or read and interpreted in a specific cultural context; for this reason it continually acquires a new meaning in a process of social construction. In different periods people choose different (aspects of) role models and experience the responses of God to their needs in various ways. These changes can also occur in an individual's lifetime, depending on his needs in changing situations. On the other hand, stories are not totally dependent on their interpretation in a specific context; written stories especially are characterized by an element of fixation and do not allow an unlimited reconstruction (cf. Day, 1991). This combination of fixation and flexibility, of 'strangeness' and 'recognizability', provides stories with their critical potential in a variety of cultural contexts. Stories cannot be manipulated to one's liking; they have a given structure that limits the possibilities of interpretation. In this respect, stories are given realities that are part of the person's environment. They can open up a new world of experience on the condition that they give rise to 'strange meanings' that bring the naturalness of familiar meanings up for discussion. In this way stories can help people to transcend the perspective of their direct social environment; they can be a vehicle for self-realization. Religious stories have the added function of bringing about a vertical extension (cf. section 4.3).

The given reality of a story can only function as a source of meaning, however, when a person reacts to it on the base of his sensitivity. Meaning is neither given by the person nor possessed by the environment, but it emerges in the person-environment interaction. From an interactionist point of view, psychology of religion should pay attention both to the importance of religious content and to the individual's receptivity for what the religious tradition has to offer, a receptivity that strongly depends on the person's relationships to significant others. As is illustrated in the case study of Mr.

Cox, stories lose their critical and creative potential when a person is strongly dependent on specific significant others for his sense of identity. More broadly, research on the role of religion in bereavement makes clear that people are sensitive to those elements from their religious arsenal which enable a maximal enactment of their identity (Van Uden, 1985). This interplay between the given tradition and the individual sensitivity is of central concern to the psychology of religion.

6. The religiosity of Mr. Cox and Mrs. Kuipers: some final remarks

Sundéns role theory helps us explain on what conditions religion can be instrumental in coping with critical life events. In the case of Mr. Cox, these conditions have not been met: he does not possess a religious frame of reference that enables him to anticipate God's answer to his needs and to put his trust in God. Not being acquainted with the Christian role models, he lacks receptivity for what the Christian tradition has to offer. Yet he does make use of religion in his coping with the loss of his wife: it is put at the service of the enactment of his central identity-theme: dependence on a perfect mother. To this purpose Mr. Cox constructs his own religion by making a saint, if not a god, of his wife. The notion *construction* is of crucial importance in this regard: Mr. Cox cannot rely on a *given tradition* and tries to construct his own religion instead.

Mrs. Kuipers, on the other hand, has been acquainted with the religious tradition through the mediation of several social role models, who still influence her religiosity. She has learned to be receptive to what religion provides her with. Notwithstanding her orientation towards autonomy and control, she does not frenetically try to construct something to which to hold on. Her faith seems to have played an important role in finding a balance between the two central themes in her life: control and care, construction and receptivity.

This distinction between *receptivity* and *construction* might be of importance in understanding individual differences in religious orientations. Some people are able to open themselves to *meaning-finding* through entering into dialogue with the religious tradition; their religious orientation is characterized by an involvement in a self-transcending goal. Other religious persons try frenetically to *construct meaning* by clinging to someone or something on whom their sense of identity depends. They do not transcend this relationship to a specific other for fear of losing their hold on life.

In a research project on the influence of identification-models on the functioning of religion as meaning source we will try to study this distinction more closely. In our opinion an integration of a symbolic interactionist approach to religion and Sundén's role theory yields a promising theoretical framework for this purpose.

Notes

1. In this article we define religion as "commitment to an other ultimate reality" (Mulder, 1971, p.296). In agreement with Pargament we think that definitions of religion should do justice to its special transcendent character. Pargament criticizes approaches that are inclined to call the search for meaning religious in itself. He argues that this functional point of view still leaves us with the question of how traditionally defined religious approaches regarding meaning-giving differ from other approaches. He holds that the function of religion as a source of meaning is influenced by its substance.

2. "Ein Bibelleser kann diese Rolle 'Gott' annehmen, und zwar nicht als ein Muster, nach dem er sich richten oder als Vorlage, die er selbst spielen oder nachahmen sollte, sondern annehmen (taking the role of the other) in einem tieferen Sinn, dahingehend nämlich, dass er sich dieser Rolle als eines Referenzrahmen bedient" (Sundén, 1962, p.279).

3. The definitions in this quotation are borrowed from Turner (1956, p.317), but the word *construction* has been erroneously omitted in Sundén's article.

4. Sundén's distinction between a total and a verbal transmission is not relevant in this regard. In a merely verbal transmission, the religious stories are not told at all. Our

question concerns a total transmission, in which the stories are told and the child is provided with role models.

5. Meltzer, for example, points out that Mead does not define the 'I' clearly: "From his discussion, the 'I' would seem, however - and this is an inference - to include everything from biological urges to the effects of individual variations in life-history patterns. Still (...), the 'I' serves the very useful purpose of evading a complete collective, or sociological, determinism of human conduct" (1972, p.19).

6. The term *meaning-finding* does more justice to the *emergence* of meaning in the interaction between the person and his environment, than the more commonly used *meaning-giving*.

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