

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

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

**Religionsvetenskapliga skrifter nr 27**

**1995**

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**Åbo Akademi  
Åbo 1995**

**ISBN 978-952-12-4176-5 (online)**

ISSN 0780-1270  
ISBN 951-650-499-X

Åbo Akademis tryckeri  
Åbo 1995



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*

*Hans Stifoss-Hanssen*

## **Roles Constitute Religious Experience. Fiction and Fact in Hjalmar Sundén's Role Theory, Attribution Theory and Psychodynamic Theory**

"How are religious experiences at all psychologically possible?" This problem is formulated by Sundén (1977 p 23), and we will take it as a focus of the discussion in the present paper. This formulation of the problem will help us hold on to what is important: not a competition among theories, but a serious attempt to discuss a fundamental problem in the psychology of religion. As a creative attempt to solve the problem, Sundén's role theory is of great importance.

### **Presentation of Sundén's role theory**

The theory is based upon two psychological elements: psychology of perception and social psychology.

The element from psychology of perception primarily deals with the selective character of perception, and how this selectivity is organized. Our conception of the world is by no means a photographic reproduction, but rather a process where we conceive what we have learned to conceive. Our consciousness is adjusted to perceive certain phenomena and patterns, and to exclude others. This process is a useful part of the economy of

perception, and it is founded in complex conditions of both a mental and a physiological nature. Sundén illustrates the nature of perception with his famous story about the policeman who believed the throat of an empty bottle to be a weapon (1959 pp 48 - 49). Thus, perception is conceived to be an interpretation process, and Sundén describes the tools we apply in this process as 'patterns'.

From the field of social psychology, Sundén applies a role definition of familiar content: a role is "the sum of cultural patterns that are linked to a certain status" (Sundén 1959 p 51, quoting Linton 1936). Starting from this point, Sundén assumes that religious tradition exists in the shape of roles, and he elaborates his theory on the basis of this assumption (see also Sundén's definition of religion, reflected in the title of this paper, Sundén 1977 p 30). It is essential to point out three steps to understand this part of the theory:

1. The roles function as perceptual patterns, in close interaction with the physiological aspects of perception (1977 p 30, see also Hallowell 1972).

2. A situation where roles are enacted is two-sided, or dual, which means that the religious person takes the role of the figure of the religious tradition that he identifies with (God's partner; role-taking), and at the same time adopts the role of God, for example, as his counterpart (role-adoption), (1977 p 30, 1959 p 53. Sundén bases this moment of the theory on G H Mead, whom he quotes from Newcomb 1952).

3. Finally, the choice of a religious role-pattern is merely one option among others. In real-life situations, a secular or a religious pattern can be activated, and shifts can be made from one type of pattern to the other; this is denoted phase-shift by Sundén.

An interesting aspect of the theory is Sundén's emphasis in his argumentation on apologetics. One gets the impression that he wished to introduce religiosity into his scientific surroundings, among the phenomena that could be reproduced and verified, and to describe it as different from illusion. Religion belongs to "the real, existing world, in which we can have confidence" (1977 p 29).

Furthermore, it is an essential feature in the role theory that it elaborates religious experience systematically, in its interaction with religious tradition, including the images and stories of the Bible. This feature makes the theory realistic and meaningful, and at the same time broad (it can be applied to all individuals in a religious culture, not only the elite).

The methodological question within the theory is best seen as unresolved, meaning that there is nothing in the theory that points to a specific methodology in its application to religious phenomena. In the presentation of the theory, there is an obvious ambition to contribute to understanding or explanation of empirical phenomena. Sundén himself consistently applies the theory within a qualitative methodological framework, aimed at the understanding of phenomena.

According to Tilander (1986), Sundén's role theory can be characterised as dealing with social interaction, as one-subject theory, as dealing with encounter, as having understanding as its aim (hermeneutical), and as describing a process that is often unconscious (p 13 - 18).

Turning to Wulff (1991), we see a presentation of the role theory as a clearly behavioral theory, described in the following way: "A form of cognitive behaviorism that analyzes the learning, motivation, and reinforcement of social behavior in terms of cognitive events mediating the impact of external events" (p 133 - 134). Even if it is obviously legitimate, the description of the role theory as a cognitive learning theory will probably surprise many of those who are familiar with the theory, and it is clearly at odds with Tilander's interpretation.

Sundén's role theory has been made use of as the main theory in several empirical studies (Wikström 1975, Unger 1976, Holm 1976, Petterson 1977, Källstad 1980, Capps 1982, Maloney 1985, van der Lans 1985). These applications demonstrate the viability of the theory both as a hermeneutical model in a qualitative design, and as a means for making and testing predictions in a statistical design. Together with Sundén, several of those authors presented the theory, and their utilization of it, in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1987:3. This presentation contains frequent



comparisons between Sundén's role theory and the attribution theory (Spilka, Shaver & Kirkpatrick 1985).

### **Critical evaluation of the theoretical foundation**

Naturally, the role theory has evoked discussion. Criticism of the theoretical foundation has been presented by Björkhem (1977), who focuses on Sundén's concept of roles, and finds it irrelevant to give such an emphasis to perception as Sundén does. Björkhem holds that a religious person actually enacts his role, and that the perceptual/social-psychological description, therefore, is inadequate. The religious role is of a different kind. He also disputes the explanatory value of focusing on the form of interpretation that is included in perception. Rather, experience implies a form of interpretation that is essentially different from the interpretation that Sundén describes as part of the perceptual process.

Generally, Björkhem maintains that Sundén's concept of role does not adequately describe the kind of role behavior that is typical of religious experience. The idea of role, he argues, needs to be extended by use of a theatrically characterized role concept. He also disputes the explanatory value of the idea of anticipation, the idea of role adoption, which is very central to the theory.

We will return to some of these objections below.

### **Critical evaluation of the ontological presuppositions**

This criticism is chiefly found in Unger (1984). It is closely associated with the feature of the theory that is described above as apologetic. This criticism essentially asserts that Sundén, in his motivation of the theory, does not differentiate between the philosophical and the psychological problems (Unger p 85). In his engagement for apologetics, or for analysis

of culture, Sundén lends the theory to solve more problems than it can possibly be designed for: religious experience is not only real experience, it is experience of something real as well. The idea of religious experience being an experience of something real is motivated by Sundén by assuming that religious experience can be anticipated, it can be shared by a group, and it is "direct" (uninterpreted), and thus primary.

Apart from the fact that Sundén has shown that religious experience is not pathological or abnormal, Unger's criticism seems adequate. We may furthermore observe that Unger basically reveals Sundén's dependency on the contemporary scientific atmosphere at that time, in which a positivist attitude tended to describe religion as illusion in a negative sense. The general development of scientific dialogue may be said to have overcome this tension, to the extent that it is now less relevant to apply such a contradiction between illusion and reality as Sundén experienced among his contemporaries. A modern description of religiosity may introduce terms such as interpretation, construction or fiction without necessarily depriving it of relevant reality. Sundén's project may have been impossible when it was presented; it has since become unnecessary as well.

Otherwise, the theory's solution to the psychological problem is still valid: religious experience is real experience. Unger's criticism may ensure proper limitations upon the application of the theory.

### **Critical evaluation of methodical assumptions**

What we have in mind, in mentioning methodical assumptions, is the description given by Wulff, of the theory as behavioral. As we have mentioned, Wulff locates the theory as social learning theory, implying a focus on "learning, motivation, and reinforcement of social behavior" (p 134). This seems to be a fresh perspective on the theory, and one overlooked, for example, by Tilander. However, if we look at the components of religious experience that are put into focus by the theory, we

must realise that these are perception, learning, socialization, and behavior. In other words, we may conclude that Sundén (in the role theory) contends that religious experience consists of those components, or that they are the most essential.

Against this background, Wulff's criticism of social learning theory becomes of interest. He states that such theory generally exaggerates the importance of external factors, at the expense of the individual, the emotional and the unpredictable, and that it favors experimental and biological research methods. In short, one might say that he finds such methods reductionist. Without using the word reductionism, Unger comes close to a similar view (1984 p 100 - 101).

Applied to the role theory, this criticism could be discussed along several lines. For one thing, and from Sundén's overall production, one may establish that such a direction of the theory was certainly not intended by Sundén. Furthermore, the research that has actually been conducted on the basis of the theory has not been dominated by biological or experimental methods, probably due to the scientific atmosphere in which the theory has been put into use.

If we stick strictly to the theory, however, there can hardly be much doubt that Wulff's location of the theory is fairly accurate. The characterisation of the theory as a social learning type however, is not necessarily an objection. In our opinion, Wolff's evaluation of such theories in general is too negative. The point is that this characterization of the theory, along with the critical evaluation in the paragraphs above, can point to the specific character and the limitations of the theory. So far, we would suggest that the theory has served psychology of religion by focusing on the great value of applying the role concept to religious experience, and by providing a tool for understanding religious socialization and behavior. On the other hand, the theory seems to have shortcomings when it comes to cognition, and in particular for the emotional aspect. The reason for discussing attribution theory and psychodynamic theory, in the following, is to look for elements in these theoretical conceptions that may

complement the role theory. In doing so, nonetheless, we will hold on to the idea of role, since we conceive of this as extremely fruitful.

### **The attribution theory**

In our discussion, we will focus on the aspects of interest in our study of Sundén's role theory. The relationship has already been discussed by Tilander (1986) and Wikström (1987); the main sources for the attribution theory are Spilka, Shaver and Kirkpatrick (1985), and Spilka, Hood and Gorsuch (1985, p 19 - 29).

The main assumption of the theory, which has the character of a philosophical *a priori*, is the idea that it is fundamentally human to search for explanations (causes) for the events of life. Religion is understood as an instrument in this search, more exactly as a characteristic system of explanations. There are several secular explanatory alternatives as well, and humans make choices among the explanations available. Attribution theory provides a model on what motivates such choices. This aspect comes strikingly close to the idea of phase-shift in the role theory.

An attribution is motivated by the needs for meaning, control, and protection of self-image, and they take place when events or experiences threaten the satisfaction of those needs. The authors assume that religious ideas have the capacity of fulfilling those needs, and they give statements as to what conditions the choice between religious and secular attributions. These conditions are linked to the individual, the context of the individual, the event or experience, and the context of the event or experience.

Attribution theory has similarities with the research on Locus of control, a theory that has been applied both experimentally and clinically, also in research on religious faith (e g Stewin 1976). It also displays strong resemblances to the theory of psychological reversals, developed by Apter (1982). The theory of psychological reversals has also been explicitly applied to religious experience (Apter 1985).

The attribution theory is clearly cognitive. We know of no reports on empirical research carried out on the basis of the theory, that could indicate if it should be linked to an experimental or a hermeneutical research paradigm. Spilka et al (1985) associate the theory closely with research on intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity (ibid), as if the statements in intrinsic-extrinsic research were instances of attributions, and point to the attribution theory as a possibly superior theoretical system for intrinsic-extrinsic research.

In his discussion of the two theories, Tilander (1986) characterises the attribution theory as positivist, since it conceives of man as seeking explanation, whereas the role theory is described as hermeneutic, since it allegedly conceives of man as seeking understanding. In our opinion, such a judgement overloads both theories, since there is nothing in either of them that either encourages or prevents experimental testing (positivism). The misconception is probably caused by the application of scientific concepts on an inadequate level, that is, on the level of primary religious behavior. Merely looking for a cause or an explanation in his personal life does not make a person a positivist; such terms are adequately applied only to scientific theories, methods and procedures. Methodologically, the two theories could best be seen as being relatively equal.

The strength of attribution theory seems to be its well-structured description of the cognitive processes in religious experience, and its implicit emphasis on the importance of cognition in religious experience.

Apart from the feeling one can get that attribution theory presents some truisms, its major limitation is, of course, its scope; religious narrative and symbols, for example, are left unexplained.

### **Psychodynamic theory on religious experience**

What is characteristic of psychodynamic theory, is its idea of an unconscious life that affects thoughts, emotions and behavior in a decisive

way. The unconscious may be seen as a dramatic reenactment of events in the surrounding reality, and in the unconscious, satisfaction and frustration of basic needs are reworked and solved. In the unconscious of a grown person, his mental history is stored, and it goes on to affect his life. Dreams, psychoses, hypnosis (and maybe religion) reveal the contents of the unconscious, and anxiety, depression, and pain may also originate from the same place. In this theoretical conception, emotions become the most important psychological phenomenon.

It is obvious that psychodynamic theory is important for the understanding of religion, a fact that is underlined by the frequent use of religion as an illustration in the works of the founders of the tradition. Originally, the psychodynamic tradition understood religion as an infantile reconstruction of the earthly father figure with the aim to create a safe feeling, or as a compulsive protection against forbidden impulses. Later development of the theory has provided material that has been more fruitful to the understanding of religion, including a more positive evaluation of regression, and the theory of object relations. In our context, the main value of psychodynamic theory is its potential to understand the emotional power of religious experience. To this theoretical perspective, Sundén's search for the conditions of religious experience becomes somewhat peripheral, in so far as such experiences become a natural part of human development.

We will focus on the object relations theory. Even at the level of graphic presentation, the similarity to the role theory is obvious. These both consist of circles connected with arrows, representing the person/me, and real and imaginary characters in an interaction (e.g. Wikström 1975, Spero 1990). The object relations theory does not use the term 'role', but 'representation', which means a mentally created image of a significant person, or some other object. The consciousness contains an interaction between the I and those objects, and one of those objects may be (or, is always? Rizzuto 1979) a representation of God, a god-image. Generally, the object relations theory implies a shift of emphasis from instincts, in the earlier theory, to relations (Wulff 1991 p 362). Viewed from the perspective

of role, it is completely adequate to describe this mental process as role-play or role-enactment.

Two differences in this respect between Sundén's role-theory and object relations theory may be pointed out: 1) The object relations theory presupposes unconscious processes, and therefore provides a different stage for role enactment; and 2) the object relations theory does not assume that the idea of God develops from socialization and culture, as the role theory does, but from early mental processes. When the child encounters religious socialization, the god-representation is already a fact. The further development is seen as an interaction between god-representation and socialization.

The concept of transitional objects in object relations theory is of particular importance. These objects form a particular category, originally providing the first experiences of the surrounding world to the infant; for the adult, they are transformed into experiences of play, beauty, culture, and religion (Winnicott 1971, p 112). The child's transitional object is transformed into the adult's symbol.

Some of the roles that are described in the role theory, may even be seen as objects (e g God). Furthermore, if we apply the concept of transitional phenomena, we assume that role behavior as such can be seen as taking place in "transitional space". This gives role behavior the character of play, esthetic performance, phantasy, and fiction. With Sundén's role theory in mind, this raises the question of introducing conscious play into the role concept, as the term is used in theatrical terminology.

### **A new perspective on the role theory**

Hopefully, our discussion has shown that the three theoretical perspectives (role theory, attribution theory, psychodynamic theory) each makes a different contribution to the understanding of religion. These contributions can be briefly described as the understanding of social learning, of

cognition and of emotion. Attribution and psychodynamic theory do not apply the term role in any explicit way, but they come close to it, and provide understanding of the same phenomena as are understood by the term 'role' in Sundén's theory.

In our opinion, the role concept is extremely promising for the psychology of religion, providing a creative perspective on religious experience sufficiently useful to serve as the basis for a theory of such experience. Furthermore, the tendency in recent psychology of religion to focus on myth, story, symbol and ritual, as the truly distinctive feature of religious experience, renders the concept of role even more important. As we have seen, Sundén introduced the concept and defined it as based upon perception and social interaction or learning; during our discussion, we have pointed to attribution, emotions and play as possible elements to expand the theoretical perspective. A role theory of religious experience should include all important aspects of such experience, that can be linked to the role concept in a meaningful way. One can always argue that a modified theory will at some point simply cease to be "Sundén's role theory"; we will not enter into that discussion. Inevitably, however, any proposed development will have departed from Sundén, and include ideas of perception and social psychological roles.

Once a theory of this kind is formulated, it can be utilized within several methodological paradigms. It can be applied simply as a heuristic tool in interpretation of individual material, with no ambition to prove the truth of the theory; this has been the case for most studies linked to the role theory, as well as for the broad tradition building on psychodynamic theory. But we know that both theories have been used to derive hypotheses, for testing in experimental designs, which has also been meaningful (van der Lans 1987, Svartberg 1991). A famous and relevant example of the formulation of a hermeneutic concept in an experimental language is the development of an experimental test of Frankl's existential therapy in an experimental test (Frankl 1975, Crumbaugh and Maholick 1964). In our opinion, experimental studies may well be applied in a way that is not ontologically



reductionist, and we recommend that psychology of religion continue its tradition of adopting the two methodologies in a parallel manner (Åkerberg 1981). The following discussion is carried out with no intention of leading up to any particular choice of method, and we will concentrate on elaborating the contents of the theory.

### **Conception of reality in the role theory**

In his theory, Sundén places a heavy emphasis on perception. He is supported by Hallowell (1972 p 178), who also links cultural experience closely with perception. Both seem to suffer from the same weakness, that is, the absence of critical discussion of perception, or of what mental phenomena should be labelled perception. Perception is given too wide scope, and the distinctions between perception and interpretation are not precise enough. Such an emphasis on perception also reduces the value of the social-psychological role concept.

Our contention is, then, that perception should be downplayed. Religious role behavior should not be described as a perceptual process (Sundén 1977 p 30), but as a process that includes perception. As we know, Sundén's intention was to show that religious experience was founded on normal and understandable perceptions, and he has succeeded in demonstrating that these perceptions are not abnormal or pathological. Demonstrating that religious experience relates to a real object, however, cannot be done in such a manner (or in any other manner).

It should be repeated that Sundén's argument was conditioned by his situation, a scientific context where phenomena were separated into facts and fiction. Sundén even states that "if the myths are reinterpreted in such a way that they receive a symbolic, speculative interpretation, religions are going to vanish" (1977 p 28). He dissociates himself vigorously from the idea of fiction in faith, declaring instead that religious experience comes from facts as good as any.

We will note that subsequent scientific and scholarly debate has achieved the insight that all knowledge contains elements of faith, and that our reality is indeed to a large extent constructed by our interpretation of it; maybe there is no accessible, objective reality behind language. Consequently, a religious symbol or statement has ontological status no weaker than a mathematical a priori, for instance (which is a symbol as well). Theology is currently being developed along such lines, as for example in McFague (1987).

If perception was emphasized in the role theory partly to increase the real character of religious experience, our argument should indicate that its importance can now be reduced to a level where it has descriptive value. Our argument also opens the way to inclusion in the theory of the idea of fiction, which will be discussed below.

### **Extension of the concepts**

According to attribution theory, we can assume that role behavior can be seen as attributions, or as having attributive elements. The attribution theory is designed to explain cognitive processes, and such processes may be seen as complementary to experience and behavior. Attributions may inspire and explain experiences for individuals. This indicates that attribution and role theory provide understanding for different aspects of religious experience, and may complement each other.

Furthermore, it is very likely that the options of religious attributions and of religious role-behavior are structured according to the same principles. Attribution theory provides understanding of what motivates, initiates and leads the attributions; this understanding can easily be included into the role theory. In this way, Sundén's idea of phase-shift may be extended and specified.

Another proposal for extension of the role theory concerns the axis of reality - fiction in the conception of religious experience. As we have seen,

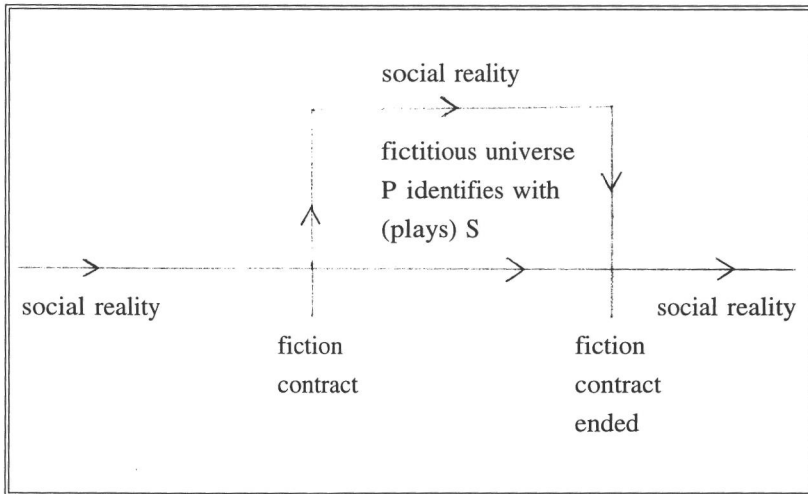
the emphasis in the theory on perception is partly determined by an intention to describe religious experiences as real; we have contended that such an intention is not relevant. However, our argument does not of course imply any allegations about God's existence, only that our study of religious experience cannot prove anything in this area. Furthermore, we will go on to argue that a theatrically inspired role concept, containing the aspect of play, both is adequate, and corresponds to important insights in psychodynamic theory. On the basis of intuition, there seem to be several indications that religious role behavior represents elements of play.

From a psychodynamic point of view, the idea of play is motivated by the assumption that the relevant figures live their own life in our creative mind. Some of the roles relevant to religious experience may be objects according to the object relations theory (which makes it meaningful to conceive of God as a role), and all the figures draw their power from the fact that they represent aspects of our unconscious; we project to the roles and identify with them.

A theatrical terminology seems to be relevant in a description of our religious role behavior, for two reasons:

1. A theatrical concept of role allows a focus on fiction. I know that I am not Isaac (who was about to be sacrificed by his father), but it may be meaningful for me to "be" him for a certain period of time. Regardless of how the pious person chooses to conceive of such behavior, it implies clear elements of pretending, of imitation, or (serious) play. He accepts certain conditions that apply to religious experiencing; it gives meaning to him (and to those who may do it together with him), but he knows that these conditions are not necessarily accepted outside the religious context. This course of events displays considerable similarities to the experience of the audience in a theatre performance, and we will apply the theatrical term fiction contract to understand it. It seems meaningful to assume that religious experiences may imply a particular version of a fiction contract:

## Model: Fiction contract



(Jahnsen 1986)

Such an assumption also helps us understand the performance of bodily religious roles - rituals containing specified role behavior, processions, bodily gestures.

Theory on play and pretending also provides language for the understanding of religious role behavior as a practice for out-of play situations, as a performance of utopia: the making of models of reality which can be reworked in a symbolic form (Jahnsen 1986 p 40, Friis 1982 p 135; see also Stifoss-Hanssen 1991).

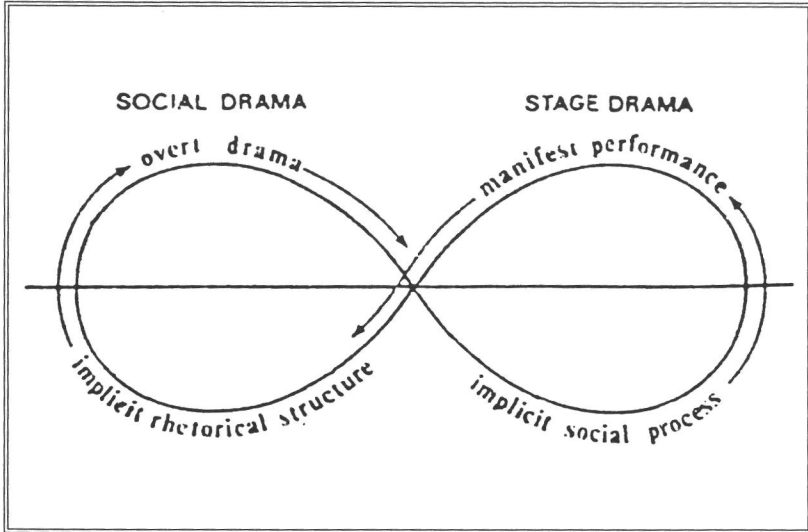
2. A theatrical concept of role allows us to make use of Winnicott's contention that religious behavior is a transitional phenomenon, occurring in "transitional space", and that the figures of religious identification are often linked to transitional objects. What is characteristic of behavior

external reality. In adult life, such creative activity, building upon relationships to transitional objects, is what adds meaning and fulfillment to our lives, beyond the absence of pathology.

Following Winnicott, it comes natural to describe religious role behavior in a language based on play and fiction. Since the object relations perspective is especially concerned with the emotional aspect of life, we may expect that a fiction-based language for religious experience will help us to understand the emotional aspect of religious experience in particular.

The social anthropologist Victor Turner has given extensive attention to the relationship between what he calls "the social drama", and theatrical or stage drama (1975, 1982). He has shown, in a convincing way, the ability of theatrical language to make sense of human behavior. The kind of behavior he uses for illustration is often of a religious type; some of his analyses actually remind one of Sundén. For example, Turner has described Thomas Becket's fate as a performance of the Via Crucis according to the catholic tradition, a role enactment taking place on the borderline between the conscious and the unconscious. He contends that when people enter into religious roles, the religious story leads them, "... giving them style, direction, and sometimes compelling them subliminally to follow.... a certain course of action, thus emplotting their lives" (1982 p 73). Interestingly, Turner consequently makes use of the term 'play', and his model links social drama and stage drama together into a unity:

Model: Stage drama/social drama



(Turner 1982)

It seems fruitful to us to look to this model for understanding religious role behavior. That might imply that role behavior representing religious tradition always includes a theatrical aspect; such behavior could be seen as shifting between social behavior with implicit theatrical aspects on one side, and explicit theatrical behavior with implicit social aspects on the other. These thoughts seem to be of obvious value for a theory of religious role behavior.

Whereas Sundén insists that the pious person does not pretend or play, we suggest that the understanding of religious role behavior should open up to the theatrical language and mode of understanding.

### **Concluding remarks**

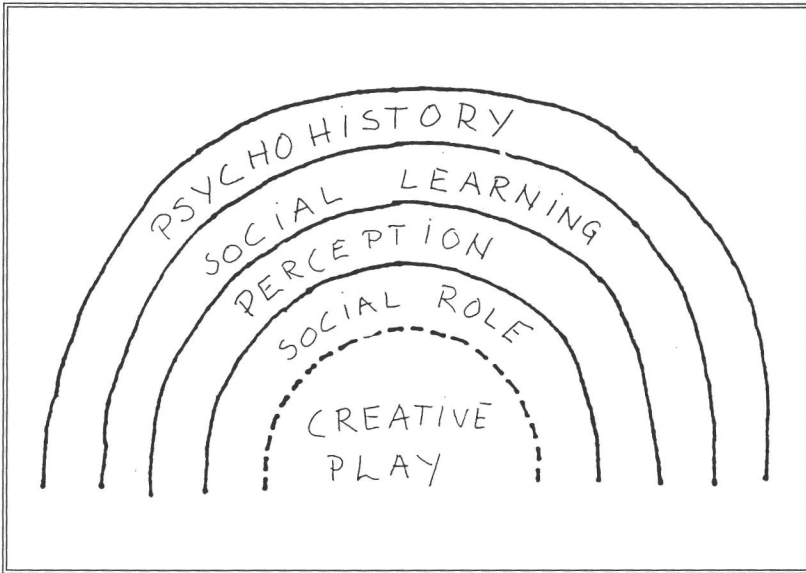
This paper started from Sundén's quest for what makes religious experience possible; it must be admitted that we have shifted somewhat towards an exploration of what is characteristic or essential in religious experience. This shift is, however, congruent with the argument that follows the role theory in its original form.

The question of what constitutes the role theory itself also needs to be repeated. Can some of our ideas for the adjustment of the theory be applied, without its losing its characteristic profile? The answer to this question can not be given here, but we take for granted that the theory's ability to provide an adequate understanding of religious experience is the most essential point. Sundén's most important contribution is the introduction of the role concept, making creative (but not complete) use of it, and providing a theoretical perspective for understanding religious experience in the context of religious tradition.

The formulation of a theory for religious role behavior may be like the following, presented as an extension of Sundén's definition of religion: "Religion is the relation of a dialogue to existence as a totality, but this relation is structured through roles; without roles, it disappears. A religious role is a behavioral pattern building on perception, social learning and the mental history of the individual. A religious role may unfold as a response to expectations, and as creative play".

Such a theory could be visualised through the following model:

Model: The elements of a theory of religious role behavior



*If this model is compared to existing graphic models of the role theory, major differences will be obvious (e g Wikström 1975 p 44). This is not primarily due to a contradiction between the models, but to differences in what one intends to illustrate. Wikström illustrates the structure of religious experience, emphasizing the taking and adoption of roles, whereas the present model is rather a sketch to the theory itself; what components might be included, and an indication as to the relationship between the components.*



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