

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

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

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Gulman Sundén

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Åbo/Amsterdam 9 November 1994

Nils G. Holm J. A. Belzen

Nils G. Holm

Religious Symbols and Role Taking

Introduction

The concept of role has been used in social psychology for at least a century. We can trace it back to W. James' major work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), where he approached the concept as an attempt to pin down the notion of "self" in psychology. Something of the same tendency is also apparent in the work of E. Durkheim (1893). One of the greatest contributions was made by G. H. Mead in the 1930's, when he analysed the origins of the social "me". His theoretical arguments have greatly enriched research in the field (Mead, 1934). Another scholar who analysed roles in the 1930's was R. Linton, whose his contributions within social anthropology have also had great significance for the development of the role theory concept (Linton, 1936; 1945). A scholar such as E. H. Erikson, who is inspired by depth psychology, also touches on role theory when he speaks of the "ritualisation of everyday life" (Erikson, 1968).

Within the use of role theory we can find three different models. First we have a **structural-analytical model**, which is concerned with analysing the different roles of a social unit. Attention is not directed at the role performances of different individuals, but is aimed rather at a description of roles as social quantities. It is argued that every society or social group consists of a collection of functions and roles, which must be present to

enable the group to exist and develop. It then becomes important to study different leader roles, functional roles, pedagogical roles, sex roles, status roles etc.; these arise, ultimately, from the division of labour, which must exist within a given group in order for everything to function. Among representatives of this tendency, I would include R. Linton (1945), T. Parsons (1951) and R. Dahrendorf (1959).

The second model is an **interactionist** one. It is concerned with examining the interaction between two or more individuals, and studying how the latter fulfil socially given roles. It is characteristic of this model to isolate different roles played by the individual in various daily situations and see how they are performed. Interest is directed, in other words, at the individual's efforts within the frame of a social context. This school includes G. H. Mead (1934), R. H. Turner (1962), J. Habermas (1973), T. R. Sarbin (1954), and T. M. Newcomb (1952), in addition to the sociologists of religion P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966).

The third model I will call a **perceptual** one. This is to be found mostly in the Nordic countries, both in psychology of religion and in folkloristics. Role theory in this form is used to explain religious and supernatural experiences. In the psychology of religion it has been chiefly developed by Hjalmar Sundén (1959), whereas within folkloristics and comparative religion the theory has been applied by Lauri Honko (1969; 1971; see also Siikala, 1978).

During the 1950's Sundén attempted to understand religious experiences in a role-theoretical perspective, and his efforts resulted in the book *Religionen och rollerna* [Religion and roles] first published in 1959 (German translation 1966). This proved a pioneering study for Nordic research in the field. In a number of other books and articles, Sundén went on to develop his role-theory based conception of religious experiences (Sundén 1969; 1977; 1982; 1987).

The main question for Sundén is how an experience of the world in religious terms is psychologically possible. In the same way that physicists must use different instruments and appliances to understand the inner properties of matter, so the human mind must also be "prepared" in order for a religious experience to be able to take place. The individual must in other words devote himself to a religious tradition and sometimes also to a ritual apparatus. By such statements, Sundén thus contradicts previous theory, according to which religious experience is independent of the cultural tradition. He strongly emphasizes instead the importance of the learning process in the acquisition of religious experience.

When Sundén discusses the significance of tradition for the individual, he not only underlines socially given roles, but emphasizes, above all, the structured experience models provided by the narratives in sacred texts. In Christianity, for example, it is important to study holy scripture, the Bible. The latter contains a large number of descriptions of how individuals come into direct contact with God. These narratives contain roles: one role for the human party and another one for God. Sundén also transfers the concept of role to the mythical plane, to the sacred models supplied by tradition. By reading the scriptures, hearing them, and seeing them function in others, individuals lay the foundation for spiritual experiences of their own. Well absorbed mythical narratives also become a potential frame of experience. They become latent roles that provide the preparation for religious experience.

There should be one further condition: the motivation for an alternative form of experience. We normally live in an everyday world that feels safe and secure. If something out of the ordinary occurs, however, our motivation model is activated so that alternative models can take over as perception-structuring patterns.

If there is a stimulus from the external world, then, in addition to the motivation for an alternative experience, a pattern-seeking process sets in within the human brain, which can lead to pattern discovery. These models may be mythical roles existing in coded form in the nervous system. What

then occurs is mainly an unconscious and automatic process: the individual takes over the role of the human party in a particular role performance and also adopts the role of God, which structures the field of perception so that what happens to and around him is actually experienced as being an act of God. The individual can thus feel quite concretely that God has a hand in what is happening. A phase shift takes place in the human mind. The individual's field of perception is structured by a mythical role which is part of a fixed religious tradition. Important qualities in experiences of an intensive kind are intentionality and totality. The individual meets a "Thou" with a mission to man and the experience becomes an all-embracing one. It takes complete possession of the individual. A reverse phase shift to more secular, everyday, models of interpretation eventually takes place.

In previous studies (Holm 1976; 1978; 1987; 1987a; 1991; 1991a) I have shown how the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit within the Pentecostal movement can be experienced in this way. In a charismatic environment there is an idealisation of the spiritual experiences of the first Christians, leading to an impulse to undergo similar experiences. This includes, not least, baptism in the Holy Spirit as described in the Acts of the Apostles on the first Pentecost. If an individual with such motivating factors enters a state where glossolalia issues from his mouth, then these incomprehensible sounds become the stimuli opening the way for full role-taking. The individual takes on the role of being baptised in the spirit, and the speaking in tongues is then experienced - within the newly adopted god-role - as being given and inspired by God. It becomes a kind of maximal experience, where the participants are not only the fellow worshippers of the surrounding congregation, but the transcendental figures of God and the Holy Spirit also come onto the stage.

It should be emphasized that there is not normally a mechanical repetition of the role model. There is often a variation in the role-taking, according to personality factors and external circumstances. A fusion of different mythical roles can also occur. The essential point, however, is that

the individual identifies the event as the action of God within a given religious tradition.

An integrated model

Some opening remarks

I would emphasize that the role concept in the perceptual model has been transferred from immediate social reality to conceived mythical images, which are often found codified in Holy Scripture. These mythical images result in a concrete role experience every time an individual actively appropriates them. Sundén's use of role-theory has made important contributions to research, particularly in the context of understanding strong and sudden spiritual experiences. Motivating factors have often been regarded as external stimuli -distress, anxiety, death, illness etc. - which the individual encounters and is forced to deal with. That alternative patterns of experience acquire significance in such more or less dramatic situations and help the individual to integrate is quite obvious.

What is at issue, however, is how one should regard the entire usage of religious language and its relation to individual experience. Is there a correspondence between religious forms of expression and an individual's fairly normal life situation? Can there be motivating factors of a non-dramatic kind which direct the individual towards certain kinds of religious expression? What life and what meaning are acquired by ordinary religious images and metaphors in an individual's daily life?

The issue then is whether, setting aside major radical experiences, there is any justification for considering religious life in its more everyday forms in terms of role psychology. Can one thus broaden the discussion of motivating factors, and can one see in religious language roles of a more generally symbolic character?

What I have attempted to do in the rest of this essay, therefore, is to build on what has been developed by Sundén. I do this by expanding the model with certain elements from depth-psychology. No detailed analysis of the concepts will be made here, and I limit myself to a fairly brief and accessible presentation. (I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Siv Illman for her kind contribution to this article.)

Inner existence space

I shall begin my analysis with the notion that man's evolution from the womb to death, burial, and recognition by posterity are a single whole. Life covers an extensive span from non-existence to non-existence, from conception to oblivion in subsequent generations. Conception announces the beginning of life's struggle for space, understanding, and meaning; to exist always involves confrontation with life conditions and surrounding individuals. This confrontation always includes both affirmation and negation, success and failure, love and hate. There is a fundamental dichotomy throughout life. Without a balance between such contrasting forces, life space would shrink considerably, to end in destruction and premature death. It is a question, therefore, of a kind of adaptation, according to which one tries as far as possible to make the life principle emerge victorious. Unfortunately, as we all know, the forces of death win in the end. I therefore believe that, like S. Freud, we may speak of a life principle and a death principle.

Once life has begun, there emerges simultaneously a struggle for living space, for a meaningful relation to the environment. This struggle is first played out in the womb, and then in childhood, before the transition to adolescence, adulthood, and finally old age. The struggle initiated by conception is constantly "audited" by the individual in the form of memories, conscious or more or less unconscious, repressed or in some other way lost. We acquire a history of our own, a narrative, a world of

experience. This history is designed to help us in the struggle for survival. We take our own life tools in our hands, and these adapt whatever confronts us in life. Those early experiences are usually not retained in an explicit and accessible form, however profoundly they mould our psyche. In all probability, it is the experiences of those first years which particularly affect the way in which we are prepared for life.

The memory we carry with us is extremely complicated and consists of different functions. It contains a cognitive component as well as an emotional one. The cognitive dimension fastens onto images and expressions which we encounter, but stores them in an order which is not completely chronological or even logical. Emotional elements always play their part, however, and can strongly affect the way in which memory images are stored. Strong emotional charges - both positive and negative - tend to attract elements of memory, telescope them, and thus also transform them. This entire memory process, which has extensions to the dream world, has been studied by depth psychology and is used in therapeutic contexts. We can speak here of condensation and displacement.

An important component in this struggle for living space is the relation to other people. First, normally, comes the mother or some substitute for her, a person to whom the child can relate. It is in the context of this relationship that the first important "memories" are developed of how the environment receives and treats us. If the early experiences are catastrophic (the mother is absent or does not answer calls for attention) then the whole encounter can produce "negative" memories which are repressed. They are forgotten, without however ceasing to operate as dynamic forces within the mind. Complete oblivion, however, is the kind of "storage" that integrates experiences without particular emotional charges. Object relations theory has analysed the child's experiences of the mother's breast and the significance this has for personality (Illman, 1992). The child develops at an early stage attitudes which become decisive for subsequent behaviour. The individual, in other words, possesses memory traces of a certain kind.

The memory is not then a mechanical storage device. It contains ever-present forces which drive and displace experiences in different directions. Not least among these forces is the imagination. By means of the latter, in combination with memory, the individual creates an **inner existence space** for himself and his activity. This space may also be described as an inner reference system (Crafoord, 1987; 1993); it is a kind of theatre of the mind (McDougall, 1985) on which almost anything can be played out and where the individual himself can take on the most diverse roles. This inner existence space is very similar to what D. W. Winnicott describes as a transition area (Winnicott, 1971). Here the child's games are played out in contact with the memory and the imagination.

The inner existence space is the scene of all the mental functions of which the individual is capable. Here one may encounter cognitive structures, emotional charges, volitional actions, relational patterns etc. At a very early stage we acquire a function which is central to all human life: the **symbol function**. This function is linked with innate tendencies, reactions to external treatment, and other impressions from outside. A drama is set up in this inner existence space which bears a relation to reality and the external environment, but which nevertheless continuously reworks memories and fantasies. Here the self constantly plays different roles to itself and to the external environment. Throughout this process there is a condensation of thoughts, feelings, and intentions, so that symbolic combinations are formed. Man's capacity to express himself in symbols becomes an important element in the struggle for life-space and survival. By means of symbols, shifting layers of life memories can be combined and become a powerful force for both good and evil in the individual's mind. Through the symbolic function, a major psychic memory can be preserved and instantly actuated for the individual.

The way forward to a developed symbolic function proceeds via different **transitional objects**. Here, I believe, it is useful to draw on the arguments of object relations theory concerning the transfer of feelings of security

from the mother, via specific objects, to abstract constructions occurring in culture and religion (Rizzuto, 1979).

The objectified symbol world

At the same time as the symbolic function in the individual develops and takes shape, an interaction also occurs with the environment. This interaction comes to consist to a very large degree of linguistic communication. Language is the most important symbolic system developed by man. In addition to this, there are of course all the other possible forms of expression, such as movement, painting, music, decoration etc. Nevertheless, children acquire through language a symbolic world, which is there given before their own existence and independent of subjective experience. There is, in other words, a world of "objective" experience which the environment by means of socialisation processes, offers or even "forces on" the individual (cf. Lacan, 1988).

An important stage in this process is provided by children's games. In games, early learned patterns are put to the test, as it were, in the objective world. New aspects of external reality are thus absorbed. The game is characterized by a combination of experience structures in the inner space and the objectified forms of the environment. Eventually, the game is increasingly transformed into work and active influence on the external environment.

Inner existence space must necessarily be affected by the patterns and structures of experience. If this happens in the best possible way, the individual finds correspondences between his own experiences in inner existence space and expressions conveyed to him by the environment through symbols. One may thus cause a partial overflow of inner existence space into external culture, and begin to acquire concrete roles in social interaction. And yet one always retains some form of inner existence space to retire to, in order to rework events and acquire new strength.

The objectified symbolic structure which occurs in culture has many layers. We have private symbols and collective ones, in addition to social and religious ones.

The religious symbols found in all cultures are perhaps those which have most fired man's symbol creating capacity. Here there has often been an objectivation of enormous proportions. This objectivation stretches over a long period of time and has specific social structures. An established social institution looks after the symbols and administers them in different ways. If these symbols are indices of identity and roots, then the individual acquires a connection with religious objects. If the institution or culture has a negative influence on interpretation and availability, however, then it can be more difficult for the individual to achieve a personal connection with the objective aspect of religion. It should nevertheless be the case that the inner images in every individual find some connection with the objectified symbol patterns of religion.

Religion as symbol system

The objectified symbol system which we normally call religion mainly consists of two kinds of symbols. On the one hand, we have the more **cognitive** symbols (with their emotional implications), on the other hand the **external**, obvious symbols, which have a more commonly shared interpretation within society. The inner cognitive symbols include, for example, God, the devil, spirits, atonement, judgement, grace etc. They are very similar to what we call concepts in the philosophical sense or, to use A. M. Rizzuto's terminology, inner representations. The external ones, on the other hand, are symbols which have acquired form in movement, colour, music, or anything else we can absorb through the senses. In both cases, however, there is an emotional binding which can be negative or positive, strong or weak. The symbols also include a volitional dimension which can find expression in a readiness to act. By means of symbols, people can be

made to want something and perform actions, either as individuals or in groups.

It is characteristic of religious cognitive symbols that they refer to very basic experiences in the individual's life struggle. It is often a case of contact with the first individuals in one's environment, mother and father, **woman and man**. In addition to all of this, there are further experiences of good and evil, creation and death, sin and grace, as well as punishment and reconciliation, or hope and despair. These are transformed into stories, legends, myths etc, which are then taken over by the social institution that supports the central life experiences. These experience are often codified and become sacred narratives in canonic scriptures. Mythology within a given religion may thus be seen as a collective reworking, on the symbolic level, of the central motifs of inner existence space.

Man's struggle with life conditions thus provides central motifs in every mythology. This includes questions of how I will be accepted, and make contact with the powerful one, how my failures will be regarded, or, in short, how I will be regarded as an individual and acquire value. This process often occurs together with other individuals undergoing similar experiences, giving rise to a collective, such as a church, a congregation, an umma, or a samgha, which will survive and go triumphantly onwards. It acquires a dimension beyond time and space. It becomes eternal, in a Communion of the Saints. Finding correspondences between important features in the inner experience space and an idealised, perhaps glorified, group fellowship reinforces the strength of the individual's engagement with reality.

Other important elements in the religious symbol world are the treatment of **time and space** (cf. Erikson, 1968; Hvarfner, 1988). Every religion has thus elaborated conceptual models for the beginning and end of the world, for its movements and cycles. On the individual level, too, the religious symbol world acquires great significance. It gives meaning to one's own "creation", one's own development, and - finally - to one's own extinction. A transformation miracle becomes important, and in the figure of Christ, all

of this has been eloquently formulated by Christianity. But time also exists here and now. The course of the year becomes a recurrent pattern, with feasts and fasts succeeding each other, giving life a kind of security through iteration. In Christianity, the story of salvation is absorbed into this annual pattern.

In the same way, the physical space surrounding an individual is divided into different spheres of intimacy and degrees of holiness. The closest analogy to inner existence space is in temples and churches, where the holiest of holies corresponds to the source, the hidden creative force. In Hindu mythology this is extremely clear since the holiest space of all, with the divine symbol, is called garbhagriha, or the womb. But natural sites - by the sea, in the forest, on a mountain etc. - can also be experienced as the source of the creative force. In such places, a person often experiences safety, repose, reassurance, and peace. Everything hints at a heavenly sense of perfection, existing as a "memory" or fantasy. One can undergo a kind of mystical experience (Holm, 1979). Expressions of this are legion, both in the conceptual world of religion and in the pictorial arts.

One more important point should be mentioned. When memories in the inner existence space are provided with symbolic expressions from the objectified external world, a number of **complications** can occur. The self can become so disillusioned that it refuses to absorb new symbolic expressions. There can be so many emotional blockages, moreover, that the forms of the objectified world simply become dead expressions without creative force. There may be strong emotional disturbances in adult individuals, exercising power over the symbolic world and preventing any integrated correspondence from occurring between one's own inner system and the external objectified one. We find, in other words, something which might be called affective anthropomorphisms encoded in these symbolic expressions. It is often a question of bottled-up painful experiences which have not been processed; it may also be the case that the objectified symbols are merely experienced as obsolete and uninteresting. There are then no meaningful inner experiences which correspond to the objective

expressions. In such cases, however, the course of life itself may gradually supply inner experiences which can promote understanding of a certain religious symbol world. These are experiences in the life of the maturing individual.

Inner role-taking

I suggested previously that the self can take on different roles in the inner existence space. This is a game of the imagination where memories are rather like lego bricks. Even this may be regarded as a kind of role-taking, although the latter is now constantly extended to the social context, and the individual takes on roles there which correspond at least partially to inner experience models. The individual acquires a place in a social community which corresponds to the self-image he possesses. But role-taking goes beyond this. Man learns collective symbols in culture, and above all in religion, where the experience structures of centuries have been "frozen" into fixed narratives. This collective heritage can be learned as objective knowledge and can even be studied by science. But the stories on this symbolic plane may, at appropriate moments for the individual, be absorbed into inner existence space, and there find a correspondence which transforms the symbols into powerful forces in the individual's mind. A role-taking occurs, in other words, which is not merely a given quantity at the cognitive level, but also something which seizes on one's deepest and perhaps earliest individual memories. Praying "*Our Father...*" may thus conflate with early memories of one's own father, whilst the communion of the congregation under its highest symbol, God, may dissolve into personal memories of the all-embracing maternal arms. A religious symbol with this inherent dual role play thus becomes a living reality: one experiences a meaningful relation.

Religious language is thus constructed of symbols from the intimate sphere. It is often a case of images referring to the father, the mother,

siblings, friends, the loved one, the strong one, the omnipotent, the omniscient, the **female and/or male** world etc. But there are also, of course, symbols of the negative: the devil, the evil one, the fiend, the sinner, the weak, the damned, the impenitent etc. The world of religion is thus a collection of symbolic expressions, often arranged in **narratives**, where living memories important to man's survival are found encoded. The capacity of these memories to make contact time and time again with individual memory spheres derives from the fact that they are objectified to express highly central symbolic content. When an individual finds an analogy between his own structures of experience and those acquired collectively, a role-taking occurs - a role experience which can lead to greater maturity, to a healing process, to the discovery of hope and confidence.

In this perspective, **prayer** acquires great importance. It may be understood as the encounter between external circumstances and symbols in the inner world. Personal meditative prayer may thus acquire great significance for the reworking of events in the environment according to structures in one's own inner existence space. A kind of fusion of personal "memories" can occur with symbols and circumstances from the outer world, leading to maturity and acquiescence. For this reason, symbols of meditation in particular assume great importance for the integration of the mind. Processes occur here which find expression in a sense of God's guidance and of prayers being answered (cf. Capps, 1982a).

We must also accept, however, that religious symbol worlds can end in **destructive experience** contexts. One may thus find symbols for both private and collective hate objects. This is something which occurs constantly when individuals in the name of religion devote themselves to war and extermination campaigns. A religious symbol system can thus be powerful in both the positive and negative senses. A blind role experience may therefore be extremely harmful. An ethical judgement directed principally at the cognitive dimensions of the individual should not therefore be ignored.

Gender symbols

From this point of view we also can discuss **the religious experiences of women and men**. We have to admit that the constructs in the inner existence space for the two genders are different. Very early we confront the outer world and learn to react according to that; and since the reactions from the outer world to a female child are different from reactions to a male one, we create an inner existence space which will be partly directed by gender expectations.

When we later confront our inner experiences with the symbolic world in the socially given reality, there can be different reactions. One is that we compensate our relation to the genders by using the religious symbols in the mythology. We may feel attracted and positively related to the figures in the religious domain. They can reinforce the experiences we already have in our inner space, and therefore coordinate very well with what we need in the inner existence space. On the other hand we may react against the symbolic expressions of the sexes in religion and try to reformulate them: we may find them false, and possibly also aggressive. From this point of view a woman can as naturally as a man identify with a male god, but what is important is that there should be mythical figures of both sexes. Both women and men need them, but partly in different ways. Because protestantism, in particular, lacks a female mythical figure, Jesus Christ instead has become femininised. He has become the symbol for love, tenderness and sympathy. This is obvious especially in pietistic movements. Sometimes the religious symbols are almost desexualised, like angels and great mystics; such symbols can even function as identification figures for some people having problems with sex roles. Such problems I have dealt with in my case study of the Finnish-Swedish popular writer Joel Petterson (1892-1937). During his last years he developed a religiosity which followed the maternal principle, identifying himself with the Madonna Mary, and Christ was experienced primarily as a friend and comrade. God the Father was something he primarily protested against. The mythological

and symbolic elements of religion focused his mental development and gave opportunities for partial identification and maturity (Holm, 1994).

Summary

To sum up it may be stated that the application of the role concept has undergone considerable development, but is also still used simultaneously in several different ways. From having been the label for an activity model within a specific group, it has gone on to become a term designating an intra-psychic process. In Sundén's version of role theory, which I call **perceptual**, the narratives of the sacred tradition were seen as containing roles, one for man and one for God. That this tradition, through application from one generation to the next, can be realized and come to structure experiences, is an important insight. It thus creates continuity and a sense of being close to "primeval experiences" in the idealised models of the sacred tradition.

What I have tried to suggest in this article is that the entire religious symbol world may be seen as reflecting concrete experience in almost every individual. It is thus a question of different feelings in the presence of the mother, the father, the two sexes etc. These feelings are found objectified in religious symbols, in myths, legends, parables, metaphors etc. These objectified forms, which also have great intrinsic value, are always available to the individual through socialisation, where words, images, and music play a decisive role. When these are supplied to the individual, there is already an **inner existence space** inside him where the earliest life experiences have been stored; there is often a sense of being accepted, rejected, satisfied, or loved. All of this occurs at the level of personal relations.

Individual history is formed by a memory which stores experiences of different kinds. The memory is nevertheless controlled by a number of different processes, with the result that contact with reality is not always

objectively real. There is instead a displacement, a fusion, or a reinforcement, creating emotionally charged motifs in the mind. These motifs often become comprehensible via symbols which are either more cognitive in character, or else they are plastically formed external objects or painted images. If the personal symbols find an equivalent in the collectively given religious imagery, a role-taking then occurs on a deeply individual plane, allowing the individual to feel meaning and hope in life. In positive cases, a maturing or healing process may occur. The process may be different in women and men, but what is important is that there is access for both genders of religious symbols of the two sexes.

One may ask whether inner dedication to symbols may be regarded as role-taking. I find it meaningful to do so, since it is generally a case of personal relations being brought to the fore. One makes contact with a "Thou", and in relation to this it is possible to take on different roles. Behind the mythical role experiences which Sundén has described, there may also be dynamic forces in the inner experience space, which thus reinforce motivational factors. But if we turn to more sociologically oriented hypotheses - the structural-analytical model and the interactionist one - there are still parallels. It is highly likely that, behind a correctly functioning social role-taking, there lie additional motives connected with the inner existence space. The concepts of role-taking advanced by these various approaches are thus closely related, although research and analysis describe them in rather different ways. My way of analysing religious experiences I call an **integrated role theory**, because I combine some depth psychological concepts and role theory. Behind the role concept in my use is a common denominator: earlier memory experiences in personal relation to others, to a **Thou**.

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