

The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II

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Edited by

Göran Larsson



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Cover illustration: Geo Widengren. Photo by Gunnar Rundgren. Photograph located at the Uppsala university library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Larsson, Göran, editor.

Title: The legacy, life and work of Geo Widengren and the study of the history of religions after World War II / edited by Göran Larsson.

Description: Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2022. | Series: Numen book series, 0169-8834 ; volume 174 | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021035715 (print) | LCCN 2021035716 (ebook) | ISBN 9789004499362 (hardback : acid-free paper) | ISBN 9789004499386 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Widengren, Geo, 1907–1996. | Religion—History—20th century. | Religions—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC BL43.W53 L44 2022 (print) | LCC BL43.W53 (ebook) | DDC 200.92—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021035715>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021035716>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 0169-8834

ISBN 978-90-04-49936-2 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-49938-6 (e-book)

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PART 1

Thesis and International Work



Geo Widengren: A Portrait of a Swedish Historian of Religions

Göran Larsson

1 Introduction

Professor Geo Widengren (1907–1996), holder of the chair in the History of Religions and Psychology of Religions at Uppsala University between 1940 and 1973, is one of Sweden's best-known scholars in the field of religious studies. His bibliography encompasses more than two hundred publications, including books, articles, chapters, edited volumes and reviews written in Swedish, English, German, Italian and French.¹ During his academic career he published on a large number of topics, such as the phenomenology of religions, Iranian studies, Gnosticism, Manicheism, Mandeism and high gods. In order to make comparisons, stipulate typologies and detect patterns in the history of religions, Widengren mainly used texts and archaeological findings from the wider Middle East, but on occasion also sources from other regions, such as Africa, Europe and Australia. His research was situated between the study of non-Christian religions (which is a common demarcation in the history of religions) and Biblical scholarship. Consequently, he did not hesitate to include Christian sources in his analysis (see Hedin's and Eidevall's chapters in this volume), while also stressing – unlike his predecessors at Uppsala, Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) and Tor Andræ (1885–1947) – that personal faith and belief should be left out of the academic study of religions. From this point of view, his appointment as Professor in the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala was a break with the theological study of religions that had long predominated as the norm in Sweden.

Generally speaking, Widengren was a comparativist, and his method was source-critical studies of texts. This approach is explained, for instance, in

1 On Widengren's bibliography, see Kaarina Drynjeff, "Bibliographica: Geo Widengren," in *Ex Orbe Religionum* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 451–464; J. Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Bio-bibliographies de 134 savants* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 540–547 and J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Geo Widengren (1907–1996)," *Studia Iranica*, Tome 25, Fascicule 2 (1996): 263–272. See also Casadio and Larsson's updated bibliography in this volume.

the introduction to *Historia Religionum: Handbook for the History of Religions, Vol. 1. Religions of the Past*. He writes:

The History of Religion as a historical discipline is dependent on the methods elaborated since generations in other historical disciplines, above all in political history. These methods imply source criticism which means that we have to answer *inter alia* such questions as: How do we constitute from the manuscript the text of the source in question? How do we ascertain whether the source in question partly or in its totality is authentic or not? How do we from secondary sources work our way back to primary sources? How do we distinguish real history from legend and myth?²

Five years after Widengren was appointed Professor in the History of Religions and Psychology of Religions at Uppsala in 1940, the Second World War ended and the world opened up for scholars like himself. At this point, Widengren had both the necessary language skills (for instance, he spoke, read and published in English, German and French) and the confidence to take advantage of this new situation. In the 1950s and 1960s he played an active role in the organization of the academic study of religions, not the least through his participation in starting what became known as the International Association for the Study of the History of Religions, later in 1955 International Association for the History of Religions (today abbreviated as IAHR) and its associated journal *NVMEN* (see Fujiwara and Jensen's and Casadio's chapters in this volume). It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Widengren was important in making progress with the study of the History of Religions as an academic field both in Sweden and internationally.

Even though Uppsala was his academic home, Widengren was never an introverted nationalist: on the contrary, he was a cosmopolitan researcher. His international impact is demonstrated by the fact that he was awarded memberships in several prestigious academic organizations, such as the World Council for Jewish Studies, the Oriental Society at the University of Leeds and the Afro-Asian Society at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He also received honorary doctorates from Amsterdam (1962), Strasbourg (1962),

2 Geo Widengren, "Prolegomena: the value of source-criticism as illustrated by the biographical dates of the great founders," in *Historia Religionum: Handbook for the History of Religions, Vol. 1. Religions of the Past*, eds. J.C. Bleeker and Geo Widengren (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 1.

Cardiff (1965), Rostock (1969) and Uppsala (1973), as well as being invited to Iran at the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire in 1971.³

Unlike many present-day scholars who might be anxious about their disciplinary identities and struggle with disciplinary boundaries, Widengren wanted to establish a platform that all scholars of religions could share. Instead of cutting the subject up into different disciplines like sociology, Islamology, Christianity, psychology and Biblical studies, Widengren's ambition was to present grand theories and bold explanations. For instance, in his opening address to the IAHR meeting in Stockholm on August 16–22, 1970, he laments how the study of religions had become fragmented:

Even when a philologist works with religious texts, analyses them, presents his findings, does all the work we usually classify as appertaining to the History of Religions, he may still refuse to attend our congresses under the pretext that he is no "historian of religions". This tendency seems to be quite especially marked in German-speaking countries. "Ich bin doch kein Religionsgeschichtler", answered one outstanding specialist in Islamic mysticism, when I tried to enlist his cooperation for this congress. I asked him: "Whom would you then qualify as such? Perhaps only holders of chairs for the History of Religions?" He said: "Yes, perhaps". "Then", I replied, "some of the greatest names in the history of our discipline would be no historians of religions. To mention but a few names from former generations: Cumont, Norden, Reitzenstein, Goldziher, Snouck Hurgronje, Oldenburg, Frazer would be no historians of religions? Is that not ridiculous?" He admitted that it was, adding: "I didn't think of that". But he did not give me his name for the congress.⁴

Even though religious studies as an academic field has become even further divided into more subdisciplines and novel theoretical and methodological approaches since that meeting in Stockholm, errors and lacunae in

3 Widengren's major academic achievements are recorded by Jan Bergman, "In memoriam: Geo Widengren (1907–1996)," *Svensk Religionshistorisk Årsskrift*, Vol. 6 (1997): 243–246; Jan Hjärpe, "Geo Widengren," *Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens Årsbok* (1996): 38–41; Anders Hultgård, "In Memoriam Geo Widengren (1907–1995)," *Orientalia Suecana XLIII–XLIV* (1994–1995): 7–9 and Anders Hultgård, "Geo Widengren," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, retrieved from <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/widengren-geo> (accessed September 8, 2020).

4 Geo Widengren, Geo, "The opening address," in *Proceedings of the XIth International Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, eds. C. Jouco Bleeker; Geo Widengren and Eric J. Sharpe (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 18.

Widengren's comparative methodology and schematic explanations can readily be found (see, for instance, Andersson's and de Jong's chapters in this volume). Nonetheless it can be argued that it was his attempt to create typologies and present schematic outlines that made the history of religions plausible for both academics and a wider public audience. From that point of view, I believe we have a lot to learn from a researcher like Widengren. Without neglecting his shortcomings, Widengren can perhaps teach us how to formulate new bold hypotheses for how to do comparative studies. That said, the errors, lacunae and problems in his approach should not be downplayed – on the contrary. However, to avoid some of the most obvious mistakes committed by our predecessors, we must also be prepared to be critical when we study how the discipline (i.e. the study of religions as an academic subject) has evolved over time. We also have to be humble and remember that it is likely that our own endeavours will be equally criticised by future scholars.

While this edited volume is dedicated to Widengren's scientific publications and his studies of specific areas, the remainder of this chapter presents a general introduction and background to Widengren's intellectual life. The focus is on Widengren's formative years as a young student at Stockholm University College (in Swedish, Stockholms Högskola; to avoid any confusion I will henceforth use its Swedish name) and Uppsala University, but it will also cover some of the intellectual and academic milieus that Widengren belonged to during his long career. While his academic life is the focus here, Widengren's interest in the military, his horse-riding and his engagement in Swedish public debates will also be discussed. Hopefully this introductory chapter will make it easier for the reader to comprehend the remaining chapters and to place Widengren in his proper intellectual context.

2 Geo Widengren as a Person

Geo Widengren was born Geo Jakobson on April 24, 1907, in Stockholm, where he died on January 28, 1996. The reason why he changed his name from Jakobson to Widengren is unclear, but it is possible that the change was made after his parents were divorced in 1917.⁵ After finishing gymnasium (in Swedish, *mogenhetsexamen*) at Södermalm's Högre Allmänna Läroverk (also known as Södra Latin) in 1925, he had to think about the future. Initially he wanted to study

5 Information about the divorce can be found in Uppsala domkyrkoförsamling, Allaa:52 (1925) Image 360/page 8102.

law with the intention of becoming a lawyer, but his attempts to do so failed according to Widengren's son, Hans Widengren (born 14 September 1953).⁶

Following this 'failure', for some unknown reason Widengren decided to pick up a fairly new subject, namely the History of Religions. Unlike the theological study of religion, which enabled one to become a priest in the Church of Sweden, the History of Religions, as it was taught at Stockholm Högskola, offered few opportunities for a job outside academia and was not something that ensured a safe career within, for example, the state apparatus (i.e. the government and its bureaucracy) or the Swedish school system (i.e. working as a teacher).⁷ This rather odd choice may be explained by Widengren's strong interest in languages, a subject at the heart of the early stage of the History of Religions. For a pioneer like Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), who is often seen as the founding father of the History of Religions as a discipline, the study of languages was a necessary prerequisite for being able to examine religious texts.⁸ A similar approach had also been emphasized by Nathan Söderblom, the first professor of the History of Religions at Uppsala University.⁹ Before Söderblom was installed as professor in Uppsala in 1901 (a position he held until 1914), he had studied Iranian languages at the University of Sorbonne in Paris.¹⁰ Söderblom's pupil and successor in Uppsala, Tor Andræ, who later became Widengren's supervisor, was another scholar who emphasized the need to study languages in order to analyse religious texts and unpack their historical contexts. In his role as teacher at Stockholm Högskola, it was Andræ who introduced Widengren to the study of religions.

As Jan Hjärpe points out in this volume, Andræ's profound influence is demonstrated in the autobiography that Widengren wrote about his teacher.¹¹

6 Personal conversation with Hans Widengren, 28 June, 2019.

7 See, for instance, Ernst Arbman, "Religionshistoria," in *Stockholms högskola under Sven Tunbergs rektorat. Minnesskrift tillägnad professor, juris och filosofie doktor Sven Tunberg vid hans avgång från rektorsämbetet den 31 december 1949* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners förlag, 1949).

8 See, for instance, Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1986).

9 See, for example, Bengt Sundkler, *Nathan Söderblom: His Life and Work* (Lund: Gleerup, 1968). It should also be noted that Geo Widengren wrote a biographical entry on Söderblom for a Swedish biographical dictionary. See Geo Widengren, "Söderblom, Lars Olof Jonathan (Nathan)," in *Svenska män och kvinnor. Biografisk uppslagsbok*, Band 7 (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1954), 424–427.

10 On Söderblom and the study of Iranian religions, see, for example, Sven Hartman, "Nathan Söderblom and the Ancient Religion of Iran," in *Nathan Soederblom and his Contribution to the study of religion: essays in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of his death*, eds. Eric H. Sharpe and Anders Hultgård (Uppsala: Horae Soederblomianae, VIII, 1984), 37–39.

11 Geo Widengren, *Tor Andræ* (Uppsala: J.A. Lindblads förlag, 1947).

However, as Hjärpe and others also pointed out, the biography is not only a book about Andræ, it is also an important source for deciphering Widengren's own life.¹² By reading this particular book, we learn how Widengren was introduced to academic life and how he learnt to study ancient texts and the history of religions. For example, the biography includes several details about Widengren's education in Stockholm, but it also describes how Andræ became a mentor and role model for him. It also includes vivid descriptions of how Widengren and his student comrades longed for the "solemn moments" when Andræ lectured to them. One example is given in the following quote:

When I think back to these hours, it is of course especially the evening lectures in the old D-hall at the University that appear as a sharp memory. There was an atmosphere of togetherness between the lecturer and the audience, which gave the Stockholm lectures their special charm. There was in Stockholm a fraternity under the master's direction or more correctly – because there were a large number of female participants – a mystery association that listened to the mystagog and curiously allowed itself to be inaugurated into the secrets of science. Andræ really had a magic wand, with which he drew a magic circle around his disciples, which they had a hard time freeing themselves from, and hardly wanted to either.¹³

Judging from the biography, it would be fair to say that Andræ became something more than just a teacher. Besides his academic impact, he taught Widengren how to behave in an intellectual and academic environment. Even though he was keen to present himself as a member of the *haute bourgeoisie*, to quote Hjärpe,¹⁴ Widengren's background was rather low middle class, and his parents had no academic background (his father worked in the royal customs service and his mother as an office clerk).¹⁵ To bridge the gap between his family background and his life in the academy, Andræ not only became an academic professor, he was also a guide or "cultural broker" for Widengren, who entered the academic world without any prior knowledge of this milieu. For example, through his way of teaching and in his conversations with students,

12 See, for instance, T. B-S., "Geocentriskt om Tor Andræ," *Ergo*, Nr. 7, Årg. 25 (1947): 98.

13 Widengren, *Andræ*, 145, my translation.

14 Hjärpe, "Geo," 38.

15 See, for instance, Thore Engströmer, *Inbjudningsskrift till åhörande av de offentliga föreläsningar med vilka professorn i religionshistoria med religionspsykologi Geo Widengren samt professorn i fysiologi Torsten Teorell tillträda sina ämbeten* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1940), 3.

Andræ showed Widengren how to become a successful scholar and researcher. In Widengren's memory, Andræ was not only well read, he was witty and funny while also being hard and fair in his judgements on others. Besides lecturing and leading the seminars, Andræ also enjoyed attending post-seminar parties with the students. Widengren has given the following description of a post-seminar party in Stockholm:

The association's meetings were followed by a simple supper, which used to be eaten in the restaurant in the northern King's Tower at the top of the sky. Here you could feel a waft of the big city, although otherwise Kungsgatan still seems quite untidy. After we'd had a bit of food and also some drinks, we had fun with various inventions. The most popular among the female participants was, of course, what we in our religious-historical jargon called the "totem dance". As a rule, we used to anchor Hjalle Sundén at the piano, with a rough whisky grog placed on top, as a fee for the thirsty pianist, so that in the breaks between the dances he could get inspiration for new efforts.¹⁶

Even though Andræ was a superb academic, especially when it came to studying the history of Islam and the formative life of the Prophet Muhammad (see Hjärpe's chapter in this volume) and was an invaluable mentor for Widengren, he was also a devoted Christian. Unlike Widengren, he was a priest in the Church of Sweden. Like his supervisor Nathan Söderblom, in 1936 Andræ left academia to be ordained Bishop of Linköping.¹⁷ This career path was never an option for Widengren, who expressed no interest in religion as a personal belief, and no records exist indicating that he was religious. In the words of his son Hans his father was rather an agnostic, and Sunday was a day for going horse-riding, not attending church, a topic I will return to below. While his predecessors, Söderblom and Andræ, were excellent scholars, they were also loyal to the Church of Sweden and faithful to their Christian beliefs. The explicit or implicit confessional approach to the study of religions that was adopted by his predecessors was unacceptable to Widengren, a position that became a turning point in the academic study of the History of Religions in Sweden.

The agnostic methodological standpoint advocated by Widengren did not imply that Christianity should be left out of the academic study of religions – quite the contrary. As Hedin points out in this volume, Widengren believed it

16 Widengren, *Andræ*, 165–166, my translation. Hjalle = Hjalmar Sundén.

17 On the life of Tor Andræ, see, for instance, *Tor Andræ. In memoriam*, eds. Ove Hassler and Robert Murray (Stockholm: AB Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1947).

was necessary to study Christianity just like any other religion in the History of Religions. There was nothing exceptional about texts produced by Christians – they were just raw data. Like any other religious tradition, according to Widengren, Christian sources should not be treated any differently but should be assessed critically and fairly. It is therefore hardly surprising that his doctoral thesis, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents: A Comparative Study*, from 1936 draws on sources from the Bible and the History of Religions more generally (on his thesis, see Eidenvall's chapter in this volume).

If we return to Widengren's early years at Stockholms Högskola, his biography of Andræ indicates that he studied a vast number of religious traditions, including Gnosticism, Islam and Hinduism, as well as the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772).¹⁸ His lectures in Stockholm also covered current anthropological theories on animism, totemism, kinship and evolutionism, as well as the prevalence of the so-called high gods (see, for instance, Andersson's chapter in this volume). The students read the books and texts of scholars like Edward Westermarck (1862–1939), Sir James G. Frazer (1854–1941), Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), Johannes Pedersen (1883–1977) and Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959). Besides his studies in the History of Religions with Andræ, Widengren also took introductory classes in philosophy under the guidance of Carl Hellström (1892–1932).¹⁹ When it was time to choose a topic for his BA thesis, Widengren decided to focus on totemism among Native Australians. Even though his defence went well and his thesis was passed, in his biography of Andræ he tells the reader that he was devastated by the criticism his teacher directed at him for not using a single footnote or reference in the whole thesis. This was a grim lesson, and he promised himself that he would never make that mistake again. In his biography of Andræ, Widengren writes:

I was ashamed of having committed this mistake, and my later essays and dissertations at college and university overflowed with footnotes.²⁰

Among his classmates in Stockholm was Hjalmar Sundén (1908–1993), whose sister was married to Andræ. Later Sundén became Sweden's first professor

18 Later Widengren even wrote a short biographical entry for a Swedish bibliographical encyclopaedia on Swedenborg. See Geo Widengren, "Swedenborg, Emanuel," in *Svenska män och kvinnor. Biografiskt uppslagsverk*, Vol. 7. (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1954), 371–374.

19 See, Walter H. Capps, "Geo Widengren on Syncretism: On Parsing Uppsala Methodological Tendencies," *Numen*, Vol. xx, Fasc. 3 (1973), 182.

20 Widengren, *Andræ*, 153, my translation.

in the Psychology of Religions at Uppsala University, in which position he became one of Widengren's cherished and most loyal colleagues.²¹ It is fair to see Sundén as one of the few close friends that Widengren kept for the rest of his life. As colleagues at Uppsala University, they had an opportunity to put their mark on the study of religion in the Faculty of Theology, not least during the turbulent years at the end of the 1960s. One of Widengren's former students, Bengt Pohjanen (b. 1944), remembers this time as follows:

We agree that ideological poison is spread at the seminars in the Dean's House. Only Sundén and Geo Widengren are immune. We dismiss Martin Lönnebo, the chaplain, and Martin Lind, the criminal type, and Jonas Jonson, Mao's arse-licker, who claims that in China, thanks to Mao's thinking, cucumbers are six metres long and are transported on trucks.²²

The "poison" mentioned in the quote is a reference to the ideologies of Marx, Mao and Stalin that were widespread at Uppsala from the end of the 1960s, while the "chaplain", "the criminal type" and the "arse-licker" are references to students of the Faculty of Theology who later became leading theologians and priests (and later bishops) in the Church of Sweden.

Besides Andræ, the philologist Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1889–1974) seems to have been the person with the deepest influence on Widengren's academic life.²³ As demonstrated by Anders Hultgård's, Albert de Jong's and Mihaela Timuş' chapters in this volume, it was Nyberg who introduced Widengren to the study of Iranian languages and prepared him for his future studies and comparisons of Middle East religions.²⁴ The fact that Nyberg was active in Uppsala and that Andræ left Stockholm after he had been appointed professor in the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala made it fairly easy for Widengren to relocate his family and move to Uppsala. Indeed, this was a necessary move if Widengren was to intensify and deepen his studies of languages and the History of Religions.

On February 13th, 1931, Widengren signed up as a student at Uppsala University and became a member of the student union of the Stockholm

21 On Sundén, see, for example, Owe Wikström, "Sundén, Hjalmar," in *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, häfte 167, ed. Åsa Karlsson (Stockholm: Edita, 2014), 260–264.

22 Bengt Pohjanen, *Gränsgångar-68* (Skellefteå: Norma & Artos, 2018), 97, my translation.

23 On Nyberg, see Sigrid Kahle, *H.S. Nyberg. En vetenskapsmans biografi* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1991).

24 Geo Widengren, "Henrik Samuel Nyberg and Iranian Studies in the Light of Personal Reminiscences," in *Hommages et Opera Minora Monumentum H.S. Nyberg*, Vol. II (Leiden & Téhéran-Liège: E.J. Brill & Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1975), 419–456.

Nation.²⁵ Because the future was still uncertain, his initial plan was to study to become a teacher in a Swedish school.²⁶ However, in order to teach ‘Christian knowledge’ a degree in Hebrew was required,²⁷ which Widengren studied under Nyberg’s guidance. Besides Hebrew, Widengren also studied Syriac, Aramaic and Pahlavi with Nyberg, Arabic with Sven Dederling (1897–1986), Ethiopian with Oscar Löfgren (1898–1992) and Assyriology with Otto Emil Ravn (1881–1952), the last in Copenhagen in 1935. Over time it became obvious that Widengren was not going to become a schoolteacher and that research was his future. On 25 May 1936 he defended his thesis in theology on *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents: A Comparative Study* (on Widengren’s thesis, see Göran Eidevall’s contribution to this volume).²⁸

In line with the University’s normal practice, Widengren was immediately promoted to Associate Professor (Docent) in Religious Studies (Teologiska praenotations and theological encyclopaedia) after successfully defending his thesis. This position lasted from June 19th, 1936 until February 1st, 1937, when he was appointed Acting Professor until February 1st, 1940. April 12, 1940 he was appointed full Professor of the History of Religions and Psychology of Religions.²⁹ He held this position until his retirement in 1973, at which point Widengren and his family left Uppsala and moved back to Stockholm. According to Hans Widengren, his father and mother were greatly relieved when they finally had the possibility to move back to Stockholm and leave behind all the academic conflicts that had dominated their time in Uppsala.

3 Life outside Academia

Besides academia, which for Widengren meant the study of the History of Religions and philology, Widengren had two major interests. Early in his life he

25 *Stockholms nation 1931–1941. Porträttkatalog med kortfattade biografiska uppgifter* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1942), 36.

26 Sigrid Kahle, “Professor Geo Widengren,” *Dagens Nyheter*, February 14, 1996.

27 On the transformation of religious education in the Swedish school system from “Christian knowledge” to “Religious knowledge”, see Karin Kittelmann-Flensner and Göran Larsson, “Swedish Religious Education at the End of the 1960s: Classroom Observations, Early Video Ethnography and the National Curriculum of 1962,” *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 36, Issue 2, (2014): 202–217.

28 Geo Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents: A Comparative Study* (Stockholm and Uppsala: Bokförlags aktiebolaget Thule/Almqvist & Wiksells boktryckeri, 1937).

29 Engströmer, *Inbjudningsskrift*.

became involved with the Swedish army, and during his studies at Stockholms Högskola he also undertook military training at Karlbergs Military Academy in Stockholm.³⁰ Like several Swedes, Widengren enrolled in the voluntary corps during the Finnish War of 1940 against the Russians, who had invaded Finland.³¹ Although information about this part of his life is vague, Widengren served for two months in the war.³² According to his former student, Professor Jan Hjärpe, it was during this turbulent time that Widengren received the news from Uppsala of his appointment as full professor in the History of Religions. Widengren remained loyal to the military and served as an officer in the Swedish army until his retirement.³³

Closely related to his interest in the military, Widengren was a passionate horse-rider. Several anecdotes are preserved about his horse, Attila,³⁴ and Widengren often lectured dressed in riding clothes: riding breeches, and a horse whip were often part of his paraphernalia when he lectured. The following episode is recalled by Pohjanen:

I knock on Sundén's door. He shares a workroom with Geo Widengren, Professor of Religious History and a captain in the reserve. He is sitting at his table in breeches. The whip is hanging over the chair frame. In January, I listened to his lecture on the Crusades. Those who have a High Church leaning claim that Widengren is an atheist. A week later, I attend the first seminar, where he scares the shit out of several students. He throws out a text on Gnosticism in Greek, asks the candidate, who almost needs a Greek dictionary ["almost needs a Greek dictionary" is a name for a specific person in the class], to read. No, that does not work. The next candidate has gone [down the] public line [i.e. to a state school with no instruction in classical languages] and does not know a word of Greek. Widengren slams the rod down on to the table and wonders what the candidate is doing there if he does not even know Greek. The candidate blushes, ashamed, but remains. He later became a professor

30 Hultgård, "Geo".

31 See, for instance, Martina Sprague, *Swedish volunteers in the Russo-Finnish Winter War, 1939–1940* (McFarland, Jefferson, 2010).

32 See, for instance, Widengren, *Andræ*, 284 and Engströmer, *Inbjudningsskrift*.

33 On Widengren's engagement with the Swedish military, see *Norrlands trängregemente. Stabsavdelningen D VI Tjänsteförteckning*, Vol. 1 (1933–1936), stored in the Swedish Military Archive (Krigsarkivet) in Stockholm.

34 See, for instance, Bertil Appelgren, "Samtal med forskare: 'Då jag själv blir deppig tar jag mej en ridtur med Attila,'" *Aftonbladet*, 2 February, 1969.

at the Department of Theology. Widengren sees that I am straightening my back. I'm a classic [i.e. he has studied classical languages in public school]. He nods. I read the text in the ancient Greek way. Widengren listens with a smile on his face. When I finish, he wonders if the candidate has heard of koiné. I answer that the New Testament is written in kiní. He is impressed. Wondering if the candidate can also say what the text is about, I answer that it claims that a child does not become human until it has got its teeth and can bite so that God's breathing can't escape from the child's mouth. The other students, who do not know Greek, giggle, Widengren nods. Yes, that's one of the Gnostics' thoughts on this text from AD 300. There they've got it! Now the dry laughter is pulverized once more.³⁵

Widengren does not appear to have been a very sociable person, and those who studied under him (e.g. Jan Hjärpe, Anders Hultgård or Gudmar Aneer) do not give us any anecdotes about his personal life. As already noted, from his appointment as full professor in Uppsala, Widengren's family was described as *haute bourgeoisie* and liberal but with conservative leanings. Following the customs of the time, his appointment as professor was announced in the Swedish press. What is more unusual is the several media comments on the fact that Widengren was so young when he was appointed professor. The following anecdote that circulated in the Swedish media at the time can serve as an example:

- Colonel Willy Kleen started studying at Uppsala University a few years ago. At the student party (gask in Swedish) at the Stockholm nation, he collided with a young man, and a rewarding conversation unfolded:
- I'm going up to this Geo Widengren. How should one deal with him?
- Yes, he's a pretty decent guy.
- But you, how should he be approached. Does he have any favourite subjects (käpphästar in Swedish)?
- The two withdrew to a corner and talked. Willy Kleen received a lot of good advice from his young, blonde friend, who seemed to have just left high school. When they broke up, Kleen recalled a small formality.
- Brother, sorry, what was your name?
- Geo Widengren.³⁶

35 Pohjanen, *Grängsgångar*, 82–83, my translation.

36 This anecdote was printed in both *Sölvesborgs-Tidning* (28 October, 1948) and *Söderhamns Tidning* (3 November, 1948), my translation.

Both his former students and the few extant photos of Widengren give the impression that he often dressed in classic suits, while his wife Aina is described as beautiful and fashionably dressed by the author and former theology student at Uppsala university, Bengt Hallgren (1922–2017).³⁷

Correspondingly, the few letters and notes that have been preserved from Widengren's many international visits and conferences, for instance, in relation to the IAHR or the establishment of the journal *NVMEN*, does not provide much information about Widengren's personal characteristics (on these enterprises, see Fujiwara and Jensen's contribution to this volume and the research carried out by Casadio³⁸). Most of the correspondence concerns practical matters, such as itineraries, congratulations and letters of thanks, and a few personal details. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge there is no unexplored archive of Widengren's remaining papers that could be consulted for information on his personal or academic life. For instance, the university library in Uppsala only possesses a few letters and brief notes, nothing more. However, some of Widengren's letters to international researchers and publishing houses may well be stored in archives and libraries outside Sweden.³⁹ In this volume, a transcription of thirty-five letters have been included that cast light on Widengren's and Pettazzoni's intensive correspondence. In addition, the volume also contains seven letters between Widengren and the Italian scholar Ugo Bianchi (1922–1995) written between 1958 and 1970. These letters are often related to ongoing research, but also to the establishment of IAHR and *NVMEN*. The content of these letters has been partly analysed and placed in their proper context in Fujiwara and Jensen's chapter and in Casadio's chapters in this volume.

Like so many scholars of his time, Widengren developed tense and even hostile relations with several Swedish and international scholars (see, for example, Gothóni and Larsson's chapter in this volume), and it is my impression that he had few close friends.⁴⁰ Among his friends were Hjalmar Sundén,

37 Bengt Hallgren, *Guds finger i Uppsala* (Stockholm: Alba, 1981), 26.

38 Giovanni, Casadio, "NVMEN, Brill and the IAHR in Their Early Years: Glimpses at Three Parallel Stories from an Italian Stance," in *NVMEN, the Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR*, eds. Tim Jensen and Armin W. Geertz (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), 303–348.

39 One example is the collection of letters from Geo Widengren to Johannes Pedersen that are archived at the University Library of Copenhagen. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Jørgen Bæk-Simonsen for making me aware of this collection.

40 Some of these conflicts are described in Carl-Martin Edsman, "Ein halbes Jahrhundert Uppsala-Schule," in *Kontinuität und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Anders Hultgård zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 23.12.2001*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 194–209.

already mentioned, and Archbishop Ruben Josefson (1907–1972)⁴¹ according to Hans Widengren's recollection.⁴² The relationship with Nyberg was important, but it was also complicated, and there are ample examples in Widengren's publications of him clashing with Nyberg's theories and explanations.⁴³ During his study years he was also a good friend of Stig Wikander's (1908–1983), with whom he studied Iranian languages under Nyberg. The so-called Gatha seminars, which were held at the home of Professor Nyberg, are described by Widengren in the following way:

The Gatha seminars – with some interruptions – continued from the autumn of 1932 to the autumn of 1937. They were held in his home every fortnight and were attended by several older and younger scholars. However, the only regular and really active members of the seminar were Wikander and myself, and for that reason the task of reading and translating the text fell upon us two. The preparation took us exactly a fortnight, and yet many passages were of course quite enigmatic to us. In order to be able to do some other work than the Gathas we divided the task between us, one of us reading every other seminar. We were hardly able to do more than to reproduce the opinions of Bartholomae-Reichert with some casual references to Andreas-Wackernagel. This was, however, the background against which the superior knowledge of our teacher could unfold itself. At that time, as far as I can remember, Nyberg's interpretation of the Gathas was concentrated on problems associated with text criticism, lexicography and syntactic observations. It was a strictly philological interpretation.⁴⁴

In 1953 Wikander was appointed to the chair in Sanskrit and Comparative Indo-European Philology at Uppsala University, but even though he remained an important reference for Widengren (not the least in his publications), their

41 On Ruben Josefson's academic life and work within the Church of Sweden, see, for instance, Sten Rössborn, "Josefson, Per Love Ruben," in *Svensk biografiskt Lexikon*, Band 20 (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1975), 415.

42 Personal conversation with Hans Widengren.

43 See, for instance, Geo Widengren, "Oral tradition and written literature among the Hebrews in the light of Arabic evidence, with special regard to prose narratives," *Acta Orientalia*, Vol. XXIII (1959): 201–262. See also *H.S. Nyberg. Muntlig tradition, skriftlig fixering och författarskap sammanställt enligt efterlämnade manuskript och kommenterat av Bo Utas* (Uppsala: Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-samfundet i Uppsala, nr. 5, 2004).

44 Widengren, "Henrik Samuel Nyberg," 424–425.

friendship had already ended in the 1940s.⁴⁵ Without going into any details, the falling out between Wikander and Widengren most likely had nothing to do with either scientific or political disagreements. Even before the war Wikander was attracted by fascist tendencies, whilst Widengren was drawn to anti-Nazism and anti-fascism.⁴⁶ Despite disagreements on these matters, it is likely that both Wikander and Widengren were united in their aversion towards communism. It is therefore more plausible that the split between the two friends is related to a conflict over a so-called preceptor position (i.e. a teaching position) at the University of Uppsala that took place in 1949. The idea was that the preceptor should take care of the teaching in both the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Philosophy (History of Religions was a subject included in a BA at both faculties), but the position was to be accommodated in the Faculty of Theology. One of the applicants was Wikander, while Widengren and Nyberg were two of the members in the expert committee that was appointed to find the most suitable candidate for the job. Despite strong attempts by both Widengren and Nyberg and a divided committee, the Vice Chancellor, Fredrik Berg (1887–1974), came to the decision not to offer the position to Wikander, but to Carl-Martin Edsman (1911–2010), who had defended one thesis in Exegesis and one in Nordic Comparative Ethnology.⁴⁷ This decision was most likely seen as a betrayal, and after this episode the friendship between Wikander and Widengren was over. As far as I know, neither Wikander nor Widengren have revealed any details about this conflict (this matter is also addressed in Mihaela Timuș's chapter in this volume). However, it is well-documented that Widengren and Edsman had strong resentments against each other and over the years were engaged in several conflicts and disputes.⁴⁸ From 1959 Edsman

45 On Stig Wikander, see, for instance, Mihaela Timuș, "Stig Wikander," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Second edition, Vol. 14, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thomason Gale, 2005), 9734–9737.

46 On Wikander and fascism, see, for instance, Stefan Arvidsson, "Stig Wikander och forskningen om ariska mannaförbund," *CHAOS. Dansk-Norsk tidsskrift for religionshistoriske studier*, Nr 38 (2002): 55–68. When it comes to Widengren, it should be stressed that he served as an expert witness against the Swedish publicist and agitator Einar Åberg (1890–1970), who was accused and convicted on several occasions for spreading antisemitism in Sweden from the 1940s until his death in the 1970s. As compared to Wikander, nothing has been published on Widengren's position during the Second World War. I partly deal with this episode in my biography of Geo Widengren, which is in press with the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm.

47 Oloph Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten vid Uppsala universitet 1916–2000. Historiska studier* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2021), 114–116.

48 See, for instance, Edsman, "Ein halbes" and Carl-Martin Edsman, *Res aut Verba. Erinringar med anledning av sakkunnigutlåtandena rörande preceptorsbefattningen i religionshistoria*

was transferred from the Faculty of Theology to become the first professor in the History of Religions at the Faculty of Philosophy (i.e. Humanities). For Widengren, this was most likely a decision that made his position somewhat weaker at the University of Uppsala.⁴⁹

Apart from some details of his interests in horse-riding and the military, there are hardly any data on Widengren's personal life. On 10 July 1944 he married Aina Björkman in Stockholm,⁵⁰ and on September 14, 1953, his son Hans was born.⁵¹ Aina was a housewife, but unlike so many so-called professors' wives in Uppsala, she was rarely expected to organize dinners or lunches for colleagues or post-seminar activities. In Uppsala she was a full-time housewife, but occasionally she helped her husband with practical details concerning his publications, like proof-reading. After the family moved back to Stockholm in 1973, Aina took a job as a shop assistant at *Svensk tenn*, a fashionable store for furniture and interior design which still has a shop in the heart of Stockholm.⁵²

4 Teaching and Administration

Besides his position as a researcher and teacher at the Faculty of Theology, Widengren also served as Dean in 1944–1945, 1950–1951 and 1965–1971. In this position he took great responsibility for the Faculty and its staff. From the documentation in the central archive of Uppsala University, we see that Widengren participated in the daily routines of the university and the Faculty of Theology. He answers questions raised by the central administration of the university and the government in Stockholm, participates in interviews with journalists, and functions as a doctoral promoter at the University of Uppsala on several occasions.

When it comes to the actual content of his teaching and the atmosphere in his classes and seminars, little has been preserved. The student Bengt Pohjanen, whom I have already mentioned, provides some information from Widengren's teaching from the late 1960s. Besides this rather sporadic and anecdotal information, some more general information can be gleaned

vid Uppsala universitet (Lund: A.B. Ph. Lindstedt Univ. Bokhandel, 1949) and Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten*, 116.

49 Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten*, 116.

50 *Svenska Dagbladet*, July 10th, 1944.

51 *Dagens Nyheter*, September 6th, 1953.

52 Letter from Aina Widengren to Jan Hjärpe (Stockholm, February 5 1996, letter in Hjärpe's personal possession).

from the Yearbooks of Uppsala University. For example, for 1946 and 1947 and for the autumn and spring semesters we can at least learn about the content of the seminars.

Director: Professor WIDENGREN

A. Theology and Philosophy licentiate degree

Leader of the exercises: Professor WIDENGREN. Meetings during the autumn term 1946 (6 meetings), Number of participants 10 individuals, Subject: Bohemian mysticism in 17th century England and Hypostated divine qualities in pre-oriental religion. Meetings during the spring term 1947 (8 meetings), Number of participants 10 individuals. Subject: Hypostated divine qualities in Egyptian and pre-oriental religion and the myths and rites of the Cathars.

B. Bachelor's and master's degree.

Leader of the exercises: during the autumn term 1946 Associate Professor LJUNGBERG, during the spring term 1947 docent Haldar. Meetings during the autumn term 1946 (11 meetings), Number of participants 15 individuals, Subject: The God Thor in comparative lighting. Meetings during the spring term 1947 (15 meetings) number of participants 13 individuals, subject: Islamic mysticism.

C. Theological Bachelor's Degree.

Leader of the exercises: during the autumn spring 1946 Associate Professor HALDAR, during the spring 1947 Professor WIDENGREN. Meetings during the autumn term 1946 (13 meetings), number of participants 16 individuals, subject: Israelite prophecy. Meetings during the spring term 1947 (12 meetings, number of participants 7 individuals), subject: Mani and Manichaeism.⁵³

Compared to our own present-day teaching at the university, Widengren and his contemporaries seem to have been less governed and restricted by fixed curricula, study plans or syllabuses. The teaching was often centered around the professor's own interests, and the content was generally focused on the current research that the professor was engaged in. The aim was to present students with a real research problem, with the professor showing how it could be unpacked and resolved. The seminars could therefore be characterized as a laboratory, or an extension of the professor's own studies and research.

53 This description, signed by Widengren, is included in *Uppsala universitets årsskrift* 1947, 127, my translation.

From the list above, we can also see that the dividing lines between, for instance, the study of Christianity or Biblical Studies were not that strict and that the History of Religions could easily encompass topics that today are often seen as subjects belonging to other sub-disciplines within the study of religions or theology. This impression is confirmed by Anders Jeffner (b. 1934), who studied religion and theology at Uppsala University in the 1950s and 1960s and who later became Professor of Systematic Theology at the same university. In one of his lectures, Jeffner remembers his own study days as follows:

At that time, the young students met the research professors directly. We listened to their lectures and talked to them in small seminar groups. That the academic teachers would be going through textbooks was then an unreasonable thought. What was fascinating with Widengren and Engnell was that, based on their detailed studies of religion, they sought out general theories about religious development, about myth and history, about text and the transmission of traditions, about patterns in belief in God and much more. The implications of the theories could be tested on the concrete material, and at that time they were very true.⁵⁴

Besides scattered information, as described in the quotation above, we do not have much information about Widengren's teaching. It is, however, likely that the students who studied history of religions often participated in Widengren's ongoing research. Some of Widengren's own books, like *Religionens värld*, to which I will return below, was also read by several generations of students in the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University.

5 A Public Intellectual

Besides his academic life as a researcher, teacher and dean, it should be stressed that Widengren also functioned as an intellectual who took part in public discussions from the 1940s until the end of his life. Over the years he published extensively in *Svenska Dagbladet*, one of Sweden's leading daily papers, and also gave a large number of lectures and talks on Swedish radio. The following list is based on advertisements in Swedish daily papers of lectures he gave on Swedish radio between 1950 and 1968.

54 Ander Jeffner, "Teologi som vetenskap," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, Årg. 76 (2000), 130, my translation.

- January 7, 1950 The Shapur inscriptions in Persia
- November 23, 1951 The Horse-riding people from the East: Attila and the Huns
- December 13, 1951 The Horse-riding people from the East: Turks
- December 18, 1951 The Horse-riding people from the East: The Mongolian world conquerors.
- January 6, 1954 We have seen the star in the East
- March 1, 1954 Harlequin costume and monk's robe: Professor Geo Widengren talks about the prehistory of pranks during Lent
- December 2, 1955 Eastern epic: Gilgamesh Österländska epic: Gilgamesh
- December 13, 1955 Eastern epic: Song of Songs
- December 27, 1955 Eastern epic: Thousand and One Nights
- August 17, 1956 The Princes on the Pea: Geo Widengren talks about the Parter State of Hatra
- November 11, 1957 A Thousand and One Nights, I. Reading by Gerd Hagman. Introduction and commentary by Geo Widengren
- November 14, 1957 A Thousand and One Nights, II. Reading by Gerd Hagman. Introduction and commentary by Geo Widengren
- November 21, 1957 A Thousand and One Nights, III. Reading by Gerd Hagman. Introduction and commentary by Geo Widengren
- November 25, 1957 A Thousand and One Nights, IV. Reading by Gerd Hagman. Introduction and commentary by Geo Widengren
- August 24, 1958 Lebanon: unity and division
- February 16, 1958 Among researchers and specialists: Vicar Karl Elis Bratt, Professor Geo Widengren and Associate Professor Åke V. Ström on theology education at Uppsala University
- July 8, 1959 King for 7000 years: Kerstin Anér on the kingdom as an idea and a myth. Participants: BA, Eva Moberg, phil lic., Nils Runeby and Professor Geo Widengren
- December 22, 1964 On Genghis Kahn
- January 5, 1965 Power and humans
- February 10, 1968 Gesta Francorum: a chronicle from the first crusade⁵⁵

On public platforms such as *Svenska Dagbladet* and Swedish radio, Widengren could present his scientific results, decipher new textual findings and explain archaeological discoveries from the fields of ancient and classical archaeology

55 This list has been retrieved via the database "Svenskadagstidningar", which contains digitalized versions of old Swedish newspapers. A search on the name "Geo Widengren" gave more than 700 hits in this database.

(e.g. the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Ras Shamra findings, etc.). Like few others, he was able to place these discoveries in their proper philological and cultural contexts. As a member of the editorial board of *Bonniers Konversationslexikon* between 1937 and 1943, a popular encyclopaedia for the general reader in Sweden, Widengren had another way of presenting his ideas to a wider audience outside academia. Some of the texts published in *Svenska Dagbladet* and some of the lectures he gave on Swedish radio were also collected in two edited volumes, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner* (1961) and *Ryttarfolken från öster* (1960). As Hedin stresses in his chapter in this volume, both publications were targeted at the general public.

In 1950, Widengren also revised an introductory book on the life of the Prophet Muhammad that had been written in Swedish by his former supervisor, Tor Andræ. As pointed out by Hjärpe in this volume, besides updating Andræ's book and adding new research findings, Widengren deleted passages that expressed his supervisor's pro-Christian bias and added his own favourite subjects, namely the importance of high gods and sacred kingship.⁵⁶ For example, in the original text Muhammad was compared negatively with Jesus, a judgement that, for Widengren, had nothing to do with scientific research and everything to do with confessional beliefs. Because of this bias, thought Widengren, they had to be removed from the text. This publication is still on sale in Sweden.

Although it is not possible to determine whether or to what extent the publications Widengren wrote for a general audience had an impact on public debates, it is likely that they were read by both teachers and priests in the Church of Sweden. A large majority of priests and teachers who had studied religion at Uppsala University are likely to have encountered texts written by Widengren. For example, the student reading lists for the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala indicate that Widengren's publications were used as course materials and textbooks from the 1940s until his retirement in 1973.⁵⁷

56 See also Jan Hjärpe, "Förord till nya upplagan: Tor Andræ och Muhammedboken," in Tor Andræ and Gideon Widengren, *Muhammed. Hans liv och hans tro* (Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, Second edition, 2008), 7–16. It should be noted that the Swedish publishers wrote Gideon and not Geo when they reissued this book, clearly a typo!

57 See *Teologiska fakultetens studiehandbok gällande föreskrifter och studieplaner för fakultetens examina* (Uppsala: Wretmans boktryckeri, 1937). This "handbook" was published almost every year at the University, showing what the students read. Similar information regarding the content of the higher seminars at Uppsala University (including the Faculty of Theology) can be found in the Yearbooks of Uppsala University, the *Uppsala Universitets årsskrift*.

6 International Influences

Because of the great range of his research and the vast number of publications he produced, it is not easy to pinpoint who influenced Widengren. It is more accurate to say that his inspiration came from different sources and research traditions. That said, it is at any rate evident that the scholars who were associated with core group in the IAHR and NVMEN were of great importance to Widengren. Alongside Swedish scholars like Nyberg and Wikander, Raffaele Pettazzoni, Claus Jouco Bleeker (1898–1983), Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) are quoted in his publications. As Casadio has shown, these scholars were in close contact with one another and exchanged numerous letters, participated in the same academic networks and presented papers at the same conferences.⁵⁸ The second edition of Widengren's phenomenological work, *Religionens värld* (translated into German as *Religionsphänomenologie*⁵⁹), published in Swedish in 1953, is, for instance, dedicated to Dumézil.⁶⁰ In 1955 Dumézil was also rewarded with a honorary doctorate by the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University.⁶¹

In *Religionens värld*, which is arguably Widengren's main contribution to the phenomenological study of religion, he does not make any references to the continental philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) or the historian of religions Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950). Although the last two are mentioned, they are not frequent references for Widengren. In *Religionens värld* and other areas of publication, Widengren was more influenced by the circle around NVMEN and IAHR already mentioned and by scholars who were associated with the so-called British Myth and Ritual school. This is a label used for a loosely knit group of scholars who were centred around the ideas of scholars like Samuel Henry Hooke (1874–1968), Arthur Maurice Hocart (1883–1939) and Edwin Oliver James (1888–1972). Basically, the Myth and Ritual school proposed that progress in the study of religions was dependent on cross-cultural comparisons that included sources from Antiquity and the Near East. It was generally believed that festivals, rituals and the role and function of the king in the Near East were topics of special

58 Casadio, "NVMEN".

59 Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1969). This book has also been translated into Spanish (*Fenomenología de la religión*, 1976) and Italian (*Fenomenologia della Religione*, 1984).

60 The importance of Dumézil for Widengren is also stressed by C.J. Bleeker, "Wie steht es um die Religionsphänomenologie?," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* xxvii, No. 5/5 (1971), 306.

61 Arne Sträng, "Teologie doktorspromotioner vid Uppsala universitet 1936–1977," *Kyrko-historisk årskrift*, 1967, 39.

importance for the History of Religions. Most scholars who were associated with the theoretical approaches advocated by the Myth and Ritual school also had negative views of so-called evolutionist explanations, that is, that all cultures have to pass through the same developmental stages and evolve in similar ways.⁶² As demonstrated in Gothóni and Larsson's chapter in this volume, anti-evolutionism was a favourite topic of Widengren's.⁶³ Besides a lengthy article in *Ethnos*, Widengren wrote a short book on this topic in 1946.⁶⁴

According to most followers of the ideas proposed by the Myth and Ritual school, there is a connection between action (i.e. the ritual) and text (i.e. the myth). Widengren summarized this idea as follows:

The myth is the natural complement of the rite. While rite is the sacred act, myth is the sacred word, which accompanies the action and explains it. Conversely, the rite, as an action or gesture, illustrates the sacred word or sacred text.⁶⁵

A basic hypothesis was that similar patterns could be used as a basis for comparison and in interpreting older and more "difficult to interpret myths" in other cultures and time periods. In this way, the rite became a kind of universal key to the myth. Among British scholars, Uppsala was often presented as the Scandinavian hub of the Myth and Ritual school. The influence of this theoretical outlook is especially visible in the exegetical work of Ivan Engnell (1906–1964) and his thesis *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (1943).⁶⁶ Internationally it is often Engnell who is presented as the upholder

62 A general presentation of the Myth and Ritual School can be found in Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York/London: Routledge, 1991) and Walter Harrelson, "Myth and Ritual School," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 9., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6380–6383.

63 See Geo Widengren, "Evolutionism and the Problem of the Origin of Religion," *Ethnos*, Vol. 10, Nos. 2–3 (1945): 57–96.

64 Widengren, "Evolutionism," 57–96, and Geo Widengren, *Religionens ursprung* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1946). This book was partly translated into German; see Geo Widengren, "Evolutionistische Theorien auf dem Gebiet der vergleichenden Religionswissenschaft." In *Selbstverständnis und Wesen der Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Günter Lanczkowski (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 87–113.

65 Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld. Religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelsens bokförlag), 134, my translation.

66 On Engnell, see Sten Hidal, *Ivan Engnell. En bibelforskarens bana* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademiens handlingar, 2019).

of the Myth and Ritual School in Sweden,⁶⁷ but it is evident that he was influenced by Widengren on this topic. In the preface to his doctoral thesis, Engnell writes:

To my teacher in Comparative Religion and Assyriology, Professor Geo Widengren, I owe a debt of gratitude that it would be difficult to exaggerate. He generously relinquished his own claims to a subject that is his particular specialty, and that he would have been better fitted than anyone else to treat in a work of this kind himself. He has continually lent me his support, both in the form of advice and direct help; he has discussed problems with me, given references from the literature etc. And in the latter stages of the work he has offered his time to go through the texts anew and to read the proofs. For all this and for the personal friendship he has accorded to me I tender my deepest gratitude.⁶⁸

Leaving aside the fact that Engnell is often seen internationally as the first advocate of the Myth and Ritual school in Sweden, the connection between the worldly king and the heavenly king is without question one of Widengren's most cherished ideas. He returned to this topic in a large number of publications,⁶⁹ not least in the five volumes included in the series "King and Saviour" that were published in the *Uppsala Universitets årsskrift* (on this series, see Timus's chapter in this volume).

While it is fairly easy to document Widengren's engagement with IAHR and establish that he was a guest researcher at several universities outside Sweden, as well as being a member of many prestigious international scientific organisations, it is much harder to outline his impact on the research community. Quite surprisingly, especially considering his large scientific production, the many scientific organisations he was member of and his participation in IAHR and *NVMEN*, his works were rarely reviewed in leading scientific journals. Whether

67 See, for instance, Robert A. Segal, *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 136.

68 Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell's Boktryckeri A.-B, 1943), IX.

69 See, for instance, Widengren, Geo, *Psalm no och det sakrala kungadömet i Israel* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitetets årsskrift, 7, 1, 1941); Geo Widengren, "Det sakrala kungadömet bland öst- och västsemiter," *Religion och Bibel* (1943): 49–75; Geo Widengren, "Konungens vistelse i dödsriket. En studie till Psalm 88," *Svensk exegetisk årsbok, Årgång x* (1945): 66–81; Geo Widengren, "Den himmelska intronisationen och dopet," *Religion och Bibel*, v (1946): 28–60; Geo Widengren, "Hieros gamos och underjordsvistelsen. Studier till det sakrala kungadömet i Israel," *Religion och Bibel* (1948): 17–46; Geo Widengren, "King and Covenant," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1957): 1–31.

this indicates that Widengren's publications had a low impact is difficult to determine. It should be stressed that it is hard to conduct a bibliometric analysis since many journals that might include reviews of Widengren's works have not yet been digitalized, but a search using common search engines like Google or more specialised databases like ATLA Religion Database, which according to EBSCO contains over 2.9 million index records and 980,000 review records,⁷⁰ produced few reviews of Widengren's books. The search result from ATLA indicates that it was primarily his publications on Iranian religions, Mani and Manichaem, and Mandeism, that attracted attention, and not his magnum opus, *Religionens värld*, or the five volumes included in the King and Saviour series. However, to come to a more definitive conclusion on his impact on the international research community would require the cooperation of several researchers and librarians in Europe, United States and even the Middle East (not least in Iran, since he published extensively on Iranian religions, cultures and languages).

7 National Impact

As compared to the international research scene, it is much easier to find reviews and opinions about Widengren's research and publications in Swedish and Nordic publications (see, for instance, Gothóni and Larsson's chapter in this volume). His publications in Swedish were generally highlighted by journalists and reviewers in daily papers, as well as in intellectual journals in the Nordic countries.⁷¹ Even though many reviews were positive, it is also important to stress that Widengren had many enemies and personal conflicts with a number of Swedish and Nordic scholars. For instance, as Peter Schalk shows in his short history of the Swedish Association for the Study of Religions, the tensions between the universities of Uppsala and Lund were long a divisive factor in the Study of Religions in Sweden. In Lund, it was common for students to be given assignments providing them with arguments for refuting Widengren's hypothesis about high gods and upholding the theory of animism

⁷⁰ General information about ATLA Religion Database is taken from <https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/atla-religion-database>, accessed 8 April, 2021.

⁷¹ See, for instance, Aldre Alfred, "Review of Geo Widengren: Religionens värld," *Kyrko-historisk årsskrift* (1945): 376–380; Ruben Josefson, "Aktuell religionsforskning," *Svensk Kyrkotidning*, Nr. 42, October 18 (1945), 690; Helge Ljungberg, "Review of Geo Widengren: Religionens värld," *Vår Lösen*, Årg. 36, Nr. 6–7 (1945): 244–248 and Sven Rodhe, "Review of Geo Widengren: Religionens värld," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalsskrift*, Häfte 4 (1945): 307–308.

(i.e. the theoretical approach supported by Professor Erland Ehnmark and Associate Professor Olof Pettersson, both at Lund University). This topic was a red rag for Widengren.⁷²

Even though the conflict between Uppsala and Lund runs deep in the history of religious studies, the differences between the two universities should not be exaggerated. With time it is evident that several of the students who had defended their doctoral thesis under the supervision of Widengren became some of the most influential scholars in Sweden from the 1960 and 1970s. For example, after defending his thesis *Ich bin Isis: Studien zum memphitischen Hintergrund der griechischen Isisaretalogien* in 1968, Jan Bergman eventually became Professor of the History of Religions at Uppsala university. Three years after Bergman's doctoral defence, Anders Hultgård defended his thesis, *Croyances messianiques des Test: XII Patr. Critique textuelle et commentaire des passages messianiques* in 1971. Following in the footsteps of Bergman, Hultgård also became Professor in the History of Religions at Uppsala University. In 1972, Jan Hjärpe defended his thesis, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes sur les sabéens harraniens*, under Widengren's supervision. Following a short stint at the Åbo akademi in Finland, Hjärpe became the first holder of a chair in Islamology in Sweden at Lund University. One year after Hjärpe's defence, Gudmar Aneer defended his thesis, *Akbar the Great Mogul and his religious thoughts*, in 1973. After some time in the service of the Church of Sweden, Aneer took up a position as lecturer at the University of Gothenburg.

Without going into any details of the individual careers of Bergman, Hultgård, Hjärpe or Aneer, it is clear that Widengren's legacy for the history of religions and religious studies in Sweden is a significant one. He supervised the great majority of scholars in the field of History of Religions who defended their theses in Sweden from the Second World War up until his retirement in 1973. It should therefore not come as a great surprise that it was his students who occupied most of the central positions at all Swedish universities from the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars like Bergman, Hultgård, Hjärpe and Aneer have also themselves supervised large numbers of doctoral candidates, so that to some extent many if not most contemporary historians of religions in Sweden share Widengren's legacy. Two examples included in this volume are Daniel Andersson and myself, who were both supervised by Gudmar Aneer at the University of Gothenburg.⁷³ Without downgrading this legacy, it is a central

72 For more information, see <https://svenskreligionshistoria.wordpress.com/om/>, accessed 7 April, 2021.

73 While Daniel Andersson's thesis, *The virgin and the dead: The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Day of the Dead in the construction of Mexican identities* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet,

task for all scholars of religions to investigate this heritage and take a critical stance towards the past in order to be able to raise relevant questions for the future. To know the past is therefore the key to unlocking the future.

8 An Outline of the Volume

Most of the chapters included in this volume were first presented at a conference on the life of Professor Geo Widengren that Professor Håkan Möller of the University of Gothenburg and I organized with the help of a generous grant from the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm on April 11–12, 2019. The aim of the conference was to honour Widengren's academic achievements and stress their importance, as well as to critically discuss his work in light of the latest academic findings and research. To put it bluntly, is Widengren's research still relevant and worth paying attention to? And can we learn anything by reflecting on how the study of religions as a discipline has evolved over the years?

The discussions at the conference in Stockholm were honest and sometime heated. Among the participants were both former students of Widengren – for example, Professor Jan Hjärpe and Professor Anders Hultgård, both included in the present volume, and Professor Gudmar Aneer – and Swedish, Nordic and international researchers. Some had cooperated with him or met him occasionally, while others had only read his publications and heard stories and rumours about his personality and character. Although I am not that young anymore, it was with great excitement that I listened to the stories about the “good old times” in Uppsala. Anecdotes were shared and interlaced with critical comments and sometimes even sighs about the “stupidity” of former times, not the least from the female participants, who provided ample evidence of how hard it was to be a woman and a researcher in the 1960s and later. I think that most if not all the participants were glad that times have changed. But it was also possible to detect a sadness among some of them and regrets for some of the positive aspects of the “old times” that have been lost forever. For instance, it is no longer possible for one individual to grasp the whole field, that is, all the research carried out on one topic, or even one “tradition”. The extraordinary linguistic competence that Widengren possessed is no longer

2001), deals with the interaction between the colonial and precolonial Mexico, my thesis, *Ibn García's Shu'ūbiyya letter: Ethnic and theological tensions in medieval al-Andalus* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), dealt with internal conflicts and tensions between Arab and non-Arab Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula in the 11th century.

possible for most scholars in the field of religious studies, if any at all. The field has also moved on, and today there is a greater emphasis on self-critical reflexivity, theoretical awareness and a sound methodology. These “modern” requirements had certainly been a great challenge to Widengren and many of his contemporaries. As Hjärpe sharply points out in his chapter in this volume, questions about theory and method were usually, if not always, absent in Widengren’s time.

After the conference in Stockholm, the papers were rewritten and edited to suit the present volume. Since the conference did not cover all aspects of Widengren’s academic career, some additional contributors were invited. Nonetheless it would not be possible to cover all aspects of Widengren’s career or all his academic interests in one volume. These topics merit further studies, and hopefully this volume can motivate other scholars to highlight specific aspects of Widengren’s publications, as well as initiating further disciplinary studies that can cast light on how the academic subject has evolved, changed and developed over time.

The present volume is divided into six interlaced sections dealing with central aspects and questions that Widengren addressed in his research. To make a sharp separation between the sections is often difficult, since Widengren rarely made any distinctions between topics like phenomenology, sacred kingship and anti-evolutionism in his own research. Readers should therefore be aware that the same topic may be addressed in several chapters of the present volume.

Leaving aside the diversity of Widengren’s research, the first part of the volume opens with an introduction to his life and work. Besides the biographical chapter that you now are reading, Göran Eidevall’s chapter contains an analysis of Widengren’s doctoral thesis, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents: A Comparative Study*. This part closes with a chapter by Tim Jensen and Satoko Fujiwara that provide an overview of Widengren’s involvement in the International Association for the History of Religions.

In the second part we turn our gaze to one of Widengren’s most cherished topics, the study of Iranian cultures, languages and religions. This part of the volume contains three chapters written by Anders Hultgård, Albert de Jong and Mihaela Timuş, which are united in their attempts to place Widengren’s research in its proper academic context and to raise critical questions about the quality and validity of his research on this specific topic. To put it more bluntly, how do Widengren’s ideas about the role and function of Iran in the history of religions fare today?

The third part of the volume consists of two chapters by Giovanni Casadio and Clemens Cavallin that deal with Widengren's phenomenological research. Besides presenting Widengren's views on phenomenology, the chapter by Casadio includes a comparison with Italy, and more specifically with the work of Raffaele Pettazzoni, a scholar who had a great impact on Widengren's research and academic work. In sharp contrast with the other chapters in this volume, Cavallin re-evaluates Widengren's work and makes a call for a study of religions that pays attention to both phenomenology and normative assessments.⁷⁴

These chapters are followed by a fourth part containing four chapters dealing with methodological questions and some of the criticism Widengren received from contemporary scholars of religion as well as his engagement in public discussions. The first chapter in this part is written by Rene Gothóni and Göran Larsson, who focus on the Finnish scholar Rafael Karsten (1879–1956), one of Widengren's most outspoken critics. The chapter by Christer Hedin places the focus on how Widengren made a contribution to public discussions of religion in Sweden during his time. By analysing how Widengren revised one of his former supervisor Tor Andræ's more popular books in Swedish on Muhammad, Jan Hjärpe casts light on how Widengren dealt with the problem of personal belief in the study of religions. The last chapter in this section is written by Daniel Andersson who deals critically with Widengren's research on high gods, sacred kings and anti-evolutionism and his ambition to make comparisons of time and place.

The fifth part contains two chapters by Einar Thomassen and Chiara O. Tommasi dealing with Widengren's research on Manichaeism and Gnosticism. Resembling the part on Iranian studies, Thomassen and Tommasi place Widengren's research in its proper academic context and critically evaluate his studies of Manichaeism and Gnosticism.

The sixth part contains a postscript by Göran Larsson that summarises and analyses the legacy of Geo Widengren.

74 Some of the suggestions proposed by Cavallin can actually be compared to Bleeker's response to the so-called Werblowsky declaration of "the basic minimum presuppositions" that was presented at the 1960 IAHR conference in Marburg. On this declaration and Bleeker's response, see Armin W. Geertz and Russel T. McCutcheon, "The Role of Method and Theory in the IAHR," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12 (2000), 14–16.

After the six parts, the volume contains an appendix that includes forty-two transcribed original letters that cast light on the correspondence between Widengren, Pettazzoni and Bianchi.⁷⁵

The chapters included in this volume have benefited immensely from the constructive criticism that the two anonymous reviewers provided. Without their critical comments this manuscript would have looked very different. An early draft version of this opening chapter has also benefitted from the critical remarks given by associate professor Simon Sorgenfrei at Södertörn University. I also would like to take the opportunity to express my gratitude for the support that the volume has received from the editors of the *NVMEN* supplement series.

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75 The letters included in this volume have all been provided by Professor Giovanni Casadio. He received the first section of them (including those between Pettazzoni and Widengren) from Prof. Mario Gandini (1924–2021). The original letters are preserved in the library of San Giovanni in Persiceto, Fondo Raffaele Pettazzoni (see the index of all the 20,350 letters at: <http://www.raffaelepettazzoni.it/CARTEGGIO.htm>), created by the scholar and librarian of international reputation Mario Gandini. Photocopies of these letters were given to Casadio in 2009 and transcribed by him. The letters included in the second section (Widengren-Bianchi) are in the private possession of Casadio and were given to him by the widow of Ugo Bianchi, Adriana Giorgi Bianchi (deceased five years ago).

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Hebrew Laments in the Light of Mesopotamian Material

Göran Eidevall

1 Introduction

Strictly speaking, Geo Widengren was not a biblical scholar. He never held an academic position within an exegetical discipline. Nevertheless, he made several important contributions to the field of biblical studies in general, and to Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible exegesis in particular.¹ In this chapter, I discuss some key factors that enabled Widengren, being an expert within history of religion, to attain a rather prominent position within the exegetical guild, such as the academic milieu in Uppsala and the discovery of ancient Ugarit. Arguably, though, the most important factor was Widengren's ability to combine these two disciplines in a fruitful way. In all the works discussed below, he consistently applied comparative methodology from the history of religion in order to throw new light on biblical texts. As regards the latter, he tended to prefer laments from the book of Psalms.

In the following, I shall focus on the early stage of Widengren's scholarly career. The time frame is 1936–1945. Within that period of ten years, Widengren authored several studies of immediate relevance for Old Testament exegesis. In his first major work, the doctoral dissertation, he made a systematic comparison between biblical and Mesopotamian prayers belonging to (roughly) the same genre, referred to as “psalms of lamentation”.² The biblical material discussed was almost exclusively drawn from the Psalter. During the following years, Widengren published detailed exegetical interpretations of two poems from this biblical book, namely Psalm 88 and Psalm 110.³ As I intend

1 In recent scholarship, the more neutral designation “the Hebrew Bible” is often preferred over against “the Old Testament”, since the latter is closely connected to a Christian perspective. In this chapter, I use the label “Old Testament,” since it was standard during the period studied.

2 Geo Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents: A Comparative Study* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1936).

3 Geo Widengren, *Psalm 110 och det sakrala kungadömet i Israel* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 7/1; Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1941); idem, “Konungens vistelse i dödsriket. En studie till Psalm 88,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 10 (1945): 66–81.

to demonstrate, Widengren's approach to the biblical texts underwent significant changes during the period studied. Whereas his dissertation, from 1936, is an example of comparative analysis that is relatively free from preconceived notions as to the expected results, his article from 1945, where he discusses Psalm 88, bears the imprint of the emerging "Uppsala school," and its preoccupation with certain (allegedly) cross-cultural cultic and mythological patterns.⁴

2 Widengren's Academic Milieu: History of Religion and Biblical Exegesis in Uppsala

In the 1930s, when Geo Widengren began his academic career at the Theological Faculty in Uppsala, several scholars from different disciplines shared a strong interest in the Old Testament. One of his teachers was the Semitic philologist H.S. Nyberg, who published an influential analysis of the book of Hosea during this period.⁵ The suggestion that Widengren should devote his dissertation to a comparative study of texts from the Psalter was made by Tor Andræ, who was professor in history of religion. Interestingly, the professor in Old Testament exegesis, Sven Linder, seems to have played a minor role in this context.⁶

Apparently, the boundaries between the disciplines, history of religion and biblical studies, were blurred in Uppsala during several decades. This is illustrated by two dissertations that are discussed below: Widengren's thesis in history of religion, which contains analyses of a vast number of biblical passages, and Ivan Engnell's thesis in Old Testament exegesis, which mainly treats non-biblical material. Widengren was one of Engnell's teachers. I will discuss some aspects of the interaction between these two Uppsala profiles

4 On the profile of the so-called Uppsala school within biblical studies, see Antti Laato, "Biblical Scholarship in Northern Europe," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 111/2, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 336–70, esp. 350–56. Cf. also Laato's depiction of the background, in terms of impulses from Scandinavian and British scholarship, on pp. 341–50. See further Douglas Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel* (3rd ed., Studies in Biblical Literature 16; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 169–286, who offers a valuable presentation of this group or "circle" of Uppsala scholars, as well as a critical discussion of their contributions to biblical exegesis.

5 H.S. Nyberg, *Studien zum Hoseabuche* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 6; Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1935).

6 Further reflections on the Theological Faculty in Uppsala as an academic milieu during this period are provided by Sten Hidal, *Ivan Engnell: En bibelforskarens bana* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2019), 18–20.

below.⁷ A third scholar, Helmer Ringgren, who was taught by both Engnell and Widengren, was professor in history of religion (in Åbo, Finland) when he was offered the chair in Old Testament exegesis in Uppsala (in 1964).⁸ These three – Engnell, Ringgren, and Widengren – were well-known representatives of the so-called Uppsala school during the 40s and 50s.⁹

3 Widengren's Dissertation: Hebrew Laments in Mesopotamian Light

Geo Widengren's doctoral dissertation carries the title *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents*. In the Introduction, he explains why he chose this particular topic for his dissertation.¹⁰ He mentions Charles Cumming's monograph, *The Assyrian and Hebrew hymns of praise*, which appeared in 1934, as a major source of inspiration. Notably, this pioneering work, with its focus on hymns, did not pay attention to the genre of laments. Widengren was encouraged by his supervisor, Tor Andræ, to fill the lacuna left by Cumming, by providing the first "systematic comparison" of "Accadian" (that is, Babylonian and Assyrian) and "Hebrew" (that is, biblical) lamentation psalms.¹¹

It turns out that this ambitious comparative project is based on two important presuppositions. The first one is related to the direction of influence between the literary corpora studied. With several other scholars (such as Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel), Widengren assumes "a more or less far-reaching influence on Israelite literature by the Accadian."¹² Clearly, Widengren has no apologetic agenda, determined by Christian theology. In his dissertation, he does not set out to defend the originality or supremacy of the

7 For an insightful survey of Engnell's academic career and production, see Hidal, *Ivan Engnell*, 24–127. See also Laato, "Biblical Scholarship," 350–53.

8 On Ringgren as a biblical scholar, see Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 238–41, and Laato, "Biblical Scholarship," 355.

9 See Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 197–241. Ivan Engnell is often described as the (self-appointed) leader of this group of scholars. Laato, "Biblical Scholarship," 350, cites an anecdotal utterance, ascribed to Engnell, which captures this succinctly (albeit somewhat crudely): "According to recent scholarship, that is according to the Uppsala school, that is according to me." A similar picture is painted in a retrospective article by Helmer Ringgren, "Vad blev det av Uppsalaskolan?," in *Teologiska fakultetens vid Åbo 60-årsjubileum den 1 oktober 1984*, ed. E. Cleve and H. Karjalainen (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1985), 11–20, see esp. 14.

10 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 1–19.

11 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 1.

12 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 2.

biblical texts over against their extra-biblical counterparts. On the contrary, he apparently takes for granted that the biblical authors had borrowed both literary motifs and religious ideas from the Babylonian and Assyrian (and, by extension, the Sumerian) civilizations. However, because of the geographical distance, Widengren does not postulate a direct literary dependence between these cultures. According to his reconstruction, Syria served as a “connecting link” between Mesopotamia and Palestine.¹³ When the Israelites arrived in the region, “Palestine and Syria were in many ways affected by the Babylonian civilization, of which these cultures were actually merely offshoots.”¹⁴ Therefore, the Israelite literature inherited many forms and expressions, which had their origins in the Accadian literature.

The second presupposition concerns the connection between the selected textual material and cultic practice. It was probably uncontroversial to maintain that Accadian lamentation psalms “of the *šu-illa*, *eršemma*, and *eršahunga* types” were linked to various forms of temple cult.¹⁵ However, as observed by many biblical scholars, the cultic connection is not always obvious in the prayers that have been collected in the anthology known as the book of Psalms. Widengren devoted a lengthy section in the Introduction to this topic, arguing that such a connection could in fact be established.¹⁶ This was important for Widengren, because he was not interested in studying these texts as religious poems, detached from the cult.

True to his academic discipline, the history of religion, Widengren declares that “the following investigation is primarily intended to be a comparative study of religion, not of literature” and that “the direct object of the investigation is the pronouncedly cultic type of Semitic religion.”¹⁷ Notably, his formulations indicate a high degree of similarity; both Babylonian and Israelite cultic practices are seen as expressions of “Semitic religion.” At the same time, Widengren is aware of the diversity within Mesopotamian religion as well as within the Old Testament. He concludes that it is “impossible to speak about the Israelitic religion,” because “Israelitic Palestine was the arena of a terrific battle of religions, from which a compromise – the post-exile Judaism – ultimately emerged the victor.”¹⁸ As a consequence, one may infer, Widengren’s investigation also involves the task to uncover certain ritual practices linked to

13 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 15.

14 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 17.

15 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 16 (quote); see further 20–25.

16 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 25–34.

17 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 17.

18 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 17.

an earlier stage of Israelite religion, a stage that showed more affinities with Babylonian religion.

The main part of the dissertation (chapters I–III) contains systematic comparisons of a large number of Accadian (mostly Babylonian) and Hebrew psalms of lamentation, including penitential prayers. Widengren demonstrates that, despite the difference between polytheism and monotheism, both Babylonian and biblical laments usually address one particular deity. Furthermore, similar divine epithets are used by the supplicants.¹⁹ According to Widengren, this proves that “there is no conclusive difference between the god concepts of the Accadian and Israelitic psalms of lamentation.”²⁰ In the ensuing chapters, he demonstrates far-reaching structural and thematic similarities between these two literary corpora. One may even speak of a common repertoire of recurring genre-related formulations, such as the interrogative exclamation “how long ...”²¹ The shared themes and motifs discussed by Widengren include, among others, “Aloofness of the Protective God,” “All men have sinned,” and “Enemies.”²² Interestingly, the notion that the deity has hidden or turned away his/her face from the petitioner turns out to be of central importance within both collections of laments. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, however, Widengren finds more references to human sinfulness in the Accadian prayers than in the relevant parts of the book of Psalms.²³

Throughout this work, Widengren is eager to maintain and defend a profound equality between Babylonian and Israelite religion. This is especially evident as he discusses so-called “expressions of confidence.”²⁴ Here Widengren polemicalizes against Begrich, who held the opinion that such expressions were lacking in the Accadian psalms of lamentation. Several textual examples are adduced, in order to show (against Begrich) “how strongly the feeling of confidence is manifested in Accadian religion.”²⁵ However, this discussion concerns more than the occurrence of certain motifs in certain texts. According to Begrich, as summarized by Widengren, Babylonian piety (as opposed to the piety expressed in the biblical psalms) was characterized by manipulation and flattery, rather than pious faith: “the intention is to prevail upon the deity, by flattery, to grant the supplicant’s wish ... the homage rendered to the deity is

19 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 37–72.

20 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 72.

21 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 94.

22 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 94–107, 137–251.

23 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 95–100.

24 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 80.

25 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 87.

evidence of a lack of real trust.”²⁶ By contrast, Widengren argues emphatically that “the Babylonian religion, embraced by religious men and women, was a *real* religion.”²⁷

In retrospect, one might perhaps say that Widengren’s search for similarities between Hebrew and Accadian laments shows both the potential and the limitations of such a comparative approach.²⁸ However, his dissertation should first of all be evaluated in relation to its time of origin. Viewed from that perspective, it stands out as a truly pioneering study.

4 Ugarit in Uppsala: Widengren and Engnell

While working on his dissertation, Widengren heard about sensational discoveries that had been made in Syria. At a site called Ras Shamra, a team of archaeologists had unearthed the ancient city of Ugarit, with palaces and temples, as well as a rich library. He mentions these “recent excavations” briefly in the Introduction of his thesis, indicating that they might turn out to be of great importance.²⁹ However, he adds that “as long as the philological interpretation of the new-found texts is still in the preliminary stage, the time does not seem ripe for the inclusion of this material in a comparative study.”³⁰

Already one year later, in 1937, Widengren published a survey of recent archaeological discoveries in Syria and Palestine, with a special emphasis on the excavations at Ras Shamra/ Ugarit.³¹ He was able to refer to recently published editions and translations of cultic and mythological texts from Ugarit (most of them appeared in print in 1936). Widengren predicted (quite correctly) that these texts, with their wealth of information concerning various aspects of ancient Canaanite religion, such as the pantheon and the sacrificial cult, would have an immense impact on the field of Old Testament exegesis.³²

26 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 86.

27 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 96–97 (emphasis as in the orig.).

28 As a counterbalance to the predominantly positive evaluation made here, one might refer to Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 37; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994), 15 (n. 33), who argues that Widengren’s comparative method in some cases prevented him from arriving at a reasonable contextual interpretation of motifs found in the individual laments in the Psalter.

29 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 15.

30 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*, 16.

31 Geo Widengren, “De senaste utgrävningarna i Palestina och Syrien. Några resultat,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 2 (1937): 180–99; see esp. 192–94.

32 Widengren, “De senaste utgrävningarna,” 194.

As far as I can see, Widengren was one of the first Swedish scholars who realized the potential of the literature from Ugarit. He must have considered the possibility of dedicating his next major research project to comparisons between biblical and Ugaritic texts. For some reason, however, he decided against it. Still, there can be no doubt that he continued to follow the development of Ugarit studies with great interest. Most importantly, he encouraged one of his students, Ivan Engnell, to write an exegetical study focusing on royal motifs in these texts.

In the Preface to his dissertation, which was published in 1943, Engnell expresses his gratitude to Widengren, “a debt of gratitude that it would be difficult to exaggerate.” He then continues, rather humbly: “He generously relinquished his own claims to a subject that is his particular specialty, and that he would have been better fitted than any one else to treat in a work of this kind himself.”³³ Evidently, Widengren had the role of a mentor for Engnell (perhaps to a greater extent than the formal supervisor, the Old Testament professor Sven Linder).³⁴ The reader is told that he (Widengren) “has continually lent me his support, both in the form of advice and direct help; he has discussed problems with me, given references from the literature etc.”³⁵ One gets the impression that Widengren exerted a strong influence on Engnell. However, Engnell was an ambitious scholar with ideas of his own. He disagreed with Widengren on some central issues, and in particular on the relation between oral and written tradition.³⁶ Soon he would become one of Widengren’s colleagues at the Theological Faculty in Uppsala. Engnell was appointed professor in Old Testament exegesis already in 1947.³⁷

It is worth noting that Widengren did not give up on Ugarit studies altogether. A couple of years before the appearance of Engnell’s seminal monograph, he published a minor yet clearly pioneering study of Psalm 110.³⁸ Two central points of departure are described at the beginning of the article. First, Widengren supports the theory that the king had an important sacral function in various cultures in the ancient Near East. Second, he agrees with the

33 Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1943), xi.

34 Thus also Hidal, *Ivan Engnell*, 12, who supplies the information that Engnell’s interest in the texts from Ugarit and the topic of sacral kingship was aroused by a series of lectures that Widengren held in the years 1937–39.

35 Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship*, xi. In this context, Engnell even speaks of a “personal friendship” between Geo Widengren and himself.

36 This is discussed in detail in Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 228–37.

37 See further Hidal, *Ivan Engnell*, 13–15.

38 Widengren, *Psalm 110 och det sakrala*.

majority of biblical scholars that Psalm 110 had a practical liturgical function in the royal coronation ritual in Jerusalem.³⁹ This study resembles Widengren's dissertation, in more than one respect. In this case, too, a topic of high exegetical relevance is investigated from the perspective of the history of religion, with the help of a comparative method.⁴⁰ In order to illuminate a number of obscure passages in the psalm, Widengren draws extensively on extra-biblical sources: Sumerian and Accadian texts, as well as a number of recently published texts from Ugarit.

According to a plausible emendation of the Hebrew text, Ps 110:3 contains a solemn declaration, featuring a birth formula, where the deity (speaking through a prophet?) addresses the king: "I have begotten you, like dew from the womb of the dawn" (cf. similarly Ps 2:7).⁴¹ Widengren is able to throw new light on this formulation, as well as other biblical allusions to a personified dawn (Hebrew *šahar*), by referring to texts from Ugarit that mention a divine couple, Šahar and Šalem. This is a short summary of the mythological background, as described by Widengren: The sacred king was seen as the offspring of a divine marriage (a *hieros gamos*), which was celebrated and enacted in the official cult. In ancient Canaanite and Israelite religion, the female partner of the male high god was thought to be morning goddess, Šahar. This explains, among other things (according to Widengren), why the epithet "son of Dawn" is applied to a Babylonian king in Isa 14:12.⁴² Later in Psalm 110, the king is called "a priest, in the order of Melchizedek" (v. 4). The concluding part of the chapter is therefore devoted to a discussion of the king's (alleged) priestly functions in Israel as well as in neighboring cultures.⁴³

Two years later, Widengren wrote a lengthy article in Swedish, with the title (in English translation) "The sacral kingship among Western and Eastern Semites."⁴⁴ The subtitle, "Some remarks occasioned by a recently published work," indicates that this is, to some extent, a review article. The "recently published work" in question is Ivan Engnell's dissertation, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (see above).⁴⁵ To begin with, Widengren

39 Widengren, *Psalm 110 och det sakrala*, 3.

40 Widengren, *Psalm 110 och det sakrala*, 5–6.

41 Widengren, *Psalm 110 och det sakrala*, 9. In his translation Widengren uses the Swedish phrases "fött dig" (in English, approximately: "begotten you") and "morgonrodnadens sköte" (corresponding to "the womb of the dawn").

42 Widengren, *Psalm 110 och det sakrala*, 9–10.

43 Widengren, *Psalm 110 och det sakrala*, 13–26.

44 Geo Widengren, "Det sakrala kungadömet bland öst- och västsemiter: Några synpunkter med anledning av ett nyttkommet arbete," *Religion och Bibel* 2 (1943): 49–75.

45 Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship*.

praises Engnell's work. He characterizes it as a groundbreaking study that fills a gap within Old Testament research.⁴⁶ However, in the remainder (which is the main part) of the article, he discusses numerous texts and motifs associated with sacral or divine kingship which had not been included in Engnell's study.⁴⁷ Drawing on a vast collection of material, including Sumerian as well as Mandaean sources, Widengren demonstrates his excellent competence in this type of comparative studies, as well as his impressively broad knowledge of texts from a vast geographical area, written in various languages, during more than two thousand years. At the same time, he seems to indicate that his own future research will not focus primarily on biblical texts and problems. Towards the end of the article, he declares that he is eager to follow Engnell's continued work on such issues.⁴⁸

5 The King's Descent to the Netherworld and the Rise of the Uppsala School

Widengren's study of Psalm 88, which appeared in 1945, recalls the article on Psalm 110 (see above) in several respects. The methodological approach is informed by contemporary comparative history of religion. In practice, only one section of Psalm 88 (vv. 2–9 [vv. 1–8 in English translations]) is discussed. Exegetical matters pertaining to this passage, such as translation and textual criticism are treated rather briefly.⁴⁹ In the main part of the article, however, the Hebrew formulations used in Ps 88: 2–9 tend to recede to the background. No attempt at a detailed analysis is made. Widengren does not address the place and function of this section within Psalm 88 as a whole, viewed as a literary composition. One almost gets the impression that the selected biblical text serves merely as a pretext for discussing certain mythological and ritual patterns.

More specifically, Widengren employs Psalm 88 as a point of departure for discussing a number of motifs associated with so-called "Tammuz liturgies" from different cultures. In such liturgies, the sacral king presumably acted as a "dying and rising god" of the Tammuz/Dumuzi type.⁵⁰ Three motifs allegedly attested in Psalm 88, which (in Widengren's interpretation) can

46 Widengren, "Det sakrala kungadömet," 49–52.

47 Widengren, "Det sakrala kungadömet," 53–74.

48 Widengren, "Det sakrala kungadömet," 75.

49 Widengren, "Konungens vistelse i dödsriket," 69–70.

50 Widengren, "Konungens vistelse i dödsriket," 69, 71. For instance, Widengren evidently places the Ugaritic god Ba'al within the Tammuz category.

be linked to “the Tammuz ideology,” are discussed with reference to Ugaritic and Mesopotamian texts: the deity’s (or, the king’s) descent into the netherworld, his imprisonment, and his suffering in the netherworld.⁵¹ According to Widengren, the passage Ps 88:2–9 (Eng. 1–8) constitutes a cultic representation of the mythological account of Tammuz’s descent into the netherworld, and his sojourn (or captivity) in the realm of death.⁵² Yet one motif of paramount importance in this context, namely the deity’s (and/or the king’s) return from the netherworld, that is, his resurrection, is conspicuously missing from Psalm 88.⁵³ As a consequence, Widengren’s treatment of this motif, the return or resurrection of the deity/king, is completely void of references to this biblical poem.⁵⁴ This is remarkable, in the light of his ambition, stated in the subtitle of the article, to present a study of Psalm 88.

When compared to both contemporary and more recent exegetical studies of this text, Widengren’s treatment of Psalm 88 stands out as somewhat deviant. Since this biblical prayer does not contain any detectable reference or allusion to a royal figure or to the temple cult, Widengren’s analysis would seem to rest on two questionable presuppositions: (1) that the supplicant can be identified as the reigning king in Jerusalem, and (2) that the words spoken by the supplicant/king are part of a ritual enactment of a myth at a major religious festival. According to most modern exegetical commentaries on the Psalter, Psalm 88 should rather be classified as an individual lament, without any royal or liturgical connotations.⁵⁵ Due to its dismal perspective on human existence displayed, this lament is often compared to the book of Job. Because of the absence of any expression of confidence or hope, it can even be regarded as darker than Job’s complaints. In the words of Arnold Anderson, “the writer’s painful experiences are reminiscent of Job’s anguish, but the Psalm lacks the occasional glimpses beyond the present trials and tribulations.”⁵⁶

51 Widengren, “Konungens vistelse i dödsriket,” 71–77.

52 Widengren, “Konungens vistelse i dödsriket,” 79.

53 In fact, the possibility of rising from the dead is emphatically denied somewhat later in Psalm 88: “Do you perform miracles for the dead? Will the shades rise up and praise you?” (v. 11 [Eng. 10]; my own translation from the Hebrew). Read within their context, these rhetorical questions express profound desperation. See, e.g., Arnold Anderson, *The Book of Psalms, Volume 2 (73–150)* (The New Century Bible; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 628–29, and Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 194.

54 Widengren, “Konungens vistelse i dödsriket,” 77–79.

55 Thus, e.g., Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 622–24; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 192; Hans-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 393.

56 Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 623.

Whereas Widengren's discussions in the dissertation are based on established exegetical views regarding the genre and function of the biblical psalms studied, his study of Psalm 88 appears to use a pre-conceived pattern as an interpretative lens. Moreover, this pattern is sometimes very hard to reconcile with the actual formulations in Ps 88:2–9 and, above all, with the literary context of this passage. How can this deviation from the procedures of mainstream biblical exegesis be explained? I suggest that the key lies in Widengren's gradually increasing adherence to the ideas of Samuel Hooke and other scholars associated with the so-called "myth and ritual" movement.⁵⁷ The opening paragraphs of the article on Psalm 88 can be read as a programmatic declaration from the small group of scholars that would become known as "the Uppsala school" (which was heavily influenced by the British "myth and ritual" school).⁵⁸ Here Widengren encourages all biblical scholars in Scandinavia to join this new movement, and to participate in the search for traces of a (largely disintegrated) mythic and cultic pattern, revolving around sacral kingship, which once upon a time was common to all religions in the ancient Near East:

The modern Anglo-Saxon research within the areas of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East (represented by such names as Blackman, Gadd, Hocart, Hooke, and Osterley), whose results as yet seem to be little known in our country, and even less in Norway and Denmark ... speaks of a pattern, the myth and ritual pattern, which formed the basis of the sacral kingship in the ancient Near East. This old mythic-ritual pattern has in many places fallen apart; a process for which the Anglo-Saxon research has coined the phrase disintegration of the pattern. This is certainly the case in the Old Testament literature ... attempts to reconstruct the disintegrated mythic-ritual foundation are demanding and must be exercised with caution. However, regarding research on the Old Testament, the texts from Ras Shamra have provided invaluable assistance, due to their affinity to the OT, in terms of language, phraseology, and ideas.⁵⁹

57 See, above all, Samuel H. Hooke (ed.), *Myth and Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

58 On the "myth and ritual" school as a precursor and as a source of inspiration for the Uppsala school, see further Laato, "Biblical Scholarship," 34–43, and Ringgren, "Vad blev det," 12–13.

59 Widengren, "Konungens vistelse i dödsriket," 66–67 (in my own translation from Swedish; emphasis as in the orig.).

From the perspective of modern biblical exegesis, Widengren's analysis of Psalm 88 can be characterized as idiosyncratic. However, from another perspective, it can be described in terms of a consistent application of the program of the emerging Uppsala school. A discussion of the development (and disintegration) of this school during the decades that followed lies, however, outside the scope of this chapter.⁶⁰

6 Conclusions

Geo Widengren was, strictly speaking, not a biblical scholar. Nonetheless, he deserves a place in the history of biblical studies.⁶¹ As shown above, Widengren played an important role during the formative stages of the so-called Uppsala school. He was the first scholar in Sweden who called attention to the potential significance of the texts from ancient Ugarit. Moreover, Widengren acted as an inspirational teacher and mentor for Ivan Engnell, who later became the front figure of the Uppsala school.

Several of Widengren's studies of biblical texts and motifs have been well received within the field of exegesis. His dissertation from 1936 (discussed above), can be described as a pioneering work.⁶² Further, such a comparative investigation requires an unusually broad competence. It is therefore not surprising that it has become, and still is, a standard work of reference in exegetical literature dealing with the Psalter in relation to its ancient Near Eastern cultural context.⁶³ Widengren's studies of Psalm 88 and Psalm 110 (discussed above) were written in Swedish.⁶⁴ Hence, one would hardly expect any impact outside of Scandinavia. To my surprise, however, I have found several references

60 See Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 197–253, and Laato, “Biblical Scholarship,” 350–56.

61 Widengren is mentioned rather briefly by Laato, “Biblical Scholarship,” 349, 353–54. By contrast, Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 228–37, devotes more space to Widengren than to several other Scandinavian scholars.

62 Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms*.

63 See John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Culutral Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 147, 153, and Alec Basson, *Divine Metaphors in Selected Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 11/15; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 14, 182. Cf. also Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 116–18 and 131 (n. 1–2).

64 Widengren, *Psalm no och det sakrala*, and idem, “Konungens vistelse i dödsriket.”

to Widengren's study of Psalm 110 in modern international commentaries on the book of Psalms.⁶⁵

Geo Widengren continued to publish works of exegetical relevance after the period covered by this article (1936–1945). Some of these addressed an international readership. In a series of lectures held at the University of Münster in 1952, he was given the opportunity to develop his ideas concerning sacral kingship in the Old Testament and in early Judaism.⁶⁶ Finally, it is worth noting that Samuel Hooke invited Widengren (but not Engnell!) to write a substantial chapter (“Early Hebrew Myths and Their Interpretation”) in the volume *Myth, Ritual and Kingship*.⁶⁷ This anthology summed up the results reached by scholars belonging to the “myth and ritual” movement during the 25 years that had elapsed since the publication of the anthology *Myth and Ritual* in 1933.⁶⁸

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66 Geo Widengren, *Sakrales Königtum im Alten Testament und im Judentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1955). The lecture series was called “Franz Delitzsch-Vorlesungen.”

67 Geo Widengren, “Early Hebrew Myths and Their Interpretation,” in *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, ed. Samuel H. Hooke (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), 149–203. For some reason, Widengren is here presented as “Professor of Oriental Languages” in Uppsala.

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Professor Geo Widengren, IAHR Vice-President 1950–1960, IAHR President 1960–1970, IAHR Honorary Life Member 1996

Tim Jensen and Satoko Fujiwara

1 Introduction

Honouring the memory of late Professor Geo Widengren (1907–1996) necessarily entails remembering how he influenced and helped promote the international study of the history of religion(s). He did this not only by way of his vast *oeuvre*, but also through his active participation in and contribution to “learned societies”, inside Sweden and internationally. Despite the importance of this kind of contribution to the development of sciences, including the human sciences and the study/science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*), such work is all too often neglected. The following chapter is a modest effort to make sure that future generations of scholars do not forget this aspect of the career, work and life of Geo Widengren.

The focus of this chapter is therefore on Widengren’s key role in the founding and first twenty years of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) and its flagship journal, *NVMEN*, published by Brill. The focus is *not* on the business and discussions of the IAHR as such, but on aspects of Prof. Widengren’s participation in and contributions to the IAHR before and during his decades as IAHR Vice-President (1950–60) and President (1960–70).

In this chapter, we have not aspired to cover everything relevant. Neither do we go into any detail as regards Widengren’s important scientific contributions to the field, which are numerous and include contributions to IAHR publications such as articles submitted to *NVMEN* and to the IAHR book series (*Supplements to NVMEN*). We take it that his scholarly *oeuvre* will be dealt with elsewhere in this edited volume.

The material used for this chapter is also limited to what can be gathered from reports and minutes from IAHR business meetings, whether published in *NVMEN* (in or outside the specific “Bulletin”) or in Proceedings from relevant IAHR world congresses and other conferences. We have also included

parts of Widengren's correspondence with Raffaele Pettazzoni,¹ the first IAHR President (1950–1959) and the first *NVMEN* managing editor (1954–1959); primarily letters from 1948 to 1954/55, the time up to the publication in 1954 of the first volume of *NVMEN* and the 1955 IAHR World Congress hosted by Prof. Pettazzoni in Rome.²

2 The International Association for the Study of the History of Religions

The IAHR, originally called the “International Association for the Study of the History of Religions” (I.A.S.H.R.), was founded at the World Congress in Amsterdam in 1950. (The new and shorter name, the “International Association for the History of Religions,” was formally adopted at the 1955 Rome World Congress).³ The I.A.S.H.R. and later IAHR were rooted in congresses for the history of religions, a series of meetings beginning in Paris 1900. However, the I.A.S.H.R. also included activities between world congresses for the history of religions.

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- 1 We have been so lucky as to have Dr. Valerio Severino pave the way for us to have copies of letters produced and sent to us from the Pettazzoni archive in San Giovanni in Persiceto. The letters that we have received are 15 letters of Widengren to Pettazzoni (and 2 documents attached thereto), related to the period 1948–1959, along with 20 draft letters of Pettazzoni to Widengren related to the period 1948–1956. When quoted and referred to, we give the date of the letter (English style) and the catalogue number. Sincere thanks are extended to Dr. Severino as well as to Dr. Sara Deriu, the manager of the library “G.C. Croce” of San Giovanni in Persiceto which hosts the Raffaele Pettazzoni Archive. Following the submission of this contribution by the two authors, the editor and the publisher have decided to reproduce and include the letters in the volume.
 - 2 It would, for many reasons, have been wonderful to also have had the chance to make use of the correspondence between Widengren and the 1950–1970 IAHR Secretary General C. Jouco Bleeker to whom Widengren dedicated his *Religionsphänomenologie* with thanks for IAHR collaboration and friendship.
 - 3 For those who know about how later proposals to change the name of the IAHR to some other names have led to years of heated debates, in writing and at meetings, the ease with which it was decided to “accept the proposal of the President” [R. Pettazzoni] is remarkable. Pettazzoni found the I.A.S.H.R. “somewhat cumbersome” as it reads in the summary (Bleeker 1955:236) by then Secretary General Bleeker, and though the new name (I.A.H.R.) was not “entirely correct English,” the proposal was, as said, accepted “for practical reasons.” See ahead for a similar “easy-going way” of handling a proposal for a change of name in 1960, in contrast to the later and much more heated and complicated ways of handling and debating proposals for a change of name.

The step from an “organisation” limited to the planning and holding of world congresses – what the first IAHR (I.A.S.H.R.) Secretary General, Prof. C. Jouco Bleeker (Bleeker 1954, 86) called a “rather loose” organisation – to an organisation with a life in-between congresses was not an easy one to take. It took the initiative, collaboration and hard work of some of the most prominent history-of-religions scholars of the time. One of those scholars was Professor Geo Widengren. Widengren was but one of many who saw the need for an international organisation, but he was one of the few who actually acted on it. He actively communicated with others by letter, made plans, and met the necessary people to eventually make the organisation a reality.

For instance, responding to a letter from Professor Raffaele Pettazzoni, an Italian scholar of religion who was 15 years older than him, Widengren writes:

Dans votre lettre vous avez parlé de la crise actuelle de l'histoire de religion. Certes, il y a une telle crise assez grave, chose regrettable dont laquelle ne saurait nier l'existence. À Paris j'ai pris part au congrès des orientalistes quelques collègues ont discuté avec moi cette crise et les moyens de la guérir. En effet les historiens de religion sont très mal organisés. Nous sommes d'avis qu'il faut absolument créer une institution internationale comme un point de ralliement pour nos collègues. Actuellement on a proposé qu'il faudra organiser une union internationale des historiens de religion pour éditer un journal international dans le but de publier des articles surtout phénoménologiques, de dresser une bibliographie et d'organiser des congrès un peu plus fréquents qu'ils n'ont été auparavant. On a pensé que cette union serait établie et dirigée en collaboration et avec le support d'Unesco. De ma part j'ai promis à mes collègues parisiens de prendre contact avec mon gouvernement pour m'assurer la subvention financière si nécessaire.

Upsala September 10, 1948, 237078

In the late 1940s, after World War II and 15 years after the most recent of the preceding world congresses had taken place in Brussels in 1935, several prominent scholars talked about a “severe crisis” for the history of religions. They discussed the need to support and develop the field. One proposed solution was the establishment of an international organisation. The organisation would have an international journal and more frequent congresses. It would also have support from UNESCO under the CIPSH, the still existing *Conseil International de la Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines*.⁴

4 See <http://www.cipsh.net/htm/>.

Widengren, in the same letter as quoted above, proposed:

... que nous organisons cette Union aussitôt que possible. Les noms discutés par nous comme fondateurs ont été comme suit: L'Italie: M. Pettazzoni, La France: M. Dumezil et M. Puech, La Grande Bretagne: M.E.O. James, Les Pays Bas: M. van der Leeuw, Suede: M. Widengren. Pour Les États Unis et l'Allemagne on n'a pas encore discuté des noms mais dans une lettre à Paris j'ai proposé tels noms comme: pour Les États Unis ou M. Nock ou M. Goudenough ou M. Kraeling (de la part duquel je crois que tout le projet a émané) et pour L'Allemagne ou M.J. Kroll ou M. Weinreich. Comme chargé à faire la bibliographie je voudrais proposer M. Eliade qui dispose son temps pour une tâche comme ça et qui est certainement très apte pour une telle entreprise. Le siège sera Paris – ça va de soi – et M. Puech me semble aussi par cette raison mais à plus d'un titre l'homme le plus propre à fonctionner comme le secrétaire.

Upsala September 10, 1948, 237078

In this letter to the future IAHR President and first *NVMEN* editor-in-chief, Pettazzoni, Widengren managed to mention almost all of the key players, including Mircea Eliade,⁵ who took part in the formation of the IAHR and *NVMEN*.⁶

5 It seems evident, also from a September 14, 1948 letter (241909), quoted in part by Giovanni Casadio, "NVMEN, Brill and the IAHR in Their Early Years: Glimpses at Three Parallel Stories from an Italian Stance," in *NVMEN, the Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR: Past, Present, and Prospects*, eds. Tim Jensen and Armin W. Geertz (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), note 33 from Pettazzoni to Widengren that Pettazzoni shared the opinion of Widengren: Eliade was very well qualified for the position as editor-in-chief of the planned journal, not least because annual bibliographies were planned to be central to the IAHR (and the journal), with subventions from UNESCO primarily given to the publication of bibliographies. However, Eliade, in the end, did not "get the job," and a later letter from Widengren makes it clear that Widengren had had second thoughts as to whether Eliade, after all, was the right person. The relevant passage is quoted by Casadio, "NVMEN," note 48, and we can thus limit ourselves to a minimum. Widengren wrote: "Après avoir étudié un peu plus près les dernières publications de notre ami Eliade je le trouve un peu trop 'aventureux' pour occuper plus que la position purement technique d'un secrétaire de rédaction" (Widengren to Pettazzoni, October 24, 1951, 237082). However, in 1960 in Marburg, when the IAHR Secretary General C. Jouco Bleeker reports on (trying to solve and not himself face similar problems) the problems which Pettazzoni had faced in his last years as editor-in-chief, Bleeker says that he is willing to continue as editor-in-chief if he can have Prof. Anne-Marie Schimmel as "secretary of the redaction and Prof. Eliade as consulting editor" (Ort 1961, 20).

6 Apart from, it must be added, the Dutch scholar, C. Jouco Bleeker, the first IAHR Secretary General (1950–1970), and, after the death of Pettazzoni in 1959, the second *NVMEN* editor-in-chief. Bleeker, who, with G. van der Leeuw (who died in 1950 soon after becoming the first

It is also interesting, in passing, to note that it seems, as remarked also by Giovanni Casadio in his excellent article on “*NVMEN*, Brill, and the IAHR in Their Early Years” (Casadio 2016; cf. also Casadio’s chapter in this volume) that it, as can be seen from Widengren’s letter, may not have been neither Eliade nor Pettazzoni nor Ch. Puech, but actually Carl H. Kraeling, an American scholar who came forward with the idea of having an international association with a linked journal.⁷ Thus, what Eric J. Sharpe has called the “Trans Atlantic Axis” was part of the beginnings of the mostly European-centered international Association.⁸

Another interesting thing to note, not least to us as two officers of the current IAHR Executive Committee, was the importance of money for the work of the IAHR and thus also for the work on the journal. Managing to have Brill to become the publisher of the IAHR flagship *NVMEN* (and of the *Supplements to NVMEN*, the IAHR book series subtitled *Studies in the History of Religions*) was important in this regard, and so was the IAHR membership in the above-mentioned CIPSH. For decades, UNESCO provided the IAHR with funds and subsidies for both the publications and conferences of the IAHR through the CIPSH. That funding included subsidies earmarked for participant scholars from weak-currency countries. Then, as now, the IAHR made continuous effort to become truly international and democratic, to expand beyond the borders of Europe or the Trans Atlantic axis. With the aforementioned funding, that meant they could do so without having a non-European membership that had no influence for lack of money to participate in IAHR activities and business meetings.

Widengren was important to fund-raising efforts. From day one of the IAHR and *NVMEN*, Widengren tried to get financial support from the Swedish government. In several of his letters to Pettazzoni and in the letters from Pettazzoni to Widengren, mention is made of these efforts and the challenges Widengren faced, inter alia because ministers and other key persons

IAHR President at the Amsterdam 1950 World Congress) hosted the Congress in Amsterdam, following discussions, with Widengren involved, about the possibility of having Rome or Stockholm host it.

7 This point was also made by Casadio in his excellent article “*NVMEN*”. Cf. also Casadio’s chapter in this volume.

8 See Eric J. Sharpe, “From Paris 1900 to Sydney 1985. An Essay in Retrospect and Prospect,” and Tim Jensen, “The EASR within (the World Scenario of) the IAHR: Observations and Reflections,” in *NVMEN, The Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR: Past, Present, and Prospects*, eds. Tim Jensen and Armin W. Geertz (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016) for a history of the process of globalisation or internationalisation of the IAHR as a process beginning right from the very European beginnings in Amsterdam 1950 – and continued ever since.

in the Swedish government and ministries came and went. Moreover, there seemed to have been some frustration in Sweden with UNESCO because – so Widengren writes (Upsala October 24, 1951, 237082) – Sweden contributed with a million Swedish kroner to UNESCO each year without getting anything back. Nevertheless, Widengren managed to secure what at that time must have been substantial and important annual sums of money for the IAHR and *NVMEN*.⁹

The importance of Widengren to the beginnings of the IAHR and *NVMEN* also shows in the fact that he did not hesitate to offer direction when needed, as evidenced in a letter to co-vice president Pettazzoni dated December 13, 1950, 237080, in which Widengren writes: “La mort inattendue de van der Leeuw remet entre les mains de vous comme le vice-président le plus aîné la tâche de diriger nôtre association.”

Likewise, Widengren was quite outspoken when he wrote about *NVMEN*, its tasks and contents, and its editors to be. While Widengren wholeheartedly accepted and supported the proposal made by M. Eliade and H.-Ch. Puech, he had some hesitations as regards Eliade as the editor-in-chief. In the above mentioned letter (Upsala October 24, 1951, 237082), though, he first writes:

Pour ma part je trouve cependant que la revue soit la chose le plus nécessaire si nous voulons gagner notre but essentiel, faire la propagande et attirer l'attention sur notre science à la même fois que nous essayons de créer un sentiment – pour ainsi dire- « d'esprit de corps » entre les historiens de l'histoire des religions qui sont à présent trop fractionnés et dispersés. Je crois donc que la rédaction de notre revue sera une chose extrêmement importante et – difficile. Revenant sur la question de l'éditeur je trouve qu'il sera absolument nécessaire pour vous d'assumer cette tâche ingrate ...¹⁰

9 See letters Upsala September 10, 1948, 237078; Upsala October 24, 1951, 237082; Upsala September 4, 1953, 237086. In the first one mention is made of a sum of 4.500 ‘couronnes suédoises’, in the second mention is made of a hope for 3.000 for at least three years, and in the last one Widengren writes that he has, finally, secured 1.000 ‘couronnes suédoises’ per year from the Swedish government for the IASHR/IAHR. However, this sum of money is, he adds, dependent on the Swedish national association becoming formally a member to the IAHR.

10 This is where we find (cf. note 5) the reservations expressed about Eliade as editor-in-chief.

He continues:

Si vous me permettez je vais donc proposer la solution que nous avons esquissée à Rome: vous serez l'éditeur en chef avec un secrétaire de rédaction et un comité à votre disposition.

Consequently, Widengren must be considered one of the leading figures in the nomination and appointment of Pettazzoni as IAHR President and *NVMEN* editor-in-chief.

As shown by Casadio's chapter in this volume, the relationship between Pettazzoni and Widengren was tested at the end of the Italian scholar's life. Still, it is clear that Widengren stayed a loyal and hardworking Vice-President. He provided great support to Pettazzoni, who, with the help of other IAHR leading officers, worked to secure articles for *NVMEN* and to arrange the IAHR World Congress in Rome 1955, despite opposition from influential Catholics and Roman-Catholic institutions.

3 *NVMEN*

We have already indicated the degree to which Widengren considered having a journal like *NVMEN* a matter of key importance to the IAHR. From the beginning, he argued in favour of the association having a journal that was more than a "bibliographic journal." That is not to say that he was against having the IAHR edit and publish a bibliography, but that was not his main interest. As he said in a talk given in Marburg 1960, when he had been nominated President following the passing of Pettazzoni in 1959, he did not consider himself a "Bibliography-Expert."¹¹

Widengren was from the beginning in favour of a journal along the lines indicated in a proposal written by M. Eliade and Ch.-M. Puech¹² and he paid special attention to what he called "*Stand und Aufgaben* (state of the art)"

11 See, *Marburg 1960 Proceedings*, 51. The IAHR published, with Brill, and Bleeker as editor-in-chief, an annual bibliography with the name *International Bibliography of the History of Religions* (also edited by Bleeker and published by Brill). Its successor was *Science of Religion. Abstracts and Index of Recent Articles*. See Armin W. Geertz and Russell McCutcheon, "The Role of Method and Theory in the IAHR," in *NVMEN, The Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR: Past, Present, and Prospects*, eds. Tim Jensen and Armin W. Geertz (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), 138.

12 Casadio, "*NVMEN*," 18, with Appendix 1, a letter from Widengren to Bleeker, with a copy to Pettazzoni, dated October 30, 1950, 237076.

articles.¹³ He also mentioned those articles in his talk in Marburg, in which he tries to evaluate the degree to which the IAHR had accomplished its goals over the 10 years following its beginning in Amsterdam. Talking about *NVMEN* he said:

Es ist uns noch nicht gelungen, das ausgezeichnete Programm, das unsere verehrten Mitarbeiter Eliade und Puech einmal skizziert haben, in die Praxis umzusetzen. Das beruht zunächst auf der Schwierigkeit, willige und kompetente Mitarbeiter zu finden. Gute Forschungsübersichten sind absolut notwendig, damit der religionshistorische Spezialforscher sich außerhalb seines eigenen Spezialgebietes orientieren kann und damit er sich in erster Linie als Religionshistoriker, und nicht als Assyriologe, Iranist, Sanskritist, Sinologe o.ä. fühlt. Dasselbe gilt natürlich ebenso – oder noch stärker – für die Prinzipienfragen, um die wir uns bisher viel zu wenig gekümmert haben.¹⁴

The quote indicates how Widengren saw the ideal “*Religionshistoriker*” (or “*Religionswissenschaftler*”) as a scholar combining historical-philological expertise(s) in a religion, region, period etc. with a general, yet qualified, knowledge of religion and religious phenomena across cultures and times. It thus also indicates how Widengren sees the phenomenology of religion as intimately linked to the history of religion and, in turn, the history of religion as a *sine qua non* for an acceptable phenomenology of religion; a systematic, comparative, cross-cultural study of religion(s) and religious phenomena accompanied and informed by historical-philological studies.

4 The Development of the Study of the History of Religions

Likewise, it indicates why IAHR President Widengren at the IAHR world Congress in Claremont 1965 promised that studies of religions of antiquity and of “primitive religion” (today most often termed “indigenous religion”) would not be as marginal in future IAHR congresses as they were in Claremont.

13 Though we promised to not dwell on Widengren's scholarly contributions to e.g., *NVMEN*, we cannot help mentioning his important contributions to the first and second volumes of *NVMEN*, namely the two, in our opinion, excellent articles on “Stand und Aufgaben der Iranischen Religionsgeschichte” published by Widengren in *NVMEN*, Vol. 1 (1954) and Vol. 2 (1955), the mention of which figures high in the correspondence with Pettazzoni, who was very happy to receive these contributions, despite some delay.

14 *Marburg 1960 Proceedings*, 51–52.

Indeed, those fields figured relatively strongly in the Stockholm 1970 World Congress. In his opening address to that Congress, Widengren,¹⁵ comparing sections of the Stockholm Congress with sections at earlier congresses, mentions the space given in Stockholm to “phenomenology of religion” (already in the program of Amsterdam 1950) and “psychology of religion” (entering in Rome 1955), which were associated with such fields at the time. However, Widengren was still committed to holistic scholarship. In the same speech, which echoed remarks he made at IAHR study conferences in Strasburg (1964), Jerusalem (1968), among others, he expressed deep concern about the fading away of more historical studies and of papers on e.g., Scandinavian-Teutonic and Roman religion. Continuing an appeal for a combination of generalist and specialist approaches to develop a broad knowledge of religions, he encouraged, in that speech and elsewhere, that there “should be more Islamic studies orientated from the viewpoint of the History of Religions in general” (Widengren 1975:16). Later, in Stockholm 1970, Widengren worried about the “compartmentalisation of scholarship in our day” (Widengren 1975:17). In a way, Widengren and the IAHR which he and the World Congress represents, 20 years after having helped remedy the “crisis” of the history of religions by way of establishing the I.A.S.H.R., was still wrestling with what was at stake when he and others in 1948 talked about a crisis for the history of religion(s): insufficient *esprit de corps*, not enough collective “identity.”

As opposed to that lack of collective identity, Widengren himself certainly contributed to the promotion of the history of religion(s), promoted by and promoting the IAHR, by reading papers at conferences and submitting many articles despite “obstacles” mentioned in the letters: pain in his back due to his military service (Uppsala, January 28, 1949, 237079), a cold or the like due to the difference in temperatures between Turkey and Sweden (Uppsala, October 24, 1951, 237082), and the birth of his son after nine years of marriage to his wife – a joyful event, as Widengren writes, but also a “revolution” to their life and something which at times caused Widengren to not be as focused on his work as he normally was (Uppsala, October 5, 1953, 237087).¹⁶

15 Geo Widengren, “The Opening Address,” in *Stockholm 1975 Proceedings*, 15–16.

16 As noticed by Jan Hjärpe in his obituary on Widengren published in *IAHR Bulletin* 34, August (1996): 21–22, the motto of Widengren was “nulla dies sine linea,” and, as added by Hjärpe: “thereby he lived.”

5 International Networks

Nordic (and Swedish) readers of the correspondence between Pettazzoni and Widengren no doubt will notice the mentioning of other scholars from Sweden and the Nordic countries. Tor Andræ, naturally, is mentioned,¹⁷ but the two also communicated about several other scholars, including Hans Abrahamsson and his *The Origin of Death: Studies in African Mythology* (1951); a work Pettazzoni characterized as “excellent.”¹⁸ Worth mentioning are also Widengren’s efforts to try to help Pettazzoni find a Danish scholar who could deliver an article on Vilhelm Grönbech, a scholar who Pettazzoni thought was not sufficiently well-known outside of Denmark. The Danish scholar recommended by Widengren, Sven Åge Pallis, however, declined, responding that he had already written too much about Grönbech. Instead, Pallis referred Pettazzoni to two younger Danish scholars, Jørgen Prytz Johansen and Johannes Pedersen (February 13, 1954, 241923).

That exchange from the correspondence between Widengren and Pettazzoni serves as an example of how Widengren actively worked to encourage the formation of national member associations in countries without such associations, an important task for dedicated IAHR officers over the years. His efforts (and despair) regarding the UK are particularly notable since most readers will know, as did Widengren and Pettazzoni, that the UK did not suffer a lack of scholars of religion. Having been to Cambridge for lectures, Widengren in 1953 (July 27, 1953, 237085) nonetheless writes that while there, he tried to propagate the Association (the IAHR), which was still “tout à fait inconnue dans ce pays!” Pettazzoni, suggesting just how influential Widengren had been in the formation of international networks, responded:

De même je vous suis très reconnaissant de vos efforts pour la formation des groupes anglais et norvégien de la Int. Association. C’est un vrai scandale qu’il n’existe pas encore un tel groupe en Grande Bretagne!

Rome, September 9, 1953, 241918

17 See e.g., Upsala 22.12.1951, 237084, where Widengren writes that he is volunteering to deliver a summary of Andræ’s *oeuvre*, not least with regard to the effort to include Islam-studies in the history of religion.

18 See e.g., Widengren to Pettazzoni December 7, 1951, 237083, and Pettazzoni to Widengren Rome, November 10, 241914.

6 After Pettazzoni

In 1954 the first volume of *NVMEN* was published, with Pettazzoni as the editor-in-chief writing an “Aperçu Introductif” (Pettazzoni 1954), and Widengren writing “Hors de la responsabilité de rédacteur-en-chef,” a touching homage to Pettazzoni (Widengren 1954a) on the occasion of his 70th anniversary.¹⁹ Pettazzoni was swift to thank Widengren for the piece, writing:

Je viens de recevoir le fascicule de *NUMEN* avec l'agréable surprise que vous avez bien voulu me faire au nom des autres Collègues et collaborateurs. Je vous suis infiniment reconnaissant, et je vous remercie pour toutes les belles choses, trop belles en vérité, que vous avez cru pouvoir dire de moi.

February 13, 1954, 241923²⁰

Sadly, Pettazzoni passed away in 1959. At the IAHR World Congress in Marburg (an der Lahn) in 1960, for many reasons a milestone in the history of the IAHR,²¹ Widengren, as one of two vice-presidents since Amsterdam 1950 and Rome 1955, opened (and chaired) the Executive Board meeting. He did so on the recommendation of the Secretary General, Prof. Bleeker. In the opening minutes, he took time to remember “in well-chosen words the late President of the Association, Professor Pettazzoni.”

An important item on the agenda of that Executive Board meeting was the recommendation to the IAHR International Committee of officers and members-at-large for the incoming Executive Board. Secretary General Bleeker, having stressed “the importance of the office of President,” and the

19 Widengren also wrote an article entitled “Stand und Aufgaben der Iranischen Religionsgeschichte” for this publication.

20 See, by the way, the homage, paid to Widengren himself, at the occasion of his 60th anniversary, by Helmer Ringgren, “Professor Dr Geo Widengren sexagenarius,” *NVMEN*, 14: 1 (1967):1–3.

21 See inter alia Jensen, “The EASR,” Tim Jensen and Armin W. Geertz, “*NVMEN*. The Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR: Past, Present, and Prospects: An Introduction,” Michael Pye, “IAHR Landmarks and Connections,” in *NVMEN, The Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR: Past, Present, and Prospects*, eds. Tim Jensen and Armin W. Geertz (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016); Eric J. Sharpe, “From Paris” and Donald Wiebe, “Letter from Don Wiebe (Executive Committee Member),” *IAHR Bulletin* 3 (1986), not least as regards the Marburg 1960 Werblowsky statement (‘manifesto’) on what kind of ‘*Religionswissenschaft*’ the IAHR is supposed to promote.

fact that Prof. Pettazzoni had been “very well informed in all matters pertaining to the Association and the study of the History of Religions,” recommended Prof. Widengren as the new President with the following words: “In Professor Widengren a worthy successor can be found. He is famous for his scientific work and he has been of great help to the Secretary General in the past.”²²

Widengren was recommended by the entire Executive Board to the International Committee (IC) after Bleeker’s recommendation. He was then nominated and elected (unopposed) President for the term of 1960–1965 on September 10 at the meeting of the IC. Prof. Scholem consequently “congratulate[d] Prof. Widengren on the attainment of the high office of President and expresse[d] the wish of the International Committee that a fruitful period for the I.A.H.R. may follow.”²³

The 1960s, with the Marburg 1960, Claremont 1965, and Stockholm 1970 World Congresses, no doubt was a fruitful and active decade in the history of the IAHR, even if it was not always peaceful, as minutes and proceedings from both Marburg and Claremont indicate. On top of the scholarly fruits harvested at the three mentioned world congresses, the IAHR hosted three successful IAHR “study conferences”: in Strasburg in 1964 on initiation; in Messina in 1966 on (the origins of) Gnosticism; and in Jerusalem in 1968 on (types of) redemption. Each of the three study conferences resulted in a publication of lasting value. Unsurprisingly, Widengren played a prominent role in these activities, not least in the Messina conference on the origins of Gnosticism.

7 Consolidation and Expansion

Those World Congresses and study conferences are just some of the ways that Widengren was equally important in many ways in the decade of consolidation and expansion as he had been to the early beginnings of the IAHR and *NVMEN*. His first term as President, apart from his chairing of business meetings, was initiated when he – following a long line of speeches given by prominent guests and scholars, including, among others, Prince Takahito Mikasa, Tokyo, C. Jouco Bleeker (in memoriam Pettazzoni), and F. Heiler (inter alia, in Swedish, praising Swedish scholarship on religion and mentioning that: “en ny skola [har] upstått under Prof. Geo Widengrens ledning [i Uppsala]”) – on

22 L.J.R. Ort, “Meeting of the Executive Board of the International Association for the History of Religions (I.A.H.R.),” *Marburg 1960 Proceedings*, 19–20.

23 Ort, “Meeting,” 26.

Sunday, September 11, 1960, gave his plenary speech and took the opportunity to give a brief evaluation of the first decade in the life of the Association.

We have already referred to his evaluation as regards *NVMEN* and the importance of high quality "*Forschungsübersichten*," as well as to some of what he had to say in Stockholm 1970 about themes and sections at IAHR congresses. What he said in Marburg 1960 was perfectly in line with those stances as Widengren expressed his concern that certain "*Religionsgebiete*" were (no longer) as prominent as before and as they deserved to be. In no uncertain words, Widengren stated that:

... die rein historische Forschung im Mittelpunkt unserer Disziplin stehen muß. Unsere religionshistorische Wissenschaft ist vor allem eine historische Wissenschaft. Die übrigen Teildisziplinen müssen sich auf die historische Disziplin stützen, die ihnen den Stoff liefert. Hier ist zweifellos große Anstrengung notwendig, damit nicht ein unserer Zeit so ungeheuer wichtiges Gebiet wie die Islamwissenschaft ganz und gar der Religionsgeschichte entgleitet. Mit großen Bedauern konstatiert man auch den Rückgang auf dem nordisch-germanischen Gebiet.²⁴

Also of interest is what can be gathered about Widengren's stance regarding the "internationalisation" (today often termed the "globalisation") of the IAHR, something discussed in the business meetings with regard to concerted (and continued) efforts to develop membership and affiliation not just in Europe, but also outside Europe.²⁵

In the written records of those meetings, Widengren mentions that he is happy about the new non-European members and that he hopes the IAHR and history of religions will manage to have close ties to "Buddhologie" (and vice versa). He also reemphasizes his hope that a historical (history-of-religion) approach to Islam also in Muslim countries might develop. Last but not least, he adds:

Wichtiger als der äußere Anschluß, der oft nur auf dem Papier steht, ist es ja, daß der wissenschaftliche Geist angeregt und belebt wird. Das gilt gleichermaßen auch für die europäischen Länder.²⁶

24 *Marburg 1960 Proceedings*, 51.

25 Then as today the IAHR (and its Constitution) differentiates between 'members' and 'affiliates'. A differentiation was forgotten for a period, despite being clearly stated in the Constitution, but 'rediscovered' and implemented again as of 2010, see Tim Jensen, "Report by the General Secretary," *IAHR Bulletin*, Erfurt Congress Edition (2015).

26 *Marburg 1960 Proceedings*, 52.

This is a remark that – with the risk of (mis-)reading it in the light of later discussions rather than what we know of discussions in Marburg 1960 – may be seen as linked with other important discussions, in Marburg and ever since, about the identity of IAHR and the worldwide expansion of the scientific study of religion. While the Marburg 1960 Congress is famous not least for the Werblowsky statement (following a talk by Bleeker, which was also referred to by Widengren in his speech even though Bleeker spoke after him), readers of the minutes from the business meetings also get a glimpse of discussions linked to the quote above.²⁷

When the Executive Board discussed Bleeker's report on the "extension" of the IAHR, "especially to the East," there was not any discussion about the "scientific level" of the new or potential member associations. But when the discussion, item 10, was about possible new "affiliates," "some members of the Executive Board raised the question about the scientific level of the 'institutes,'" adding that "[t]his should be considered very carefully before affiliation takes place."

The discussions back then are not that dissimilar to the discussions of today,²⁸ and we even find in the minutes from Marburg an item that is devoted

27 It may be noted in passing that Geo Widengren, in contrast to e.g. Mircea Eliade, was not among the signatories to the Werblowsky statement.

28 We promised that this chapter was not going to be about the IAHR but about Widengren and the IAHR. Allow us therefore to not refer to all relevant discussions within the IAHR over the past many decades, for more information, see Jensen, "The EASR," Jensen and Geertz, "NV MEN," Pye, "IAHR," Sharpe, "From Paris," Wiebe, "Letter from" and Wiebe, "Memory." Most recently the discussion about the scientific profile of the IAHR has taken fire in connection with an extended Executive Committee meeting in Delphi in Greece in September 2019 where specially invited guests and the Executive discussed matters of interest to the future of the IAHR. Prof. Wiebe who was among the invited guests thinks that the meeting signaled the "fall" of the IAHR from its scientific ideals and the common commitment to the Werblowsky Marburg 1960 statement and stance (see inter alia the "In Memoriam" dedicated to Werblowsky in Jensen & Geertz (eds.) 2016 (dedicated to Werblowsky)), while the IAHR leadership thinks the meeting, the decisions taken and the proposals submitted to the International Committee reflect that the IAHR leadership is committed to combining a continuous expansion and globalisation of the IAHR with an equally continued effort to tighten up the academic, scientific profile of the IAHR, in line with what has been the case for decades. See Donald Wiebe, "A Report on the Special Executive Committee Meeting of the International Association for the History of Religions in Delphi," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 32, 2 (202) and Satoko Fujiwara, "An Analysis of Sixty Years of NV MEN: How Much Diversity Have We Achieved?," in *NV MEN, The Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR. Past, Present and Prospect*, eds. Tim Jensen and Armin W. Geertz (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), and Jensen, "The EASR," 210–213 for what he considers characteristic of the IAHR leadership efforts to expand and still stay true to the "ethos" of the Werblowsky manifesto and thus the 'esprit

to a proposal to change the name of the IAHR (changed from I.A.S.H.R. to I.A.H.R in 1955). The proposal²⁹ was to change it to the International Association for the Science of Religion. We shall not go into any detail as regards the reasons why Secretary General Bleeker as well as other board members were not in favour of this proposal. Here, we simply want to observe that the discussion of the proposal and the swift and effective way in which it was dealt (away) with reveals that times have changed: nowadays, as up to the World Congress in Mexico 1995 and the World Congress in Erfurt 2015, proposals for a change of name were also on the table, but discussions were complicated, heated and lengthy.³⁰

8 The Re-Election of Widengren as IAHR President

In Claremont 1965, a World Congress of importance regarding discussions about the scientific and/or extra- or non-sufficiently scientific profile of the IAHR,³¹ Widengren was re-elected President for the term 1965–1970. He ran unopposed, once again on the proposal of Bleeker, which was unanimously accepted by the Executive Board. Widengren, when recommended for the position, told his colleagues on the Executive Board that his participation in

de corps', collective 'identity', or 'common ground' for IAHR and IAHR related publications and conferences.

29 Ort, "Meeting," 21–22.

30 Readers with access to the IAHR website folder holding documents from the meeting in Delphi in September 2019 are referred to Prof. Wiebe's (renewed) proposal for a change of name also as regards references to earlier discussions and proposals. Moreover an overview of such can be found also in Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe, "Proposal for a Change of name of the IAHR," *IAHR Bulletin*, Erfurt Congress Edition (2015), especially those started in 1986 (by Wiebe), continued through 1992, 1993 (with the Paris 1993 International Committee recommending a change of name), and to be concluded (for a while) when the General Assembly in Mexico City 1995 voted against a change of name, see Armin Geertz, "General Assembly. Minutes of the Meeting, August 12, 1995," *IAHR Bulletin* 34 (1996), 67–69. The matter was taken up by Donald Wiebe and Luther H. Martin after the Toronto 2010 World Congress, and their 2014 proposal was discussed by the then Executive Committee, and at the International Committee meeting in 2013 in Liverpool and again in Erfurt 2015, see Jensen, "Report" and Martin and Wiebe, "Proposal." However, neither the EC nor the IC at the time was in favour of recommending a name change and the proposal thus never made it to the General Assembly in Erfurt 2015. A new proposal, this time from the Executive Committee (to change the name to IASR, International Association for the Study of Religions) was supposed to be presented to the IC in Otago, New Zealand in August 2020 at the planned (but cancelled) IAHR World Congress August 2020.

31 See in particular Wiebe, "Memory."

the Claremont congress had been uncertain “on account of an operation,” but “fortunately he was able to travel and was ... willing to continue his office of President” albeit “rather reluctantly.”³²

Closing the meeting (Item 7. Other Business), the President mentioned that “the fact that a certain uneasiness about the structure and character of the I.A.H.R. had been mentioned to him.” The minutes continue: “He added that the main aim of the Association should remain to stimulate scholarship in the field of the history of religions.” The minutes end by saying that it “was decided to discuss the structure and character of the I.A.H.R. again during the meeting of the International Committee.”³³

President Widengren could look forward to more discussions about “*der wissenschaftliche Geist*” of the IAHR, its members and affiliates. Indeed, “lively discussions” did materialize at the meeting of the International Committee where, inter alia, Prof. U. Bianchi is said to have “stressed the necessity of a scholarly character of such [applicant potential affiliates] non-national groups,” and where Prof. W. C. Smith stated that “he wished to consider the structure of the I.A.H.R.”³⁴

Prof. Smith, as is evident also from the minutes related to item 7, wanted an ad hoc committee that should “contact the national groups about their opinion concerning this matter,” and the IC decided to set up a committee to look into the Statutes of the Association, “consider the matter and formulate its conclusions.”³⁵ Prof. Bianchi, the minutes continue:

... strongly underlined that the structure of the I.A.H.R. should be derived from a scholarly style of studies. He did not wish that the I.A.H.R.-Congresses would become “religious conferences.” Prof. Smith answered that he wished to investigate the international character of the Association and that he wanted to know whether one specific approach to our discipline was becoming predominant in the I.A.H.R.

32 *Claremont 1965 Proceedings*, 144.

33 *Claremont 1965 Proceedings*, 146.

34 *Claremont 1965 Proceedings*, 150.

35 See, *Claremont 1965 Proceedings*, 153. The committee represented by Werblowsky submitted its report at the World Congress in Stockholm 1970. See *Stockholm 1970 Proceedings*, 322–324 (and 328–29, and 331–33) where several of the most important aspects of the organisational structures of today’s IAHR were laid down in the statutes. As a curiosum with regard to today’s discussions, mention may be made that “academic” in the first article of the new statutes [on the object of the IAHR] was preferred instead of “scientific.” It is added, then, that: “It indicates a scholarly and not an institutional norm: so that there is no discrimination with regard to those scholars who are not connected with a university institution,” *Stockholm 1970 Proceedings*, 323.

The Secretary General said that “the structure of the I.A.H.R. had been fixed by its affiliation to UNESCO,” that these matters had been discussed before (in *NVMEN* and in Marburg 1960), and that “the I.A.H.R. could boast of a certain tradition and a history.”³⁶

We agree: “these matters” have been discussed, in Marburg 1960 and then time and again, yet we also still boast, as it says on the IAHR website, that the IAHR is (still) the:

... preeminent international forum for the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion past and present. The IAHR is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns.³⁷

This is the case, not least due to the effort of and service rendered by scholars and IAHR officers like Geo Widengren. We know, maybe better than others, that the IAHR’s current leadership is standing on the shoulders of giants like Professor Widengren, and we know, perhaps also better than many others, how many challenges Widengren had to face in his more than twenty years of service to the IAHR.

We have already ever so briefly touched upon “his” Stockholm IAHR 1970 World Congress, his last one as IAHR President, and we noted his concerns regarding the sections and themes during that congress and others; concerns directly linked to his ideals for the IAHR and the kind of history or study of religion(s) to be promoted by the IAHR.

In his Opening Talk he also mentioned that the Stockholm congress may be distinguished from earlier ones because the sections have only papers “but no general lectures.” He then continued: “I spoke just now about the big guns fired at a congress. According to my experiences from more than thirty years these big guns are sometimes loaded with blank ammunition.”³⁸

All in all, Widengren was a big shot and a big gun. But he was not loaded with “blank ammunition.” It was, thus, a matter of course that Widengren was thanked by the incoming President, Marcel Simon, for “the services rendered over a period of twenty years” when he stepped down as IAHR President in 1970.³⁹

It was, then, also a matter of course that Widengren was among the first of those prominent IAHR dedicated scholars who, beginning in 1995 at the

36 *Claremont 1965 Proceedings*, 153.

37 See, <https://www.easr.eu/iahr/>, accessed, April 26, 2021.

38 *Stockholm 1970 Proceedings*, 21.

39 *Stockholm 1975 Proceedings*, 339.

1995 World Congress in Mexico City, have had the honour of having an IAHR Honorary Life Membership conferred on them.

As evidenced by a letter from Geo Widengren's wife, Aina Elisabeth Widengren, to the then IAHR General Secretary, Prof. Armin W. Geertz, Widengren received the message about the honorary life membership conferment a few days before passing away.⁴⁰

Mrs. Widengren wrote, in a letter dated February 23, 1996: "My husband, Geo Widengren, recently received your kind letter. Since he was still scientifically active, he very much appreciated obtaining the honorary membership of the I.A.H.R. Sadly he passed away only a few days after getting this letter on the 28th of January."⁴¹

ps: Allow the one of us, Prof. Jensen, educated at the University of Copenhagen at the time of late Prof. Jørgen Prytz Johansen, to add on a personal note that his very first introduction to the history of religions, including the kind of phenomenology of religion pursued by Geo Widengren, was by way of Widengren's *Religionsphänomenologie*.⁴² During Prof. Johansen's course, a small group of students together with the professor read, summarized and discussed almost each and every chapter of the book. Geo Widengren, for this reason also, has been to Jensen a towering figure, most likely also influential as regards Jensen's nowadays old-fashioned idea about what a scholar of religion ought be: a scholar combining expert historical-philological knowledge of one religion/area/field with an equally expert yet generalist cross-cultural, comparative knowledge of religion and religious phenomena, past and present.

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40 We recently retrieved and read this letter when we were in Marburg to put the IAHR archive in order.

41 See also the *IAHR Bulletin* 34, 1996, 20ff with the notice from the then General Secretary Prof. Armin W. Geertz about the death of Geo Widengren and the obituary written by Prof. Jan Hjärpe.

42 Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1969).

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PART 2

Iranian Cultures, Languages and Religions



Geo Widengren and the Study of Iranian Religion

Anders Hultgård

1 Introduction

Geo Widengren's studies in the religion and history of ancient Iran are a prominent feature of his scholarly profile. Besides a large number of articles and minor monographs four works should be singled out to serve as a basis for the present discussion. The first one is *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* from 1938, in which he elaborated the 'high god' character not only of Ahura Mazdā but also of Mithra, Vayu and Zurvān. He could show that the Iranian beliefs corresponded strikingly with those of indigenous African peoples. This typological concordance allowed the conclusion that the high gods of Africa were not the result of missionary influences but represented ancient inherited tradition. In a way, the book can be considered part of Widengren's polemics against the type of evolutionism that dominated scholars' view on the origins of religion in the early 20th century (see Góthoni and Larsson's chapter in this volume).¹

The second work to be mentioned is "Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte, I and II", published in the two first issues of *Numen* (1954–55). The work is divided into three parts. In the first part, Widengren outlines what can be classified a phenomenology of Iranian religions. The second part deals with the history, and the third part includes considerations of a theoretical nature.

The third one is his book from 1965, *Die Religionen Irans*, which appeared in the series 'Die Religionen der Menschheit'. It was some years later (1968) translated into French with some polemic additions. It is a comprehensive description of Iranian religion including the peoples of the North and East, the Scythians and the Sogdians, respectively. Laudable is the historical perspective which governs the presentation. Chapters on early Zoroastrianism and the religion of the Medes and the Persians are followed by separate sections dealing with Iranian religion in the Parthian and Sasanian periods.

1 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1986).

The fourth work to attract attention is Widengren's detailed study of Iranian apocalyptic ideas entitled 'Leitende Ideen und Quellen der iranischen Apokalyptik' from 1983.² It includes also what I would term cosmic eschatology.

2 The Uppsala School of Iranian Religious History

Widengren is often mentioned as a representative of an 'Uppsala school' concerned with the study of ancient Iranian religion. The reasons for this are to be found in the scholarly work of H.S. Nyberg. He was in the 1930s the prime figure in Semitic and Iranian studies at the University of Uppsala. He attracted a circle of younger gifted scholars in Uppsala who gathered to study ancient Iranian religion, in particular the Gāthā-hymns. In the preface of the German translation of his book on the religions of ancient Iran (first published in Swedish as *Irans forntida religioner*, 1937) Nyberg tells us that

Dem kleinen iranistischen Kreise, der sich längere Zeit hindurch jeden Donnerstag versammelte, um sich in die Gatha-probleme zu vertiefen, schulde ich vielen Dank für anregenden Gedankenaustausch und die mannigfaltigen Impulse, die in verschiedener Hinsicht diesem Buche zugute gekommen sind. Besonders möchte ich hier ausser Lic. Wikander, meine Freunde Prof. H. Smith, Doc. G. Widengren och Doc. K. Rönnow nenne.³

Widengren's *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* and Stig Wikander's monograph *Vayu: Texte und Untersuchungen zur indo-iranischen Religionsgeschichte* (1941) were explicitly dedicated to Nyberg. Wikander received his education in Uppsala but taught history of religions at Lund University for a period before he succeeded the indologist Helmer Smith in 1953 in the chair of "Comparative Indo-European philology and Sanskrit" at Uppsala University. Smith had held this chair from 1936. Karsten Rönnow was mainly an indologist and competed in 1939 with Erland Ehnmark, a specialist in Greek religion, and Widengren for the chair of 'History of religions and psychology of religion' in Uppsala which Widengren got.

2 Geo Widengren, "Leitende Ideen und Quellen der iranischen Apokalyptik," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism*. Edited by David Hellholm, ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 77–162.

3 Henrik Samuel Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich, 1938), 1v.

In the introduction to his 'Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte' Widengren confirms the importance of Nyberg and draws the outlines of the Uppsala school:

Dass in der hier gegebenen Übersicht die Uppsalaforscher ziemlich oft erwähnt werden, bitte ich nicht übelnehmen zu wollen ... Dazu kommt noch, dass wohl nicht verneint werden kann, dass durch die bahnbrechende Tätigkeit H.S. Nybergs in Uppsala ein Zentrum iranistischer Studien auf religionsgeschichtlichen Gebiet geschaffen worden ist, das sich wohl mit jedem anderen gut messen kann.⁴

In commenting upon Widengren's studies on ancient Iranian religion, the limited space of a chapter will only allow me to focus on some selected themes which nevertheless include the essentials of his work in this field. The following themes will be discussed:

- I. The religio-historical approach.
- II. The figure of Zarathustra and his place within the religious history of Iran.
- III. The problem of Iranian influence on early Judaism and Christianity.

3 The Religio-Historical Approach

Widengren's overall concern was to work from the perspective of an historian of religions, free from confessional bias or other types of non-scholarly judgements. His religio-historical approach in general becomes clear by comparing his studies on the religion of the Hebrew Bible with those produced by most other scholars. Widengren, as also the Uppsala exegete Helmer Ringgren, use the term *Israelite* or *Israelite-Jewish religion* and draw abundantly on material from the surrounding Near Eastern religions for their analyses. By contrast, many scholars teaching in theological faculties with a confessional framework, usually write monographs on the *theology of the Old Testament* with a view directed on the New Testament (e.g. Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments 1-2*). In addition, they normally display less interest in comparative materials. The subject matter is nevertheless the same. The religio-historical approach also marks Widengren's studies in ancient Iranian religion and can be contrasted to some extent with that of Mary Boyce in her history of Zoroastrianism where she places herself largely on the standpoint of the

4 Geo Widengren, "Stand und Aufgaben I", *Numen*, 1, 1 (1954), 18.

Zoroastrians themselves.⁵ Some scholar's use of 'Zoroastrianism' or 'Religion of Zarathustra' may be no more than synonymous with 'ancient Iranian religion'. Reading the works of other scholars, however, it appears that the designations 'Zoroastrianism' or 'Religion of Zarathustra' in fact reflect the decisive role they attribute to the figure of Zarathustra in shaping that religion. Admittedly, even Widengren makes use of the terms 'Zoroastrianism' and 'Zoroastrian' but in that case he seems to denote a specific 'religion' among the other religions of ancient Iran in contrast with those that are 'non-Zoroastrian'.⁶ Widengren as well as his teacher H.S. Nyberg were well aware of the variability found in the religious traditions of ancient Iran. To express this fact, they chose to speak about the 'religions' of Iran. Nyberg presents his reasons for doing so:

... so müssen wir Iran als Heimat mehrerer verschiedener Religionen betrachten, die zum Teil neben und nach der Religion Zarathustras existiert haben.⁷

Widengren too argues in a similar way for his use of "religions of Iran". I would not go so far as to apply the term 'religions' to this variability; instead, we have to do with different forms or variants of ancient Iranian religion.

4 The Figure of Zarathustra and His Place within the Religious History of Iran

The significance attached to the figure of Zarathustra has been a salient feature in the study of ancient Iranian religion and still is. In this respect Widengren does not distinguish himself from most other scholars. He clearly states his position: "In our opinion Zarathustra must be considered as a great reformer" (my translation from German).⁸ But he often shifts his terminology also using the concept "founder of religion" (*Religionsstifter* or *Stifter*) to characterize the role of Zarathustra, which means something more than just a reformer.⁹

5 Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism I. The early period.* (Leiden: Brill, 1975).

6 Geo Widengren, "Stand und Aufgaben I," 27, 29, 51 and the term 'nicht-zoroastrisch'.

7 Nyberg, *Die Religionen*, 24–25.

8 Geo Widengren, "Stand und Aufgaben II," *Numen*, 2, 1 (1955), 59.

9 Widengren, "Stand und Aufgaben II," 69, 75; Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), 62, 64, 98, 99, 101. On the concept 'Religionsstifter' and the interpretation of Zarathustra as founder of religion, cf. Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale*, Band 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 21.

Chapter II of his book *Die Religionen Irans* bears the pretentious title 'Leben und Lehre Zarathustras', pretentious in the sense that it claims the possibility to write a biography of Zarathustra and moreover to describe what his teachings were. Widengren also agrees with most other scholars in regarding the Gāthās as an authentic source for the life and teaching of Zarathustra, which was composed by himself.

Compared with the interpretations of much actual scholarship Widengren's view of the Zarathustra figure is clearly in line with the religio-historical approach. Looking first at the way in which Zarathustra is presented we find a marked contrast, for example, with Mary Boyce (1975) who has adopted the view-point of medieval and modern Zoroastrians depicting Zarathustra as a 'prophet'. They did so in order to make him and his community appear more acceptable in the eyes of the ruling Muslim elites but also to western Christians.¹⁰ Many other scholars also place Zarathustra in the category of a 'prophet' as a way to express his role as reformer or founder of a revealed religion.¹¹

The trend with scholars to put Zarathustra in the role of a prophet is not a recent phenomenon, however. The example of Williams Jackson clearly shows what happens when categories taken from another cultural sphere – that of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are applied to ancient Iranian religion. In his Avestan grammar from 1892, he outlined the standard image of Zarathustra as a prophet. There Jackson stated that he intended to write a 'Life of Zarathuŝtra' which was then fully elaborated in his book from 1899 with the title *Zoroaster. The Prophet of Ancient Iran*.¹² The purpose – according to Jackson – is to reconstruct "the story of the life and ministry of Zoroaster" beginning with his genealogy, his birth and childhood, then coming to his revelation and public appearance and ending with his last years and death. All this is apparently inspired by the 'Life of Jesus' genre which developed in the 19th century, and is best represented by the two influential books of David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu* (1838) and Ernest Renan *La vie de Jésus* (1863). The terminology used by Jackson is illuminating. Zoroastrian notions and figures are frequently equated with biblical concepts. The Gāthās on which Jackson based his picture of Zarathustra are called 'the Zoroastrian Psalms'; the Ameshea Spentas, the divine entities, are denoted 'Archangels' and the persons surrounding

10 On styling Zarathustra as a prophet, cf. Stausberg, *Die Religion*, 40–62.

11 See, for instance, Helmut Humbach, "A Western Approach to Zarathushtra," *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute*, Vol. 51 (1984) and Pierre Lecoq, *Les livres de l'Avesta ancien* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016).

12 Williams Jackson, *Zoroaster. The Prophet of Ancient Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1899).

Zarathustra in the Gāthās are called his ‘apostles’. All this could evoke associations that were alien to the genuine Iranian world of ideas.

As far as I can see Widengren avoids using the term ‘prophet’ when referring to Zarathustra, he mentions him by name or sometimes by the attribute ‘Religionsstifter’. Only exceptionally he refers to Zarathustra as prophet, once within quotation marks in “Stand und Aufgaben II” (p. 76) and in some passages of his article “Révélation et prédication dans les Gāthās” (1979). Widengren emphasizes instead the fact that Zarathustra presents himself as a *zaoatar* ‘priest’ in the Gāthās (*Yasna* 33,6). Following H.S. Nyberg, Widengren characterizes the religious type of Zarathustra as that of a priest and ritual singer.¹³

Summing up his view on the role of Zarathustra, Widengren states that the appearance of Zarathustra in the Iranian milieu of that time signified a true revolution. Zarathustra introduced a new religion in the sense that he did not only reject animal sacrifices and *haoma* intoxication but also that he discarded worship of the inherited gods except Ahura Mazdā; one seeks in vain the names of these deities in his Gāthās.¹⁴ They were replaced by a group of divine entities called Aməša Spəntas, the ‘Beneficent Immortals’ who are arranged to represent the three functions of the Indo-European divine society. Widengren here accepts without criticism the tripartite system elaborated by Georges Dumézil in a number of publications.¹⁵ Widengren emphasizes that the Gāthās are reflective texts based on a divine revelation conveyed to Zarathustra by a visionary experience (*cišti-*) which was obtained in a state of ecstasy (*xvařna-*).¹⁶ They have been inspired by the cult but they are not ritual texts. It is not until later that the Gāthās would have received a ritual Sitz im Leben.¹⁷

However, the course of the religious history after the time of Zarathustra took an astonishing turn, according to Widengren. The intoxicating *haoma* cult was reintroduced and so also animal sacrifices. The figure of Yima who

13 Widengren, *Die Religionen*, 67–74; Widengren, *Les religions de l’Iran* (Paris: Payot, 1968), 86–93.

14 Widengren, *Die Religionen*, 66 and 108–109; Widengren, *Les religions*, 85–86, 130–131.

15 Georges Dumézil, *Naissance d’archanges. Essai sur la formation de la théologie zoroastrienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) and Georges Dumézil, *Les dieux souverains des Indo-Européens. Troisième édition revue et corrigée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) to mention the most important ones.

16 Geo Widengren, “Révélation et prédication dans les Gāthās,” in *Iranica*. Edited by Gherardo Gnoli and Adriano V. Rossi. (Naples: Istituto universitario orientale, 1979), 362.

17 Widengren, *Die Religionen*, 93; Widengren, *Les religions*, 114.

was condemned by Zarathustra now reappears and is praised in positive terms. As is stated in the Avesta:

the most splendid of those born, with a glance most like the sun among humans.

YASNA 9,4; My translation

Widengren describes these changes with words underlining the dramatic character of that religious reversal:

De tout cela, il ressort clairement que l'apparition de Zarathoustra dans ce milieu aryen, si semblable au milieu védique, entraîna une véritable évolution. Zarathoustra symbolise une religion nouvelle, qui se dresse contre l'ancienne.¹⁸

His conclusion is that we have to do with a syncretistic process profoundly transforming the religion of Zarathustra and consequently that of the Gāthās. In this respect Widengren deviates from the interpretation put forward by his teacher H.S. Nyberg who considered the religion of the Gāthā community in which Zarathustra first appeared to be no more than a particular form of the wide-spread Mazdā-religion that dominated ancient Iran. Besides the Gāthā community there existed, according to Nyberg, another community located within the Fryāna-tribe in which Mithra was the supreme god. To this tribe Zarathustra fled and there he shaped a new syncretistic religion by merging his own Mazdā-religion with that of the Mithra-community. This religion was referred to by Nyberg as 'Zoroastrianism'.¹⁹

Coming back to Widengren we may note that his view on the religious history of ancient Iran was shared by other contemporary scholars. Ilya Gershevitch, for instance, saw in the Avesta the sacred writings of two different religions, which he denoted 'Zarathushtrianism' on one hand and 'Zoroastrianism' on the other. The former is – I quote – 'the doctrine preached by Zarathuštra as found in the Gāthās, the latter is an Iranian religious *koiné* which includes "Zarathushtrianism"'. Gershevitch speaks of a "contamination of the prophet's doctrine with incompatible elements". This mixed religion emerged in eastern Iran and was imported to the West by Darius in the last quarter of the 6th century. Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin stated briefly that:

18 Widengren, *Les religions*, 85.

19 Nyberg, *Die Religionen*, 25 and 263.

“the original doctrine of Zoroaster altered considerably in the course of the centuries, as is evident from the Later *Avesta*.”²⁰

The interpretation of Widengren and other scholars was not a new one, however. By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century scholars were convinced that Zarathustra had shaped a new form of Iranian religion that was laid down in the Gāthās.²¹ This original Zoroastrianism was subsequently transformed to a varying degree by an accommodation process in which elements once rejected by Zarathustra made their way back into his religion. Notable representatives of that opinion were the Scandinavian scholars Edvard Lehmann (1899, 1902) and Edgar Reuterskiöld (1914), as also the British philologist James Moulton (1913). For many scholars of that time this process was seen as the emergence of a syncretistic religion where the notion of syncretism also implied negative connotations.

The view of Zarathustra as a reformer or even founder of a new religion is intimately bound up with the question of the sort of Iranian religion to which he – following prevalent opinion – strongly opposed himself. As other scholars also do, Widengren reconstructs this religion from the *Yāsts* of the Avesta and proposes to denote it ‘the popular religion of Iran’.²² He devotes an entire section in *Die Religionen Irans* to describe this religion under the heading ‘The pre-Zoroastrian period’.²³ Widengren, as also his Uppsala colleague Stig Wikander,²⁴ especially pointed to the phenomenon of the Indo-Iranian ‘Männerbund’ which was thought by them and other scholars to have dominated Iranian society in the time of Zarathustra. In the view of these scholars the ‘Männerbünde’ were composed of young warriors who developed specific rituals with excessive animal sacrifices and an intoxicating *haoma* cult. In addition, the members of the ‘Männerbund’ spread violence and terror among the population.

On this point too, Widengren follows up the interpretations proposed by earlier scholars. Nathan Söderblom, for example, saw the conflict underlying the Gāthās as a social and religious opposition between peaceful farmers and

20 Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Religion of Ancient Iran* (Bombay: Tata Press, 1973), 121.

21 For the following, see Anders Hultgård, “The Study of the Avesta and its Religion Around the Year 1900 and Today,” in *Hundred Years of History of Religions in Norway. The Heritage of W. Brede Kristensen*. Edited by Sigurd Hjelde (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2000), 73–99.

22 Widengren, *Die Religionen*, 94: ‘iranische Volksreligion’; Widengren, *Les religions*, 115: ‘religion populaire d’Iran’.

23 Widengren, *Die Religionen*, 7–59; Widengren, *Les religions*, 23–77.

24 Stig Wikander, *Der arische Männerbund. Studien zur indo-iranischen Sprach- und Religionsgeschichte* (Lund: Gleerup, 1938).

cattle-tenders on one hand, and a ruling warrior elite worshipping the *daēvas* and who like ‘predatory knights’ exploited the defenseless agriculturalists.²⁵ The comparison with medieval Europe was explicitly made by Söderblom. The scholars who wrote around the year 1900 also raised the question of the type of Iranian religion Zarathustra had reformed or rejected. With the contrast of Zarathustra’s supposed monotheism against polytheism, his higher form of worship against blood-sacrifices, the notion of ‘paganism’ presented itself easily. With the Danish historian of religions Edvard Lehmann, the distinction between Zoroastrianism and Iranian paganism (‘iranisk hedenskap’) is fully developed. In his book from 1899 Lehmann devoted an extensive chapter to the pre-Zoroastrian paganism.²⁶ The description of this ancient Iranian paganism, a concept which seems to have been introduced by Lehmann, was to become a favourite exercise in textbooks and monographs on Zoroastrianism. James Moulton begins his book *Early Zoroastrianism* with a chapter entitled ‘Before Zarathustra’. The tendency can be said to culminate with Mary Boyce who devotes half of the first volume of her *History of Zoroastrianism* to an exposé of what she calls the ‘The pagan background.’

Comparing the scheme of Widengren and other scholars on Iranian religious history with what modern scholarship has achieved, we should ask to what extent does this scheme remain valid? Criticism has been levelled at the traditional view by some leading scholars of Iranian studies, in the first place Jean Kellens and Prods Oktor Skjærvø. Both scholars express doubt on the idea of Zarathustra as a historical person who profoundly reformed the Iranian religion of his time. Kellens has elaborated his view in several studies.²⁷ The Gāthās are ritual texts to be recited during a sacrificial performance. The polemizing note which undoubtedly exists may concern divergences in ritual details between different priestly schools. The conventional view of the Gāthās as evidence for Zarathustra’s life and teachings rests on a false interpretation of these songs which was inspired by a *Vorverständnis* of Zarathustra as a prophetic and historical figure. Kellens further maintained that Zarathustra could not be the author of the Gāthās.

25 Nathan Söderblom, *The Living God: Basal Forms of Personal Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 186.

26 Edvard Lehmann, *Zarathustra. En bog om Persernes gamle tro*, Vol. 1–II (København: Schubotheseke forlag, 1899–1902), 75–169.

27 Jean Kellens, *Le panthéon de l’Avesta ancien* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1994); *Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2000) and *La quatrième naissance de Zarathushtra* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

According to Skjærvø there is little evidence to suggest the historicity of Zarathustra. In both the older and younger Avesta he appears rather as a pure mythical figure.²⁸ On the accusation of pursuing the aim “to spirit Zaratustra out of history” Skjærvø retorts:

In my opinion, Zarathustra was spirited into a history he never belonged to and, even if he ever was in history, that history is now irretrievably lost.²⁹

Looking at other modern presentations of Zoroastrianism, the traditional view on its history, as represented by the scheme of Widengren, is considered to be of less relevance. For instance, Albert de Jong emphasizes a broad definition of Iranian religion and opposes the idea of a normative Zoroastrianism versus heterodox versions.³⁰ He further points to the presence of two constituents in Iranian religion, one composed of priestly traditions, the other of lay people. Both traditions reflect different aspects of the same religion.

For Michael Stausberg, the identity of the religion he intends to describe, is not based on a system of common teachings nor on a community of faith. Zoroastrianism is conceived of as “a bunch of action fields, (‘Handlungsfelder’), discourse- and reception contexts”.³¹ The point is not so much about the question whether Zarathustra had the same religious ideology as later Zoroastrians. The important thing is to study the ways in which they understood and referred to him. In this sense a Zoroastrian religion should be constructed. As to Zarathustra, Stausberg states that neither his historicity nor his claim to have founded a new religion can be demonstrated.

More in line with the traditional scheme is the interpretation of Pierre Lecoq (2016). Zarathustra was a historical figure, and the Gāthās are indisputably his own work. They testify to a moderate change of the sacrifices and a less excessive use of the *haoma* ritual. The belief in the supreme god Ahura Mazdā existed before and the general demonization of a certain group of deities,

28 Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *Zarathustras Sanger. De eldste iranske skriftene* (Oslo: De norske bokklubbene, 2003), IX.

29 Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Zarathustra: A Revolutionary Monotheist?,” in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*. Edited by Beate Pontgratz-Leisten (Eisenbrauns: E-book, 2011), 336.

30 Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 68, 452 and 457.

31 Stausberg, *Die Religion*, 18–19: “Das Zarathuštriertum wird nicht als Glaubensgemeinschaft, sondern als Bündel von Handlungsfeldern, Diskurs- und Rezeptionskontexten verstanden”.

called the *daivas*, had already occurred. Consequently, Zarathustra was not the founder of a new religion. What he achieved, according to Lecoq, consisted essentially in an ethical reform of the Iranian religion current at his time.

In my own view, the scheme of an ancient Iranian religion being thoroughly reformed by a figure called Zarathustra, then in turn strongly transformed and reverting much to its former first state seems highly improbable. On the contrary, the history of the ancient Iranian religion as we are able to grasp it begins with the Old Avestan texts (around 1000 BCE) and what was before is simply irretrievable. To cite Skjærvø: "We know nothing about the Iranian religion before the Old Avesta".³² What we then encounter, are continuously evolving traditions giving rise to a rich and varied religion which we may denote Zoroastrianism or, as I prefer, Iranian religion.

5 The Problem of Iranian Influence on Early Judaism and Christianity

The third theme to be dealt with is the question of Iranian influence on the eastern Mediterranean world, especially early Judaism and Christianity. Widengren has addressed this question in a number of publications. Those that I have deemed to be the most illuminating for his approach are listed in the bibliography below.

However, it is appropriate to start with a statement by Widengren himself:

The spiritual and material culture of Iran has always exerted an irresistible influence on the peoples who have been in direct contact with Iran.³³

Widengren once said to me that he considered the cultural and religious impact of Iran on the eastern Mediterranean world to have been 'immense'. When my study on that topic appeared (Hultgård 1979), he could not conceal his disappointment, dropping the remark: "the Iranian influence was much stronger than you accounted for."

The fields where Widengren claimed to have shown such an influence included early Judaism and Christianity, Gnosticism, and Roman Mithraism. The main objection to his argument is, in my opinion, that he did not pay sufficient attention to cultures other than the Iranian in trying to determine the

32 Skjærvø, "Zarathustra," 317–350.

33 My translation of the Swedish original: "Irans andliga och materiella kultur har alltid utövat ett oemotståndligt inflytande på de folk, som haft en direkt kontakt med Iran".

background for the Judeo-Christian phenomena he investigated. To take one example. The description of the god of Israel as “one ancient in years”, wearing a robe white as snow and “the hair of his head being like cleanest wool” (*Book of Daniel* chapter 7) for whom thrones were set in place, is regarded by commentators as somewhat strange. Widengren took it as a clear reference to the Iranian god Zervān or Zurvān, who is represented as an aged deity with white hairs. In the words of Widengren:

That Zervan, the god of Time and Age, should be visualized in that way is as natural as it is unnatural to visualize Yahveh as an old man.³⁴

As most commentators do, the background of *Daniel* chapter 7 is rather to seek in Canaanite and West Semitic mythology where the supreme god El is depicted as an old man with white hair sitting on his throne.³⁵

On the other hand, Widengren rightly points to some ideas in Gnosticism and early Christianity that reveal an Iranian influence. To take one example where Widengren’s interpretation does not seem to have attracted the attention it deserves in commentaries to the New Testament.³⁶ The well-known story in the *Gospel of Matthew* (chapter 2) relates how μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν “Magi from the east” appeared in Jerusalem and wondered where the new born king of the Jews is. They had seen αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρρα ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ, which can mean either “his star in the east” or “the rising of his star”, and wish to pay him homage. When king Herod heard this, he was greatly disturbed and asked the chief priests and lawyers where the Messiah should be born. They answered: in Bethlehem. Herod told the Magi to go there and make an inquiry for the child and then to return and inform him when they had found the child. The Magi set out and the star which they had seen went ahead of them until it stopped above the place where the child lay. Warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the Magi returned to their country. So far, the legend.

The story in *Matthew* chapter two has been much debated and commented upon. The *magoi* of the Greek text are usually interpreted as being ‘astrologers’ or more generally ‘wise men’ and the astrological line of interpretation has

34 Geo Widengren, “Iran and Israel in Parthian Times with Specific Regard to the Ethiopic Book of Enoch,” *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2 (1966), 157.

35 For example, Raymond Hammer, *The Book of Daniel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) and John J. Collins, *Daniel. A commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

36 First put forward in Widengren, “Stand und Aufgaben” I, 81 and then fully developed in Geo Widengren, *Iranisch-semitische Kulturbegegnung in parthischer Zeit* (Köln and Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1960).

dominated scholarly research. Since the use of the term in the gospel story is not pejorative, however, the word *magoi* here most probably refers to Persian priests and not to ‘magicians’ or ‘hellenized astrologers.’ Recently Albert de Jong has explained the presence of the Magi in *Matthew* chapter 2 in another way. They were introduced in the story as experts on kingship in agreement with the concern of the gospel author to emphasize Christ as the king of the Jews.³⁷

For Widengren the Iranian background of the gospel story was clear. He pointed to a tradition preserved in an incomplete Christian commentary to the *Gospel of Matthew* (*Opus imperfectum in Matthaëum* from the fourth century) and in a Syriac chronicle written in the eighth century.³⁸ In the chronicle the passage on the Magi is taken from an earlier source. The tradition runs briefly as follows.

Every year after the threshing festival the Magi gather in a place called the ‘Mountain of victory’. On the mountain there is a cave with springs of water and beautiful trees. The Magi expect in silence the appearance of a star which will announce the birth of a saviour. This happened generation after generation until, at last, one year the star appears and stops over the mountain. In the light of the star that descends on the mountain and fills the cave a figure becomes manifest, a little man, as both texts have it. The Magi enter and a voice bids them peace. Thereupon they are exhorted to follow the star which will lead them to Bethlehem. On this point of the narrative the gospel version is inserted in a sort of pale doublet to the first version.

Widengren emphasizes that this version reflects a genuine Iranian tradition which is independent from the gospel story. This tradition predicted the coming of a saviour king identified with the god Mithra. By the intermediary of a Jewish source the early Christians took over the Iranian story and applied it to their saviour, Christ. Although Widengren’s argument cannot be presented in all detail here, his interpretation of the background to the story of the Magi in the gospel seems to me convincing.

37 Albert de Jong, “Matthew’s Magi as Experts on Kingship,” in *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Experts on the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and Modern Astronomy*. Edited by Peter Barthel and George van Kooten (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 271–285.

38 See Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés. Tome II. Les textes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938), 118–120; on this specific chronicle, see also Witold Witakowski, *Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē* (Uppsala: Uppsala university, 1987), and for the passage on the Magi, Anders Hultgård, “The Magi and the Star – the Persian Background,” in *Being Religious and Living through the Eyes. Studies in Religious Iconography and Iconology. A Celebratory Publication in Honour of Professor Jan Bergman*. Edited by Peter Schalk and Michael Stausberg (Uppsala: Uppsala university, 1998).

6 Conclusions

Widengren was an internationally appreciated scholar in the field of Iranian and Middle East studies. This position can be confirmed by having a glance into the comprehensive collection of off-prints that were sent to him. As to Iranian studies, recurrent names of dedicators include Harold Bailey, Georges Dumézil and Helmut Humbach. Widengren mastered quite a lot of languages, a fact which created confidence in his text interpretations. Although several of his ideas have been superseded by the results of more recent research, his scholarly work remains impressive.

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The Eclipse of Geo Widengren in the Study of Iranian Religions

Albert de Jong

1 Introduction

In¹ one of his celebrated table talks, the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins remarked that “two things are certain in the long run: one is that we’ll all be dead; but another is that we’ll all be wrong. Clearly, a good scholarly career is where the first comes before the second.”² By this measure, it is an inescapable fact that Geo Widengren did not have a good scholarly career.

There is much that could argue against such an appraisal of a scholarly life: Widengren was appointed to the Uppsala chair of the History of Religions when he was still very young, had a very long and very distinguished career in teaching and supervision, commanded loyalty and respect (but not, it seems, affection) in his students, and was the author of a most impressive range of publications on a wide variety of subjects. He was a powerful organizer of the field of the study of religion in Europe, was president of the International Association for the History of Religions, involved with that association’s flagship journal *Numen*, the recipient of a massive two-volume *Festschrift* with contributions from the leading scholars of the time, and of multiple honorary doctorates, including one from his own university.

Seen in this light, Widengren was as close to royalty in the study of religion as anyone could ever hope to be.³ And yet, it was not only towards the end of

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- 1 The writing of this chapter took place under the spectre of two observations made during the conference where I first began to formulate some of these remarks. The first was the offence Giovanni Casadio took at my description of Geo Widengren as “the man who was always wrong”. The second was a casual observation made by Michael Stausberg, that if there was anyone currently alive who reminded him of Geo Widengren, at the very least where it comes to overconfidence or apodicticity, it was me. I am very grateful to Göran Larsson for allowing me to stick to my observations, and equally grateful to Jan Bremmer, Giovanni Casadio, Wouter Hanegraaff, and Michael Stausberg for politely disagreeing with them.
 - 2 Marshall Sahlins, *Waiting for Foucault, Still* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 2.
 - 3 In fact, C.J. Bleeker (for whom, see below) literally called Widengren “a prince among the historians of religion” (“de prins van de godsdiensthistorici”): J.G. Platvoet, “Review of G. Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin, 1969),” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 11 (1971), 79.

his long and productive life that scholars began to register fatal flaws in many of his works (or, worse, simply to ignore him). This was a constant feature accompanying his entire career, and the critique was in most cases fully justified. He responded to this by publishing even more, and pushing even harder, and projecting an image of robust confidence with frequent appeals to the fact that ‘by now’, the learned world had come round to seeing things from his perspective.⁴ In order to maintain this perception of the scholarly world around him, which with hindsight would strike modern observers as somewhat delusional, Widengren constantly vacillated between claims to superior philological insights on the one hand, and claims to better (more generally accepted) methodology on the other.⁵ But in general, he preferred simply to ignore objections raised against his insights – both with regard to details, and with regard to his more general work – and to withdraw into the intellectual company of a small group of friendly colleagues.⁶

4 See, for example, the review Widengren wrote of Carsten Colpe, *Die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). In that review, *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 58 (1963): 533–548, at p. 533, he claims that *at the time of writing* the learned world had come to accept the basic soundness of R. Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium: Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Bonn: Marcus & Weber, 1921) with regard to his (or rather Lidzbarski’s) ideas about the origin of the Mandaean: “Diese Sicht hat sich trotz heftigen Widerstandes während der zwanziger und dreißiger Jahre vor allem dank der Entdeckung der Qumran-Texte siegreich behauptet und kann jetzt als die allgemein vorherrschende betrachtet werden.” None of that was actually true, as the volume he was reviewing explicitly demonstrated.

5 A particularly painful example of this was revealed through the publication, by Jorunn Jacobson Buckley, of a generous selection of the correspondence of E.S. Drower, the foremost specialist on the Mandaean of Widengren’s generation: J.J. Buckley, *Lady E.S. Drower’s Scholarly Correspondence: An Intrepid English Autodidact in Iraq* (Leiden: Brill, 2012, 191–201). Widengren reviewed E.S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), in his usual way. He is very brief with praise and gratitude (or with giving his readers an idea what the book he is reviewing is actually about), and almost immediately begins to add corrections and suggestions, accusing Drower of basic mistakes in grammar and lexicon, all in a tone that can only be qualified as magisterial. Lady Drower objected, both personally to Widengren and in a rebuttal destined for a larger audience. Not all pieces of this particular puzzle are extant, but it is clear that when Widengren (finally) realized that he could no longer pretend to know Mandaic better than lady Drower, he switched to an argument over methods of translation. Unfortunately, the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* managed to misspell Widengren’s name as Widekgson (hence: G. Widekgson, “Review of E.S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean* (Leiden: Brill, 1959),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1961: 124–126).

6 A good example of this is the last book he published, written together with his student Anders Hultgård and his Strasbourg friend Marc Philonenko: G. Widengren, A. Hultgård & M. Philonenko, *Apocryphique iranienne et dualisme qoumrânien* (Recherches

2 Institutional and Intellectual Backgrounds

Widengren dedicated his *Religionsphänomenologie* to the Faculty of Theology of the University of Amsterdam and its dean, Claas Jouco Bleeker,⁷ and he dedicated his *Die Religionen Irans* to the Faculty of Protestant Theology of the University of Strasbourg (which, at the time, was led by the church historian François Wendel).⁸ Connections between these three institutions were evidently close: Bleeker was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Strasbourg; Wendel received one from the University of Uppsala; Widengren received honorary doctorates from both the University of Amsterdam and from Strasbourg. These dedications (and these signs of mutual recognition) arguably place his two most ambitious works in the very clear ambiance of the twilight of the dominance (or rather naturalness) of liberal Protestantism in the study of religion, and in many Western societies in general.⁹

intertestamentaires 2; Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1995). Hultgård's contribution to the book is sober and in conversation with current scholarship, but Widengren and Philonenko's contributions are not. They are best seen as the swan song of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. For that movement in German historical theology, and Widengren's participation in it, see below.

- 7 C.J. Bleeker (1898–1983) was professor of the History of Religion and the Phenomenology of Religion in the University of Amsterdam from 1946 to 1969. Like Gerardus van der Leeuw and Adriaan de Buck, Bleeker was a student of William Brede Kristensen and trained as an Egyptologist. Bleeker's evidently warm relationship with Widengren was likely helped by the fact that Bleeker's wife was Swedish (as was, incidentally, the wife of Adriaan de Buck). See K. Wagtendonk, "Bleeker, Claas Jouco," *Biografisch Lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlandse protestantisme* 5 (Kampen: Kok, 2001), 67–68.
- 8 See L. Hege, "La Faculté de théologie protestante de Strasbourg: de 1945 à 1968," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 136 (1990): 121–130, for a quick history of this faculty in the relevant period.
- 9 This is a vast field of research, very well served in scholarly publications, and not at all my area of expertise. Some of the most inspiring work I know in this area comes from the study of American religious history, and of liberal protestantism ('modernism') in that particular context: D.A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013); D. Mislin, *Saving Faith: Making Religious Pluralism an American Value at the Dawn of the Secular Age* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2015). Within that context, however, liberal protestantism clearly (or with hindsight) had a 'progressive' flavour (R.W. Fox, "The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875–1925," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993): 639–660). The European context is, in that respect, different. For alongside the link between religious modernism and social and political progressive ideas, there is an equally well-attested (at times extremely) conservative branch of protestant modernism. It is that branch that was culturally salient in the period of Widengren's youth in many parts of protestant Europe. The most penetrating sketch of that *milieu* that I know of (using the lens of secularizing notions of redemption in Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche) is C.-D. Osthövener, *Erlösung: Transformationen einer*

Within this particular constellation, however, Widengren's work stands out as lacking in overt expressions of faith. Widengren was a Lutheran and saw many of his predecessors, colleagues, students and friends serve the Swedish Lutheran church, but there are no indications that I am aware of that he saw his scholarship as being informed in any way by his religious background or heritage. For Bleeker, this was completely different: he very clearly believed that his scholarly work was informed by, and in the service of, his faith. Even for him, however, that faith was not a confession, but a very firm belief in the intrinsic value of 'religion'.¹⁰ This mood, or some of its basic postulates, very clearly permeates Widengren's *Religionsphänomenologie*, even if (as seems likely) its author himself was an agnostic.

Religionsphänomenologie is an exceptionally difficult work to figure out,¹¹ especially for someone (like the present writer) who does not possess deep knowledge of its direct Swedish context. When it was finally published in German, in 1969, it was already hopelessly out of date. This is squarely admitted in the preface to that translation, which simultaneously presents the book

Idee im 19. Jahrhundert (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 128; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). For conservatism as one of the possible breeding grounds and incarnations of history, anthropology and the study of religion, see especially J. Van Horn Melton, "From Folk History to Structural History: Otto Brunner (1898–1982) and the Radical-Conservative Roots of German Social History," in *Paths of Continuity: Central European Historiography from the 1930s to the 1950s*, ed. H. Lehmann/J. Van Horn Melton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 263–292. (In a particularly charming Freudian slip, S. Marchand, "Priests among the Pygmies: Wilhelm Schmidt and the Counter-Reformation in Austrian Ethnology," in *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire*, ed. H. Glenn Penny/M. Bunzl (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 283–316 on p. 286, n. 3, has transformed the bland title in which James Van Horn Melton's brilliant article appears into something much more suitable: from *Paths of Continuity* to *Pathos of Continuity*). The theme of conservatism and scholarship seems vital for any understanding of Widengren, but it requires knowledge of Swedish society that goes far beyond my capacities.

- 10 This is the theological position that Jan Platvoet qualifies as 'religionism' and which he sees as the final incarnation of liberal protestant theology. See, for example, J. Platvoet, "Close Harmonies: The Science of Religion in Dutch *duplex ordo* Theology," *Numen* 45 (1998): 115–162, esp. p. 135 for its salient characteristics, and in greater detail (but in Dutch) J. Platvoet, "Religionisme beleden en bestreden: Recente ontwikkelingen in de Angelsaksische godsdienstwetenschap," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 48 (1994): 22–38.
- 11 Very helpful in this respect is K. Rudolph, "Review of G. Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin, 1969)," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 96 (1971): 241–250.

as “indeed almost a new work” and as having received its main inspiration from a spirit of protest against the “evolutionism” that was ‘still’ current in Sweden *twenty-five years* earlier.¹² This battle against evolutionism is something of a constant in Widengren’s work, but it never becomes clear what he means by it,¹³ exactly, or how his own work in fact departs from an evolutionist perspective.¹⁴ Since this question is immediately relevant to the subject of the present chapter, Widengren’s study of Iranian religions, a very brief discussion seems necessary here.

From his first serious intellectual contribution to Iranian studies (*Hochgottglaube*) down to his *Religionsphänomenologie*, Widengren was an ardent supporter of the concept of ‘high gods’, and the attendant notion of the primacy of *faith* in (a personal) God as the defining characteristic of religion.¹⁵ It is that faith, and that faith alone, that will allow the student of religion (and the historian of religions) to distinguish ‘religion’ from ‘magic’ (and thus to constitute the very field itself). That distinction, in turn, is vital as part of the polemic against ‘evolutionism’ (which, it turns out, is by and large a polemic against Tylorian ‘animism’). For all of this (including this peculiar usage of ‘evolutionism’), Widengren clearly directly depends on the works of Wilhelm

12 “Dieses religionsphänomenologische Werk wurde in bewußtem Protest gegen den in Schweden noch vor 25 Jahren herrschenden und von namhaften Gelehrten vertretenen Evolutionismus geschrieben.” (G. Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969): vii).

13 See G. Widengren, “Evolutionism and the Problem of the Origin of Religion,” *Ethnos* 10 (1945): 57–96; *id.*, “Die religionswissenschaftliche Forschung in Skandinavien in den letzten zwanzig Jahren 1: die schwedische Forschung,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 5 (1953): 193–222, with Göran Larsson, “It’s not *mana*! It’s High Gods! Another Conceptual History, or another Explanation, but a Similar Problem,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31 (2019): 447–456.

14 This was stressed already by S. Bjerke, “Ecology of Religion, Evolutionism and Comparative Religion,” in *Science of Religion: Studies in Methodology*, ed. L. Honko (Religion and Reason 13; The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 237–248, who shows convincingly on p. 245 that exactly the same would be true for Wilhelm Schmidt, who thought of himself as an ‘anti-evolutionist’, but whose works are built on foundations that are perfectly in sync with Tylorian evolutionism. Amazement at this aspect of Widengren’s work was unforgettably expressed by the main target of his polemic, Martin Nilsson, in his fabled letter to A.D. Nock: M.P. Nilsson, “Letter to Professor Arthur D. Nock on Some Fundamental Concepts in the Science of Religion,” *Harvard Theological Review* 42 (1949): 71–107, esp. 105–106.

15 E.g. Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 3: his work rests on “die Überzeugung, daß der Gottesglaube das innerste Wesen der Religion ausmacht.”

Schmidt.¹⁶ Schmidt's voluminous (and breathtakingly pugnacious)¹⁷ works have often been interpreted, and not unjustly, in the light of his Catholicism. It is important, however, to stress that while he was in no way circumspect about his confessional orientation on the world, he repudiated all facile claims that it was his religion that had laid the foundations of the gargantuan structure he had erected on the concept of primal monotheism; he claimed that structure to be the outcome of pure scientific reasoning.¹⁸ And indeed, it was the lapsed Catholic Raffaele Pettazzoni who, through his tireless 50-year polemic against Schmidt's *Urmonotheismus*, ensured that the somewhat diluted version of Schmidt's ideas that Widengren embraced in *Hochgottglaube* could maintain for him the status of 'fact' when he saw *Religionsphänomenologie* through the press,¹⁹ even though several years earlier, it (together with all authorities on whom Widengren largely relied; see below) had simply been declared 'dead as mutton' by E.E. Evans-Pritchard.²⁰ From Schmidt Widengren took his passion for diffusionism,²¹ which he developed into an alarming pan-Iranian direction, as we shall see; from Pettazzoni, Widengren took the far greater plasticity of conceptions of '(high) gods' that was needed to provide his ideas on *Hochgötter* with a bare minimum of plausibility. This allowed him to discover 'high gods' in a bewildering variety of different ideas and narratives. The high god would not only be *located* in the sky, but he would be identified with it, or could wear it or any of its visible objects as part of his garments;²² the high god would be

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- 16 For Schmidt, see J. van Baal & W.E.A. van Beek, *Symbols for Communication: An Introduction to the Anthropological Study of Religion* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), 95–101; H. Zimoń, "Wilhelm Schmidt's Theory of Primitive Monotheism and its Critique within the Vienna School of Ethnology," *Anthropos* 81 (1986): 243–260; Marchand, "Priests among the Pygmies."
- 17 See J.J. Fahrenfort, *Wie der Urmonotheismus am Leben erhalten wird* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1930).
- 18 Van Baal/Van Beek, *Symbols for Communication*, 101: "In his heart of hearts he was an apologist, but an apologist of such stature that he has a right to be contested on exclusively scientific grounds."
- 19 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 47, n. 2: "Der Hochgottglaube bei den heutigen schriftlosen Völkern und früheren Kulturvölkern ist keine *Theorie*, sondern ein *faktisches Phänomen*."
- 20 J.J. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1945), 100 (adding "for anthropologists, at least"; see Marchand, "Priests among the Pygmies", 286, on the 'winnowing out' of comparativists and historians from conventional self-histories of anthropological theory).
- 21 Not, obviously, in *Religionsphänomenologie*, for his conception of phenomenology of religion as a synchronic descriptive effort that would need to be kept strictly separate from the historical approach forbade it (Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 361).
- 22 This always remained a highly significant part of Widengren's understanding of Iranian sacred kingship, and it is no surprise that he refers, for this, to R. Eisler, *Weltenmantel*

a creator, or a judge, involved with current affairs or oblivious to them, and since he was (everywhere) connected with concepts of fate, he could simply be assumed to be present wherever anything resembling fate or narrative conceptions of history was recorded. By stringing together all of these elements, and making them largely substitutive of each other, Widengren maintained his very firm conviction in the facticity and salience of 'high gods' for a proper understanding of Iranian religions (with disastrous consequences), and for a proper positioning of the study of religion as a whole. Within his own conception of these high gods, everything made perfect sense and everything was provided with an aura of truly scientific merit. But there were few, if any, who shared his conception and when *Religionsphänomenologie* came out, the concept of *Hochgötter* clearly belonged to the 'zombie categories' of the study of religion.²³ We should go even further: phenomenology of religion itself, by that time, was a zombie approach to the study of religion.

Widengren's work has been located in what Michael Stausberg calls the "great age of the phenomenological treatises",²⁴ and if we would quantify publications, reputations and, for example, the activities of the newly founded IAHR, that label is entirely justified. But it was largely a 'great age' within a very specific and rather diminutive context: the (predominantly protestant) faculties of Theology of continental European universities.²⁵ These faculties

und Himmelszelt: Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Urgeschichte des antiken Weltbildes (München: C.H. Beck, 1910), one of the most bizarre scholarly works of the twentieth century. See for Eisler and his *Weltenmantel* Brian Collins, *Robert Eisler and the Magic of the Combinatory Mind: The Forgotten Life of a 20th-Century Austrian Polymath* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

- 23 The term "zombie concept" ("zombie category", "zombie theory") was given currency by Ulrich Beck (e.g., U. Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies," *Theory, Culture & Society* 19 (2002): 17–44). It is a very helpful category for historians of academic fields, and it is as such that I use it, to indicate a theorem that looks alive, but has been dead for a long time (and, following Beck, eats our brains). Where I cannot follow Beck is in his presentist assumption that it is 'our' modernity (and globalization) that makes these concepts identifiable as obsolete.
- 24 M. Stausberg, "The Study of Religion(s) in Western Europe III: Further Developments after World War II," *Religion* 39 (2009): 261–282, p. 265.
- 25 It is distinctly possible that my view of this history has been unduly influenced by my own local (Dutch) context, for which see J. Platvoet, "Close Harmonies;" *id.*, "From Consonance to Autonomy: The Science of Religion in the Netherlands, 1948–1995," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 10 (1998): 334–351; A.L. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); M.A. Davidsen, "Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited: The Current Crisis in Dutch Study of Religion and a Way Out," *NTT: Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 74 (2020): 213–241. German universities in particular seem to have known a different development, in a double way. On the one hand, they were more successful in preserving their status and

themselves were but a shadow of their former selves and had long lost the prestige that would have allowed, earlier, most of its faculty members to find an audience beyond the confines of their own institutions.²⁶ Within those faculties, the relative visibility and prestige of the departments for the study of religion, where they existed at all, could vary greatly. Even in those faculties where such departments had substantial relative weight, they mostly were held back by long-standing theological definitions and traditions.

The most enduring and intellectually compromising of those, without a doubt, was the tacit agreement that two religions were excluded from the purview of the discipline. These were Christianity and Judaism. The former was out of bounds, since it was already dealt with by all the other departments (and was often seen as incomparable); the latter was not seen as a subject to be taught in theological faculties at all. Of course, specialists in what was called, at the time, 'late Judaism' (*Spätjudentum*) were a prominent part of the departments of New Testament studies. They would occupy themselves with those aspects of Jewish history, literature, and thought that were directly relevant to the study of the New Testament and of earliest Christianity. Wilhelm Bousset, who is widely believed to have coined the term *Spätjudentum*,²⁷ and whose *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*²⁸ defined this field as

recognition than, for example, the Dutch and Scandinavian faculties of theology. On the other hand, they failed to develop a serious presence of the study of religion as a fixed part of their research and teaching; see M. Stausberg, "Religious Studies in Germany: Institutional Frameworks and Constraints," *NTT: Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71 (2017): 58–73.

26 When I discussed this with my friend and colleague Wouter Hanegraaff, he objected and pointed out that Paul Ricœur, in developing the notion of a 'hermeneutics of faith' to counterbalance the dominant 'hermeneutics of suspicion', explicitly drew on Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade, and the broader tradition of phenomenology of religion. That is certainly the case, but Ricœur's efforts in these directions seem to point very precisely at an appreciation of phenomenology of religion as a branch of theology, or "rational faith", allowing everyone without the strong (and strongly protestant) existential involvement that characterizes Ricœur's work to continue to ignore phenomenology of religion, which they did. See P. Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 28–29.

27 When, in the 1970s, the continued use of this derogatory concept finally began to be recognized as repugnant, it was miraculously transformed into "Frühjudentum", 'early Judaism', with (too) little discussion; see A. Runesson, "Particularistic Judaism and Universalistic Christianity? Some Critical Remarks on Terminology and Theology," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000): 120–144.

28 W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im hellenistischen Zeitalter* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1903); the work was republished, after Bousset's death, by Hugo Greßmann under a slightly different title (*Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter*), and was widely prescribed to students of theology down to the 1970s. Upon publication, it

an academic subject, ended his period of interest with the Bar Kokhba revolt (around 135 CE). This excluded from his work, programmatically, Jewish literature, history, and thought from the Mishnah onwards, as fields that held no interest for the student of theology. This has been maintained in many theological faculties in Europe to the present (and represents, in the writer's view, the hereditary sin of European Christian academic theology). The teaching of Rabbinic (and later) Judaism was either located in separate Jewish theological institutions built on the model of protestant faculties of theology,²⁹ or it was reduced to 'history' and 'literature' and removed to the Faculty of Arts.³⁰

Widengren was clearly at home in this particular theologically inflected approach to the study of religion. It is not surprising, therefore, that Widengren's *Religionsphänomenologie* continues the usage of the term *spätjüdisch/Spätjudentum*, which was still current at the time, and does not contain any references to Judaism (or Zoroastrianism) as a living religion. It is important to note this, because in Widengren's case it is extremely unlikely that this would have been motivated by the type of supersessionist theology that clearly motivated Bousset.³¹ In the phenomenology of religion in general, there was little interest in the 'later' stages of 'historical' religions. The field was dominated by students of the religions of antiquity, of the religions of small-scale traditional societies, and of the 'classical' versions of Hinduism and Buddhism – all of whom, including Widengren, felt entirely comfortable in discounting the

was bitterly attacked by Felix Perles, a learned rabbi from Königsberg in Prussia (J. Perles, *Bousset's Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter kritisch untersucht* (Berlin: Wolf Peiser, 1903)), and by other Jewish intellectuals, all of whom accused Bousset of betraying his own claims to pure scientific research in favour of Christian apologetics. Bousset responded to them in W. Bousset, *Volksfrömmigkeit und Schriftgelehrtentum: Antwort auf Herrn Perles' Kritik meiner "Religion des Judentums im N.T. Zeitalter"* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1903). See J.-M. Tétaz, "Le protestantisme libéral de l'empire wilhelminien: un antijudaïsme théologique?," *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* 92 (2017): 619–652; and especially C. Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany* (Studies in European Judaism 10; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 170–205, for this controversy. In his biography of Bousset (A.F. Verheule, *Wilhelm Bousset: Leben und Werk* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1973; diss. Utrecht)), A.F. Verheule (on p. 91) still claims that in 1973, nothing had come out that could rival Bousset's work.

29 This was the German practice, for which see Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse*, 88–94.

30 This was (and largely still is) the situation in the Netherlands, for which see A. van der Heide, "De studie van het jodendom in Nederland: verleden, heden, toekomst," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 17 (1983): 41–57; 177–209.

31 In fact, Widengren wrote several publications in which he dealt extensively with Jewish history, especially in the Sasanian period (e.g., G. Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sasanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* 1 (1961): 117–162, which included a (fairly limited) discussion of some Talmudic materials).

importance of the fact that some of these religions had not, in fact, died out. This was clearly because of the dominance of some kind of primordialism that was felt to be entirely convincing and scholarly. All this came in a time where beyond the circles of the phenomenology of religion, and beyond the halls of theological faculties, most of the core elements and postulates of this particular approach to religion increasingly were repudiated or failed to be registered at all, and were unable to exert any influence.³²

3 Some Problems with the *Religionsphänomenologie*

Phenomenology of religion, in the time of its 'great age,' was a rearguard phenomenon, and Widengren's *Religionsphänomenologie* was a particularly obsolescent manifestation of it. This becomes immediately evident through an analysis of the authors he quotes. The author he quotes the most, by a huge margin, is Widengren himself (close to 400 times). This is entirely understandable both from his personality (as far as his works allow us to grasp it), and from the fact that he built the book around a core that had been laid through his own historical works in Iranian and Near Eastern religions. Immediately following himself, the author who is quoted most abundantly is Richard Reitzenstein (90), followed by Georges Dumézil (70), Raffaele Pettazoni (54), H.S. Nyberg (54), and, surprisingly, the bland works of E.O. James (51). In fact, the two twentieth-century intellectual movements with which Widengren had the greatest affinity were the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* on the one hand (as whose last 'member' Widengren can be considered), and the Cambridge Ritualists on the other.³³

32 Although it is purely anecdotal, a charming example of this mood can be found in G.K. Park, "Review of H. Zwicker, *Das höchste Wesen: Der Hochgottglaube bei urtümlichen Völkern* (Bern, 1970)," *American Anthropologist* 76 (1974): 384–385. Zwicker's work was an attempt to give a compact (and, it is claimed, updated) representation of Wilhelm Schmidt's ideas on *Urmonotheismus*. To be fair, this was a work of protestant theology that largely instrumentalized Schmidt's works in an attempt to fight the dominance of the theology of Karl Barth. Since it came in the guise of anthropology, it was reviewed in the *American Anthropologist*. That review opens with the words "Here, in our own day, is a book proposing to help the student along by culling the best from Father Schmidt's twelve volumes (1912–1955) on the prehistoric *origin* of the idea of a supreme being. But if there is a student who stands to be helped, I fear he is not reading anthropology [...]." It includes the telling exasperation "In effect, all we can say is, don't ask how religion got started, how old it is, or what its oldest forms might have been."

33 For a good introduction to this movement see R. Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York/London: Routledge, 1991). My

Even though these were two quite distinct approaches to ancient religions,³⁴ it is true to say that the heyday of both lay very deep in the past, and that subsequent developments had shown some of the core assumptions underlying their interpretations to be unsound. Most others simply went out of fashion. This was especially true of the practice common to both, and as we shall see very noticeable in the Uppsala approach to Iranian religions, to dissolve the individuality of gods, narratives, and rituals in favour of their belonging to a class, or a pattern, and thus making them literally interchangeable.³⁵ This is, to be sure, a virtually permanent temptation in the (history of the) humanities and social sciences.³⁶ Well known examples would be Max Müller's solar

perspective on this history is very much indebted to H.S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion 2: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* (Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 6.2; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 15–88.

- 34 There is no good encompassing work on the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, even though Gerd Lüdemann took some steps to set up a project on this remarkable group; see G. Lüdemann & M. Schröder, *Die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule in Göttingen: Eine Dokumentation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); G. Lüdemann, *Die "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule": Facetten eines theologischen Umbruchs* (Studien und Texte zur Religionsgeschichtlichen Schule 1; Frankfurt etc.: Peter Lang, 1996). See also K. Lehmkuhler, *Kultus und Theologie: Dogmatik und Exegese in der religionsgeschichtlichen Schule* (Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie 76; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), which is very strong on the theology of the movement, and Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse*, 170–177. For Reitzenstein, see S. Marchand, "From Liberalism to Romanticism: Albrecht Dieterich, Richard Reitzenstein, and the Religious Turn in *fin-de-siècle* German Classical Studies," in *Out of Arcadia: Classics and Politics in Germany in the Age of Burckhardt, Nietzsche and Wilamowitz*, ed. I. Gildenhard/M. Ruehl (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 283–316.
- 35 Charming and in no way exceptional examples of this scholarly mood can be found in W. Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte 1: Der Baumkultus der Germanen und ihrer Nachbarstämme. Mythologische Untersuchungen* (Berlin: Borntraeger, 1904 (2nd edition edited by W. Heuschkel)). See, for example, virtually its opening words (p. 4): "Die auf vorstehenden Blättern nach verschiedenen Stufen gesonderten Anschauungen gehen in der Wirklichkeit meistens in einander über." Or its conclusion, after many pages of separating good and evil spirits of plants (p. 614): "*Aus allen diesen bis ins Kleinste gehenden Uebereinstimmungen dürfen wir mit Sicherheit die Identität der Baumgeister und Korngeister folgern; sie sind besondere Manifestationen der Vorstellung 'Vegetationsdämon.'*" (emphasis in the original).
- 36 The most shocking Uppsala example would be the dissertation of S. Hartman, *Gayōmart: Étude sur le syncrétisme dans l'ancien Iran* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1953) a work in which the impact of Nyberg, Widengren and Wikander makes itself felt in a particularly insalubrious way. Building on the extremely implausible assumption that the First man (*gaya maretan*) in the Avesta can be divided up into three distinct personalities, the most important of these is, without hesitation (or evidence), 'unmasked' as being, in reality, Mithra. See M. Boyce, "Review of S. Hartman, *Gayōmart* (Uppsala, 1953)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 17 (1955): 174–176.

mythology,³⁷ Wilhelm Mannhardt's vegetation spirits, James George Frazer's dying gods and sacred kings, Georges Dumézil's trifunctionalism, Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, or Walter Burkert's initiation cycle.³⁸ The point to be made here is not that all these approaches are necessarily wrong. Most of them are unusually malleable, which allows them to survive many cases of what others would consider to be rather obvious disconfirmation. The point is that they make so much sense to those who are trained in them, or find them credible, that they come to transcend the need for proper demonstration.³⁹ They do not, and cannot, make that same kind of sense to others.

This is one of the reasons why *Religionsphänomenologie* is such a difficult work. When it comes to much of its core vocabulary, it is very easily misunderstood. Widengren did not find it necessary to give definitions or to be explicit about method and theory.⁴⁰ It is often left to the reader, therefore, to guess what is actually intended. A good example of this is the frequent appeal to psychology (of religion) within phenomenology. This is not, in general, a reference to any form of empirical psychology, but mainly serves to register an interest in empathy as a quality of the study of religion. By an act of imagination (and most often by recalling the riches of one's own inner life), the student of religion needs to attempt to come as close to experiencing the minds of other believers as is humanly possible. In Widengren's case, this, too, is a legacy of the *Religionsgeschichtler*, who insisted on the psychology of religion in combination with a focus on ritual as the main possibility to understand

37 F.M. Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop II: Essays on Mythology, Traditions, and Customs* (London: Longmans, Green, and co., 1868), pp. 1–146 (originally published in 1856); see, for sympathetic readings, R.M. Dorson, "The Eclipse of Solar Mythology," *The Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955): 393–416; M.P. Carroll, "Some Third Thoughts on Max Müller and Solar Mythology," *European Journal of Sociology* 26 (1985): 263–281.

38 See, for example, Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion* 2, 79–88.

39 In trying to come to terms with Widengren and his work, I have profited immensely from S.C. Goldberg, *Assertion: On the Philosophical Significance of Assertoric Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See, for example, Goldberg, *Assertion*, pp. 43–46. I also found Noretta Koertge's concept of 'belief buddies' (N. Koertge, "Belief Buddies versus Critical Communities: The Social Organization of Pseudoscience," in *Philosophy of Pseudoscience: Reconsidering the Demarcation Problem* ed. M. Pigliucci/M. Boudry (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 165–180) helpful and relevant to Widengren and the Uppsala school, although I very much regret the fact that she developed this concept with a specific focus on pseudoscience alone.

40 "[Widengren] ist der Meinung, daß in einem Lehrbuch methodische Überlegungen 'absolut entbehrllich' seien, eine Auffassung der man kaum zustimmen kann [...]" (K. Rudolph, "Review of *Religionsphänomenologie*," 243; the reference is to Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, p. 2 n. 3.).

and represent genuine religious feelings of ordinary people from the past.⁴¹ Much the same can and must be said about 'sociology', 'ritual', 'magic', 'popular religion', 'piety', etc. These terms more often than not refer to something very specific that is not covered in current usage.

It is this situation, I believe, that allows us to understand why Widengren insisted on claiming facticity for all his opinions, only to see them denounced as speculative theories by others, and vice versa. And it is this capacity that makes it understandable why Widengren never felt the need to rethink either the evidence or the approaches of the Ritualists or the Religionsgeschichtler (or, for that matter, of his own earlier work). When Bleeker reviewed Widengren's *Religionsphänomenologie*, he commended it as the culmination, and the logical end, of the phenomenology of religion, not because of its imposing theoretical vista, but for the specific reason that Widengren was the only person alive who was a master of the huge evidentiary foundation of the work.⁴² This is a sentiment one finds more often in appreciations of Widengren's importance by fellow students of religion: that Widengren was not a great theorist, but that he was an unchallenged master of the ancient sources.⁴³ Although most Iranists would concur in identifying Widengren as a great Iranist, few would recognize in his work precisely that kind of mastery of the evidence.⁴⁴ It is to this particular question, to Widengren as an expert on Iranian religions, that we must turn now.

41 Lehmkuhler, *Kultus und Theologie*, pp. 38–52.

42 C.J. Bleeker, "Wie steht es um die Religionsphänomenologie?," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 28 (1971): 303–308.

43 E.g. W.H. Capps, "Geo Widengren on Syncretism: On Parsing Uppsala Methodological Tendencies," *Numen* 20 (1973): 163–185; J.N. Jonsson, "Reflection on Geo Widengren's Phenomenological Method," *Scriptura* 2 (1986): 21–39.

44 To illustrate this mood, I shall quote here from two reviews of G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965). First, Helmut Humbach: "Leider ist das Werk nicht das so dringend benötigte Handbuch der iranischen Religionsgeschichte geworden. Das liegt daran, daß W. im Bereich der altiranischen Religionsgeschichte zuweilen nicht sorgfältig genug arbeitet und zudem eine starke Neigung zeigt, die Einführung in die Quellen und ihre philologischen Probleme durch Vorführung von Spekulationen, die meist nicht als solche erkennbar sind, zu ersetzen." (H. Humbach, "Review of G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart, 1965)," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 92 (1967): 417–419). Secondly, Shaul Shaked: "The book under review, based as it is on the author's enormous range of knowledge, displays this system at its best, but also demonstrates some of its grave weaknesses. The reviewer feels with regret that he cannot accept much of what professor Widengren has to say about the religious history of Iran." (S. Shaked, "Review of G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart, 1965)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 32 (1969): 160–162, p. 161).

4 Geo Widengren and Iranian Religions

When it comes to Geo Widengren as a student of Iranian religions, it is very difficult not to be caught between two extreme emotions: on the one hand, admiration of someone who was in many respects a great scholar and who never shied away from bold claims which came in a language that would strike most of us nowadays as over-confident;⁴⁵ on the other, despondency over a scholar who was always wrong, even when judged by the standards of his own time, and who persisted in being wrong even when errors were pointed out to him. What I admire about Widengren is his immense scholarly productivity, and especially his willingness to survey enormous stretches of Iranian and Near Eastern evidence and to issue the warning, time and again, that whereas philology is indispensable, it is never *sufficient* for the writing or understanding of religious history. It is striking that this warning, which is so self-evidently true, could and must still be issued today.⁴⁶

Widengren's programmatic – and, let us be frank, disconcertingly partisan – overview of the study of Iranian religions (*Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte*)⁴⁷ ends with a passionate plea for the importance of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts, better known as the Pahlavi books. Widengren dedicated his *Stand und Aufgaben* to H.S. Nyberg and invoked his authority to support this claim. And then he writes: "If this truth has not been understood even today by all Iranists who occupy themselves with research in the history of religion, that is somewhat embarrassing for the history of scholarship. So let us end this – wholly incomplete and unsatisfactory – overview

45 In his 'review' of Widengren, *Religionen Irans*, (which in reality is not a review at all, but merely an itemized list of typos and minor suggestions), J. Duchesne-Guillemin, who was not generally known for strongly worded opinions, enigmatically writes that *this time*, Widengren had tried to write in an objective way ("M. Widengren a fait, cette fois, un gros effort d'objectivité." J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Review of G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart: 1965)," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 9 (1965–1966): 236–239, on p. 236). See also R.N. Frye's exasperation that "if Widengren ever said that he did not know, or 'perhaps,' or 'in his opinion,' one could have more confidence in the book" (R.N. Frye, "Review of G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart, 1965)," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6 (1967): 123–124, on p. 124; and cf. *ibidem*: "I fear the constant intrusion of his own theories, and downright fancy, detract from the book.")

46 I will do so, programmatically, in A. de Jong, "Zoroastrianism and the Three Judaisms: Iranian Textuality, Philology, and Perceptions of Reality," forthcoming in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*.

47 G. Widengren, "Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte," *Numen* 1 (1954): 16–83; *id.*, "Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte II: Geschichte der iranischen Religionen und ihre Nachwirkung," *Numen* 2 (1955): 47–134. The two articles were published together as a separate volume under the same title by Brill in 1955.

of the current state and future prospects of the history of Iranian religions on this note: we would like to urge upon everyone to make the rich treasures of the Pahlavi books useful for work in the history of religion. In them we will find a rich source that to my astonishment has only been tapped in a very limited way.”⁴⁸ He was right – and, even more disconcertingly and more embarrassingly, these words have lost nothing of their salience after 65 years. There may be, and probably are, several reasons why this would be so, but surely one of the reasons is the almost total dissolution of the multilingual, multicultural, multireligious, non-institutionalized world of continental European scholarship that characterized the history of Iranian studies until, roughly, the 1970s.⁴⁹

Iranian studies have persisted on a nineteenth-century model almost up to the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁵⁰ The field was, and continues to be, very weakly institutionalized: there are virtually no durable institutes for Iranian studies, and there are very few chairs that have survived, or are likely to survive, the retirement of their current holders. Although this has caused a lot of uncertainty and unhappiness, in general it seems to have been a good thing for the field. It made the field fragile, to be sure. But, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this state of affairs has implied that everyone who ended up in Iranian studies, or in the study of Zoroastrianism, came from somewhere else, and brought to the field disciplinary training and background knowledge of a large variety of distinct fields: classics, religious studies, archaeology, Indology, Ancient Near Eastern studies, Islamic studies, Persian, etc. A perfect illustration is provided by the holy trinity of the Uppsala school:

48 Widengren, “Stand und Aufgaben II,” p. 132.

49 Compared to the huge production of histories of various fields of ‘Oriental’ studies in Europe (Indology, Assyriology, Arabic and Middle Eastern studies), and the lively debates these have engendered, it is disconcerting to note that no history of Iranian studies has ever been produced. By far the best we have currently is J. Kellens, *La quatrième naissance de Zarathushtra* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2006), but not only is that restricted in scope (covering basically studies of early Zoroastrianism), it is as partisan as Widengren’s *Stand und Aufgaben*. The only difference between the two works is that professor Kellens is explicit about the fact that these are his personal interpretations of the history of the field.

50 By “Iranian studies” I mean the study of pre-Islamic Iranian languages and cultures. Once again, there is a surprising absence of discussion of what, exactly, constitutes this field. This is not the place to have that discussion, however. See, very briefly: A. de Jong, “Being Iranian in Antiquity (at Home and Abroad),” in *Persianism in Antiquity*, ed. R. Strootman/M.J. Versluys (Oriens et Occidens 25; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017), 35–47, pp. 43–44. The disarray is well illustrated by valiant attempts to sketch its institutional profile: [B. Gray et alii], *Guide to Iranian Studies in Europe, Part One: Institutions and Teaching Programmes in Twelve Countries* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Sh. Shafa, *Jahān-e Irānshenāsī* (“The World of Iranian Studies”; Tehran: no publisher/no date).

H.S. Nyberg was professor of Hebrew and Semitic languages, Geo Widengren of Religious Studies, Stig Wikander eventually of Sanskrit and Indo-European. The contributions they made to the fields of their actual chairs are sometimes surprisingly limited and in all three cases much less original and durable than their works in Iranian studies, which also strongly cohered among the three of them.

Accumulating knowledge of the various sub-branches of pre-Islamic Iranian studies could therefore not usually be realized by entering into a department where these fields were brought together, since no such department existed anywhere in Europe. This meant that young scholars needed to travel and study isolated sub-fields with specialists wherever they were found: in France, Germany, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, etc.⁵¹ This inevitably brought students in contact with radically different academic cultures, with the main academic languages of the continent, and with a wide variety of, I suppose, rather eccentric scholars, each within their own networks. Within this set-up, Britain was a comparatively barren and introspective place, and the main early luminaries of English-language scholarly work on Zoroastrianism and Iranian studies in general were often immigrants, or children of immigrants: Max Müller, L.H. Mills, Louis Casartelli, Walter Bruno Henning, Robert Charles Zaehner, Ilya Gershevitch, etc. So it took a while for English to become the main language of scholarship – and for British academic culture to become the main example of the organization of knowledge.⁵² But when it did, it set Widengren's work, with its strong roots in continental traditions of scholarship, on the path to disintegration.⁵³

51 This did not apply to Widengren, although he went to Copenhagen to study Assyriology with O.E. Ravn. Widengren thus learnt his Iranian languages from H.S. Nyberg alone. The case of S. Wikander is different: although he was equally trained by Nyberg, he also studied Iranian languages with Arthur Christensen in Copenhagen. The big difference between Nyberg and Christensen, both leading Iranists of their time, was that Nyberg focused exclusively on ancient languages, whereas Christensen also knew Persian (and modern Iranian languages) extremely well.

52 Although Widengren wrote and published his dissertation in English, there are frequent references to the fact that he was not very comfortable (or fully competent) in that language. See, for example, E.S. Drower, "Review of G. Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala, 1950)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1951: 106–107, p. 107 ("It is a pity that Professor Widengren allowed small but irritating mistakes in English to creep into an otherwise competent book"); and the letter of Rudolf Macuch to Lady Drower quoted in Buckley, *Lady E.S. Drower's Scholarly Correspondence*, p. 201 ("Apart from the mentioned stagnant scholasticity, Widengren has a great handicap in his English.").

53 Widengren's work suffered the same fate, in my appreciation, as that of Dumézil and Eliade (and possibly also Lévi-Strauss). In all cases, including Widengren's, a new lease

Although it will require much more research (and demonstration), it seems plausible that these structural external factors played a role in the process through which Widengren essentially came to be forgotten, or to be seen and treated as possibly a giant of the past, but certainly someone whose works no one needs to consult any longer. There is this completely strange discrepancy between the robust self-confidence in his writings and the fact that he is rarely, if ever, quoted or consulted in a positive way by anyone anymore. There are very good reasons for Widengren's fall from grace – I did not call him “the man who was always wrong” for no particular reason – but at the same time it is difficult to escape the impression that we have lost something in cutting ourselves off from these early developments of the study of Iranian religions. This is true for most fields to which Widengren contributed: the study of Gnosticism, of Manichaeism, and of the mysteries of Mithras. Somehow, in all these fields, we have ended up in an atmosphere of complacency, where we feel superior to our predecessors, but churn out works that do not, and cannot, in fact, match these earlier works in bravery or vision. This chapter cannot analyze what happened *to us*, in that respect, but it aims to analyze what happened to Widengren.

5 Wikander and Widengren

In 1950, Stig Wikander published what he intended to be the first in a planned series of four studies on the mysteries of Mithras: *Études sur les mystères de Mithras I: Introduction*, in the Year-book of the Academic Society of Lund.⁵⁴ He sent an off-print of this work to Widengren, bearing the unremarkable words “Professor G. Widengren, från tillgivne förf.”⁵⁵ The two men knew each other, of course – they were almost the same age, they worked in the same field, and they had sat at the feet of H.S. Nyberg at the same time; in fact, both are mentioned in the preface to Nyberg's great work *Die Religionen des alten Iran*,

of life and impact seemed to be guaranteed in the United States, but it eventually abated there, too.

54 S. Wikander, *Études sur les mystères de Mithras I* (Skrifter utgivna av Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet i Lund 40; Lund: Vetenskaps-Societeten i Lund, 1950 (*separatum*)); for a review see D. Schlumberger, “Review of S. Wikander, *Études sur les mystères de Mithras I* (Lund, 1950),” *Syria* 30 (1953): 325–330.

55 Widengren's library was sold through Smitskamp Oriental Antiquarium in Leiden; Smitskamp used their shop to sell books and off-prints that they could not list in their catalogues, for very little money. This is how this particular publication of Wikander ended up in my collection.

Wikander as a *licentiat*, Widengren as *docent*.⁵⁶ At this particular moment they were not on an equal footing either. Widengren had been appointed professor of the history of religions in Uppsala as a very young man, in 1940. Wikander, for all intents and purposes, was out of a job, stringing together temporary teaching positions at various Swedish universities. In terms of reputation, the two were also unequal. Wikander was, and continues to be, plagued by the suspicion that he was a Nazi, or at the very least had been far too close to Nazi ideology for comfort.⁵⁷ Wikander himself seems to have believed that this association was the reason why he could not find a job.⁵⁸

The little work on Mithras is Wikander's attempt to dissociate the Roman god Mithras from his Iranian namesake and to argue for a Thracian or Danubian background of the cult of the former, and for this unlikely premise the main piece of evidence he offers is the fact that the name of the god in Greek has been transmitted both with an /a/ in the final syllable, and with an /ē/.⁵⁹ He uses this to claim that these are two distinct deities and proceeds from there. The main message of the work, thus, is that there are no genuine

56 H.S. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran* (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1966; reprint of the first German edition of 1938, with a new preface), p. iv.

57 See S. Arvidsson, "Stig Wikander och forskningen om ariska manaförbund," *Chaos: Dansk-Norsk Tidsskrift for Religionshistoriske Studier* 38 (2002): 55–68; M. Timuş, "Quand l'Allemagne était leur Mecque: La science des religions chez Stig Wikander (1935–1941)," in *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, ed. H. Junginger (Numen Book Series 117; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 205–228; M. Gasche, "Die Beziehungen deutscher und skandinavischer Orientalisten im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus: Von traditionellen Banden, Weltanschaulichen Brüchen und (teils) getrennten Wegen nach 1945," *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 4 (2016): 53–70. S. Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 105–109, very helpfully shows that Wikander's political and social conservatism (and, it needs to be added, his overt racism, see the next note) did not coincide with an explicit hatred of Jews. In fact, Wikander analysed antisemitism as the product of the nineteenth-century modernist left-wing movements and thinkers he hated.

58 Arvidsson, "Stig Wikander," 63–64. A letter sent from Chicago to Dumézil in 1967 (published in M. Timuş, "Les 'Haskell Lectures' de Stig Wikander (1967)," *Archæus* 8 (2004): 265–322, on pp. 271–272) provides distressing evidence for the depth of Wikander's racism: he describes how he has *escaped* the "filthy Aztecs" (i.e., Mexicans) to find comfort in the excellent libraries of Chicago, and vows never to return to Mexico until the day "that the Mayas will rise up and organize a St. Bartholomew's night for all those Creoles who infest this once interesting country". The same letter provides abundant evidence for the fact that Wikander believed almost all his colleagues to be his enemies (in the letter: Marie-Louise Chaumont, Richard Nelson Frye, and he even wonders whether or not to include Jean de Menasce, probably one of the mildest and gentlest of all Iranists, in that category).

59 Wikander, *Etudes sur les mystères de Mithras*, 39–41.

Iranian connections to the Roman cult of Mithras, whose origins must be sought elsewhere.

In order to build this argument, Wikander relied especially on his own earlier work on fire priests, which had exactly similar weaknesses. In that work, Wikander wilfully chose to resurrect a mistaken etymology of one of the words for priest, *hērbed*.⁶⁰ On the basis of this impossible interpretation, which had been corrected to general consensus two generations before he started writing, he built a huge edifice of speculation on Anatolian Zoroastrianism,⁶¹ where he recognized two competing religions, a fire-cult borne by the *hērbeds*, centered around the goddess Anahita, and the precursor of Zoroastrianism under the auspices of *mowbeds*, who eventually adopted the fire-cult (which belonged to the “Vayu-Anahita circle”) and made the *hērbeds* a secondary tier within a new ‘orthodox’ priestly hierarchy.

60 The Middle Persian word *hērbed* derives from Avestan *aēθrapaiti-* and means “master of the teaching” or ‘teacher-priest’ (see H.W. Bailey, “Dvārā maīnām,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 20 (1957): 41–59, pp. 41–44). Wikander relied on an argument first proposed by the brilliant James Darmesteter (J. Darmesteter, *Etudes iraniennes* (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1883), 92, n. 2); J. Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta: Traduction nouvelle avec commentaire historique et philologique* (Annales du Musée Guimet 21–22; 24; Paris: Leroux (rerp. Paris 1960), vol. 2, p. 47, n. 195), who wanted to interpret the (obscure) first part of the word, *aēθra-*, as ‘fire’ and adduced for this chiefly evidence from Persian dictionaries. Some of these (especially the late, influential, and uneven work *Borhān-e Qāte*) list words like *hīr* for ‘fire’, and on its basis *hīrkade* as ‘fire-temple’. It is likely that the origin of these words is parallel to their later scholarly invention: from a wrong interpretation of *hērbed* as ‘fire-priest’, a non-existent lexeme *hīr* for fire was constructed, and made productive through the dictionaries. This is by no means exceptional: see M. Boyce, “A Novel Interpretation of Hafiz,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15 (1953): 279–288, for some illustrations, and S.I. Baevskii, *Early Persian Lexicography: Farhangs of the Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2007), for Persian lexicography. In the most recent etymological dictionary of Persian, the same conclusion is reached: M. Hasandust, *Farhang-e rīše-šenāxtī-ye zabān-e fārsī* (“Etymological Dictionary of Persian”; Tehran: Farhangestān-e zabān va adab-e fārsī, 2016 (5 vols).), vol. 4, 2925–2926 (s.v. *hērbad*). S. Azarnouche, “Les fonctions religieuses et la loi zoroastrienne: le cas du *hērbed*,” in *A Thousand Judgements: Festschrift für Maria Macuch*, ed. A. Hintze/D. Durkin-Meisterernst/C. Naumann (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 13–23 gives the latest perspective, but erroneously claims (on p. 15 n. 9) that Wikander sought to find a connection between the priestly title and the common word for fire, *ātar* (he was far too competent a scholar for that).

61 For which, see A. de Jong, “Dynastic Zoroastrianism in Commagene: The Religion of King Antiochos,” in *Common Dwelling Place of all the Gods: Commagene in its Local, Regional and Global Hellenistic Context*, ed. M. Blömer/M.J. Versluys (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, forthc.).

Widengren wrote several annotations to the little book – sometimes noting down approval, but more often not (*detta påstående är felaktigt; obegripligt!* etc.) – in different languages: Swedish, French, classical Greek. He also responded more formally to the challenges posed by Wikander in his own writings on the mysteries of Mithras;⁶² it was easy for him (and others) to dismiss the foundational claim that Wikander made, and since that was a clinching piece of evidence, Widengren felt free to reject more or less everything Wikander argued out of hand. The promised three further studies never materialized. In a letter from Stig Wikander to Mircea Eliade, written in Damascus in 1953, Wikander indicates that he is no longer on speaking terms with Widengren.⁶³

Ironically, in the historiography of the study of Roman Mithraism, Wikander is sometimes even warmly remembered for being a pioneer, a forerunner in the demolition of the Iranian interpretation of the mysteries of Mithras. This interpretation had always dominated scholarly discussions,⁶⁴ but had become especially prominent with the publication of Cumont's almost unbelievable two volumes called *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* in the final years of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ Widengren, by contrast, in that same historiography, plays the role of the one scholar who refused to see the

62 Widengren, "Stand und Aufgaben 2," 89–96; G. Widengren, "The Mithraic Mysteries in the Greco-Roman World with Special Regard to their Iranian Background," in *Atti del convegno sul tema: La Persia e il mondo greco-romano* (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1966), 433–455; *id.*, "Reflections on the Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries," in *Perennitas: Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich*, (Roma: Editioni dell'Ateneo, 1980), 645–668.

63 M. Timuş & E. Ciurtin, "The Unpublished Correspondence between Mircea Eliade and Stig Wikander (1948–1977). Third Part," *Archæus* 5 (2001), 75–119, p. 79. The letter contains a devastating, razor-sharp analysis of the weaknesses of Widengren's work.

64 Within the historiography of the study of Mithraism, Cumont's work is virtually treated as a virgin birth. This corresponds very closely to how Cumont considered his own work. But in his analysis of the evidence, and in his attempts to fit the evidence into what was known at the time of Zoroastrian texts, he was simply going down a path that had been prepared by all those, like H. Seel, *Die Mithrageheimnisse während der vor- und urchristlichen Zeit; historisch, kritisch, exegetisch dargestellt in der Geschichte der antiken Religionen wie im Tempelleben der alten Priester nach den heiligen Sagen des Morgenlands, den Zend-Schriften und den Wurzeln der griechisch-römischen Götterlehre* (Aarau: Heinrich Remigius Sauerländer, 1823), and F. Lajard, *Recherches sur le culte public et les mystères de Mithra en Orient et en Occident* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1867), whom he dismissed as 'uncritical'.

65 F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (Bruxelles: H. Lamertin, 1896–1899 (2 vols.)). For this historiography, see, e.g., R.L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism," in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, ed. J.R. Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 215–248, pp. 219–220; R.L. Beck, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 11.17.4 (1984), 2002–2115, p. 2064.

light and stubbornly continued to interpret Mithraism on an Iranian background. And even if, as seems to be the case, most of his arguments turned out to be unacceptable, his basic position, which stressed the necessity to understand the Roman cult by bringing together whatever information is available from the interstitial world between the Roman and the Iranian culture areas, is undoubtedly correct.⁶⁶

This is something of a pattern, for exactly the same needs to be said about Manichaeism. The development is almost identical: in the beginning of the twentieth century, enormous quantities of primary Manichaean sources were looted from what was then called Chinese Turkestan, currently the Chinese province of Xinjiang, and brought to Berlin.⁶⁷ Most of the texts were written in Middle Iranian languages and they contained very many Iranian names. The enormous enthusiasm generated by this unbelievable increase in source materials naturally led to the situation that scholars began to understand Manichaeism as an example of an Iranian religion – one heavily impacted by Christianity, to be sure, but Iranian at its core.⁶⁸ Barely a generation later, another library was discovered in Egypt, containing whole books, in Coptic, and much older than the Central Asian materials.⁶⁹ And slowly but unstoppably, the scholarly focus began to move West, and scholars increasingly began

66 See, latterly, R.L. Gordon, "From Miθra to Roman Mithras," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. M. Stausberg/Y.S.-D. Vevaina (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 451–455; *id.*, "Persae in spelaeis solem colunt: Mithra(s) between Persia and Rome," in *Persianism in Antiquity*, ed. R. Strootman/M.J. Versluys (Oriens et Occidens 25; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017), 289–325.

67 For quick references, and a general overview, see W. Sundermann, "Turfan Expeditions," *Encyclopaedia Iranica online* at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/turfan-expeditions-2> (accessed 17-07-2020).

68 If we absent the (clearly excessive) interpretations of Reitzenstein, and their warm adoption by Widengren, the 'strong' Iranian version of the interpretation of Manichaeism has in reality always been hotly contested. Most scholars who were enchanted by the new evidence from Central Asia attempted to find in it evidence for the spread of Greek ideas and artistic conventions. So alongside the 'strong' Christian, non-Iranian, interpretation of F.C. Burkitt, *The Religion of the Manichees* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), H.H. Schaefer, "Urforn und Fortbildungen des manichäischen Systems," in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg IV. Vorträge 1924–25*, ed. F. Saxl (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), 65–157 cannot be framed as a 'strong' Iranian interpretation, although it is clear that Schaefer found it necessary to contextualize Mani's life and activities in the context in which it played out, which is that of the Sasanian empire.

69 The discovery was announced in C. Schmidt & H.-J. Polotsky, *Ein Mani-Fund in Ägypten: Originalschriften des Mani und seiner Schüler* (Sonderausgabe aus den Sitzungsberichten der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse 1933.1; Berlin: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1933); see J.M. Robinson, *The Manichaean Codices of Medinet Madi* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014), for the still mystifying saga of the discovery and dispersion of these codices.

to study Manichaeism as basically a movement within Christianity. And as was the case with the Roman cult of Mithras, this process escalated from the late 1960s/early 1970s onward in the direction of a complete absorption of Manichaeism into Christianity.⁷⁰ Widengren resisted this and continued to treat Manichaeism as inextricably interwoven with Iranian religious culture.⁷¹ And once again, it needs to be stressed, against what most would seem to consider an overwhelming consensus in the scholarly world, that Widengren was correct.

6 Strengths and Weaknesses

Where Widengren was correct was on two levels of scholarly analysis and activity: he was a great and voracious reader and interpreter of ancient literature, commanding the relevant philologies of the classics, Semitic languages and Iranian languages, and intimately familiar with the texts. That is a rare accomplishment that no one in the present, I believe, would be able to match. He was also correct – and there is a link between these two levels – in his general intuition, or vision, that the world of Iranian religions *mattered* in antiquity and late antiquity, and that it was *different* from the much better explored worlds of the classics, the Bible and Jewish and Christian literature. Where things went awry was in the area in between, the area where he needed to join up his vision with the texts and establish patterns of development.

For this, he mainly activated two tendencies that very much belong to the Uppsala school: the attribution of highly specific meanings to fairly ordinary words, and the recognition of many distinct and competing Iranian religions.⁷²

70 See A. de Jong, “A quodam Persa extiterunt: Re-Orienting Manichaean Origins,” in *Empsychoi Logoi: Religious Innovations in Antiquity. Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 73; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 81–106 for an attempt to undo that particular damage.

71 G. Widengren, *Mani und der Manichäismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961; English translation in *id.*, *Mani and Manichaeism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965)).

72 With the “Uppsala school” I mean the specific constellation of Iranists, particularly Nyberg, Widengren, and Wikander. I am aware of the existence of the label “Uppsala school” for a very similar constellation of scholars in religious studies (C.-M. Edsman, “Ein halbes Jahrhundert Uppsala-Schule,” in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgård* (Ergänzungsbande zur Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 31; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001, pp. 194–209), as well as for a specific orientation to the Hebrew Bible (H. Ringgren, “Mowinckel and the Uppsala School,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 2.2 (1988), 36–41)). Widengren is the linch-pin in all three, which is a good indication of his academic importance in Sweden.

In reading and rereading the core publications of this group of scholars,⁷³ it is quite difficult to disentangle who contributed what to this complex of ideas and research strategies. Since Nyberg was the undisputed master, and the one who taught Widengren and Wikander, it has become customary to attribute many of the ideas in his great *Die Religionen des alten Iran* directly to him.⁷⁴ Nyberg himself, however, indicates in that very work the contribution his two students made to the development of his thought.⁷⁵ Widengren's *Hochgottglaube*, Wikander's *Männerbund* and Nyberg's *Religionen* come, so to say, in a package and there is this disconcerting tendency in the two younger scholars, and also in their master, to refer to each other – and to accept, basically, what scholars nowadays would see as monumental errors to have been soundly established as fact by any of the three.

The two tendencies referred to above are clearly implicated in each other, or even produce each other. The first, theoretically most problematic, tendency was to attribute to rather ordinary words extraordinarily precise meanings that are by no means evident – and in several cases are simply not there.⁷⁶

73 This would at the very least include Nyberg, *Religionen*; S. Wikander, *Der arische Männerbund* (Lund: Gleerup, 1938), *id.*, *Vayu: Texte und Untersuchungen zur indo-iranischen Religionsgeschichte* (Quaestiones indo-iranae 1; Uppsala/Leipzig: Lundequist/Harrassowitz, 1941); *id.*, *Feuerpriester*; G. Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1938:6; Uppsala/Leipzig: Lundequist/Harrassowitz, 1938); *id.*, *Die Religionen Irans*; and Hartman, *Gayōmart*.

74 To the extent that the work is, largely, an extensive commentary on the Gathas, this is likely to be correct (see, for this aspect, the very important remarks in Kellens, *Quatrième Naissance*, 94–100). The genesis of the work is quite well-known: the book has a dual background. It originated on the one hand in Nyberg's teaching on the Gathas, and on the other in the invitation to give the highly prestigious Olaus Petri lectures in Uppsala in 1935. These lectures drew extremely important thinkers about religion and culture, including Adolf Deissmann, Ignác Goldziher, Adolf von Harnack, W. Brede Kristensen, Franz Cumont, Martin Nilsson, Albert Schweitzer, and Rudolf Otto to Uppsala. Iranists know them, apart from Nyberg's series, especially from the famous three lectures on the Gathas given by Antoine Meillet (A. Meillet, *Trois conférences sur les Gāthās de l'Avesta*, Paris: Geuthner, 1925).

75 Nyberg, *Religionen*, iv.

76 For a demonstration on the basis of one word, *jahikā*-, 'woman', see A. de Jong, 'Jeh the Primal Whore? Observations on Zoroastrian Misogyny,' in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, ed. R. Kloppenborg/W.J. Hanegraaff (Numen Book Series 66; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 15–41 (and J. Kellens, 'Jahikā et le vocabulaire daivique,' in *Gifts to a Magus: Indo-Iranian Studies Honoring Firoze Kotwal*, ed. J.K. Choksy/J. Dubeansky (Toronto Studies in Religion 32; New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 123–127). Others would include *Av. gaēsu*-, 'curly-haired', and *vaēsa*-, 'servant', and especially *mairiia*-, 'young man', which was the foundation for Wikander's *Männerbund*. Widengren added a host of similar specific interpretations to Middle Iranian words, such as *ayār*-, 'helper', *aštāg*-, 'messenger', *bandāg*-, 'servant', and *payg*-, 'courier'.

This is how the whole idea of the Iranian *Männerbund* came into being – and although it was Wikander who formulated it, under the impact of Höfler, it was Widengren who gave it wider currency, and who continued to find highly specific meanings in very mundane courtly, social and religious terminology. It underpinned the vast edifice he built of what he called Iranian feudalism.⁷⁷ It underpinned much of his work on sacred kingship⁷⁸ – including, it must be assumed, the very large book on sacred kingship in ancient Iran that he never finished. And it underpinned the second tendency.

This was the recognition of a multiplicity of mutually exclusive competing Iranian religions, located in specific communities (or, later, circles of initiates) centered around the worship of a particular deity: Zurvan, Vayu, Anahita, Mithra, Ahura Mazda. Here, of course, Nyberg led the way – he most certainly called his *magnum opus Die Religionen des alten Iran* intentionally with a plural, as did Widengren in his grand summation *Die Religionen Irans*. Equally intentional, of course, was Duchesne-Guillemin's answer to Nyberg with his singular *La religion de l'Iran ancien*.⁷⁹

It has often been said that Nyberg's work never got the fair reading that it deserved.⁸⁰ I am willing to accept this as true, but equally confident that had it had that fair reading, the verdict on it would not have been more benign. And this is precisely because, as Mary Boyce put it so aptly with regard to

77 G. Widengren, "Recherches sur le féodalisme iranien," *Orientalia Suecana* 5 (1956): 79–182; *id.*, *Der Feudalismus im alten Iran: Männerbund – Gefolgswesen – Feudalismus in der iranischen Gesellschaft im Hinblick auf die indogermanischen Verhältnisse* (Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 40; Wiesbaden: Springer, 1969). To get a flavour of how this works: if, in the context of courtly romance, a stranger at court greets the king by saying "As long as I shall be alive, I (together with my children) will always obey you," this cannot be a matter of simple courtesy: it must have a *technical* meaning, indicating one of the finer degrees of vassalage (Widengren, "Féodalisme iranien," 79–80).

78 G. Widengren, "The Sacred Kingship of Iran," in *The Sacred Kingship/La regalità sacra* (Supplements to Numen 4; Leiden: Brill, 1959), 242–257.

79 J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962).

80 Nyberg himself clearly believed this to be the case, and complained bitterly about the reception of the work by leading Nazi scholars before the war, and by leading Anglo-American scholars (E.E. Herzfeld, W.B. Henning, R.C. Zaehner) after the war. See the *Begleitwort* to the 1966 re-edition of his *Religionen*. A sympathetic, though ultimately dismissive, reading came in J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Western Response to Zoroaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 31–32, where some of the interesting qualities of the work are highlighted alongside a characterization of the book as "extremely personal and rather embarrassing pioneer-work".

Wikander's theories on the *Männerbund*, "the pattern of the *Männerbund* was so vivid in his thoughts that it came between him and the data".⁸¹

How all of this worked can perhaps be illustrated with a brief example. The Zoroastrian deity Sraosha, whose name means 'hearkening', is a very prominent god in the Zoroastrian pantheon.⁸² In a sense, the particular layering of the available sources for the history of Zoroastrianism (the Old Avestan texts – the standard Avesta – the Middle Persian works – New Persian and Gujarati literature – living practice) reveals not only his lasting importance, but also a quite spectacular growth in prominence and popularity (as evidence for which it has often been pointed out that Soroush is the only Zoroastrian deity to have been explicitly adopted into Iranian (popular) Islam). From a fairly abstract being representing obedience and maintaining a special relation with (listening to) the sacred word, Sraosha developed into the judge of the souls of the deceased on the one hand, and the 'lord of this world' on the other. In Nyberg's *Religionen*, Sraosha is not just identified with Mithra, whose functions he is said to have absorbed, but in one breath identified with a Mithra *community* – on the assumption that the 'abstract' deities of the Avesta (which in reality covers almost all Avestan gods) are themselves representations of communities, or of social groups. From that moment on, the three (Sraosha himself, Mithra (since Sraosha is nothing but a 'verkleiderter Mithra'), and the Mithra-community ('Mithra-Gemeinde', a pivotal concept in Nyberg's reconstruction)) can be invoked instead of each other at will. Widengren added to this his own identification (*without* fully abandoning those suggested by Nyberg), in simply claiming Sraosha to be the new name of the god Aryaman (and the closely related goddess Ashi, 'Reward', as the new name of the god Baga). So on the one hand, all these identifications made it very easy to 'establish' connections within and across multiple sources (since Sraosha could simply be Mithra, or Aryaman, or a community), but they could also be made distinct by identifying them as social units, or as rivalling religions.

There thus was an awful lot that came between Widengren and the data, too. He not only accepted Nyberg's pluralization of Iranian religions as valid, he expanded it down to fairly recent historical times. And it always worked the same way – and reading it backwards, from a modern point of view, it never ceases to amaze how much of what was never there a great scholar could read into the evidence. It impacted almost everything he wrote. He kept pace with

81 M. Boyce, "Priests, Cattle and Men," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 50 (1987): 508–526, p. 515.

82 The standard work about him is G. Kreyenbroek, *Sraoša in the Zoroastrian Tradition* (Orientalia Rheno-Traiectina 28; Leiden: Brill, 1985).

all new developments that were happening around him, but used these simply to fit new facts, new texts, new evidence into a pre-given scheme of New Year kings fighting dragons and drought, and of prostitutes hanging around men's clubs, hoping to be given a sip of intoxicating drinks so that they could perform fertility magic by organizing orgies with licentious Mithra-worshipping, bull-slaying young warriors. He used (fairly standard forms of) Near Eastern macrocosm-microcosm speculations to find patterns of thought that would have dissolved the distinction between the soul and the great god Vohu Manah. These speculations, he claimed, would provide the background for a proper understanding of Iranian mysticism, which was then claimed to have had an enormous effect on both Christian and Islamic mysticism (as well as, of course, on Gnosticism, which he, following Reitzenstein, saw as an essentially Iranian invention). In that sense, Widengren may be seen as the greatest pan-Iranist who ever lived. And when, as inevitably happened, scholars with a solid background in Iranian studies showed how weakly all of these theories were connected with actual evidence, and how poor his understanding of some of the evidence in reality was, there was no stopping Widengren's evanescence.⁸³

Let me focus on this point briefly. In his great study *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God*, Widengren traverses enormous stretches of ancient literature in a way that still leaves the innocent reader awestruck as a demonstration of deep learning.⁸⁴ This it truly is, but at the same time its core assumption

83 In order to understand this mechanism, I know of no better analogy than Richard Gordon's inspiring remarks on what happened to the 'category mistake' of seeing images as people (R.L. Gordon, "The Real and the Imaginary: Production and Religion in the Graeco-Roman World," *Art History* 2 (1979): 5–34, p. 20): "Religion then can be seen as a way of naming powers and, by the act of classification, asserting and denying relationships between 'aspects' of powers. It is a characteristically human enterprise. [...] Classifications turn into realities: the names of things 'are' the things. The taxonomy of powers easily turns into a population of 'people', though of course it need not do so: those strange forms of religion that so fascinated the nineteenth century, 'animism', 'fetishism' and the rest, are examples of taxonomies of powers that reject this option, and had to be called 'primitive' simply because they were different. Once that happens, it is a simple step to reinforce that choice by representing the powers as people, on condition that one 'reserves' the classification – they are people, but they are also not. While such a system remains intact, no one is in danger of making the category mistake that 'people' are people. Once it begins to break down, easy mileage can be got out of the deliberate category mistake, as the philosophical critics of Graeco-Roman paganism, and the Christian apologists, discovered."

84 G. Widengren, *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God: Studies in Iranian and Manichaean Religion* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1945:5; Uppsala/Leipzig: Lundequist/Harrassowitz, 1945). The work is claimed to have its roots in a study on the concept of "great mind" (*hawnā rabbā*) in the work of (or rather: attributed to) the Syrian mystic Stephen bar Sudhaile (Widengren, *Great Vohu Manah*, [3]). That study came out as G. Widengren, "Researches in Syriac Mysticism: Mystical Experiences and Spiritual

is that the being called the great Manohmed (the Manichaeen Light Nous) in Manichaeen Parthian texts is literally identical with the great and powerful Zoroastrian god Vohu Manah (whose name is used for this particular Manichaeen deity, the “Light Nous”, in Manichaeen Middle Persian).⁸⁵ This, and only this, allowed Widengren to propose an enormous and truly inspiring survey of ideas and texts surrounding Vohu Manah in various Iranian literatures, but since the identification of Manohmed with Vohu Manah was quickly shown to be unsoundly based,⁸⁶ much of his learning lost almost all of its relevance, and his lofty ideas about Iranian mysticism and its cultural radiation crumbled.

Exercises,” *Numen* 8 (1961), 161–198. In it, characteristically, he simply claimed the concept as Manichaeen/Iranian with a reference to his own work. This interpretation has not been widely adopted.

85 Ironically, it is this part of Widengren's argument that has elicited little commentary, but it is certainly misguided: the primary being who receives a *name* in Parthian and Middle Persian texts is a *Manichaeen* spiritual being, known to most as the “Light Nous” or “Light Mind”. Although Middle Persian texts render this concept understandable by ‘translating’ it as Vohu Manah, Parthian texts do not, but opt for another technical term drawn from Zoroastrian vocabulary. As W Sundermann, “Manohmed rōšn ‘der Licht-Nous’. Ursprung und Wandel eines manichäischen Begriffs,” in *Memoriae Munusculum: Gedenkband für Annemarie von Gabain* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 123–129, convincingly shows, the being named by means of this technical term is distinguished from the concept itself through the addition of an epithet (“great”, Parthian *kalān*). Anyone who would like to *reverse* this argument, which is what Widengren does, in using the Manichaeen and Zoroastrian texts as discussing the *same* god, needs to demonstrate that this is actually the case (and that demonstration is wholly absent from his argument).

86 That was actually known long before Widengren published his study. In his vicious review of I. Scheftelowitz, *Die Entstehung der manichäischen Religion und des Erlösungsmysteriums* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1922), H.H. Schaeder proposed to understand Parthian *mnwhmyd* as derived from Avestan *manahasca humaiti* (H.H. Schaeder, “Review of I. Scheftelowitz, *Die Entstehung der manichäischen Religion* (Giessen, 1922),” *Der Islam* 13 (1923), 320–333, p. 327). This etymology meant that there was no *etymological* connection between Vohu Manah and the word *manōhmēd* (which, it was later found out, is also attested in Middle Persian, but in a slightly different meaning). Although Schaeder subsequently withdrew this explanation (R. Reitzenstein & H.H. Schaeder, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1926, p. 209 n. 5)), it was adopted by most others, and wilfully ignored by Widengren (who offered his own etymology, because he needed to understand the name Man-vah-med (as he read it) as containing Man-Vah = Vahman (Widengren, *Great Vohu Manah*, p. 12 n. 2), following E. Waldschmidt & W. Lentz, *Die Stellung Jesu im Manichäismus* (Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 1926:4; Berlin: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1926), and, interestingly, passing over a quite different (but, it has to be admitted, wholly impossible) solution proposed by H.S. Nyberg, “Review of E. Waldschmidt & W. Lentz, *Die Stellung Jesu im Manichäismus* (Berlin, 1926),” *Le monde oriental* 23 (1929): 354–373, pp. 368–369).

7 Conclusions

There were, thus, two reasons why Widengren's work, and with it the work of the whole school of Uppsala, descended into virtual oblivion: a structural one and a substantive one. The structural one is the disappearance of a shared continental European academic discourse in the humanities and the study of religion: the downfall of phenomenology of religion, of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, of Dumézil's trifunctionalism, and of Eliade's religionism as branches of crypto-theology. The substantive one was the impossibility, within these grand schemes, of finding ways to connect vision with detail. Widengren, who was always praised for his encompassing knowledge, in the end fell victim to the discovery that many of the facts on which he relied were either simply incorrect or incapable of doing the work he needed them to do.

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“King and Saviour”: Geo Widengren’s Early Contributions (1938–1955) to the History of Iranian Religions

Mihaela Timuş

1 Introduction

In the present chapter I would like to offer a brief, critical survey of some of Geo Widengren’s early writings, published between 1938 and 1955. A part of them were conceived as a sequential series under the title “King and Saviour” (henceforth KS). Here, one finds the workshop where his most influential contributions were shaped, namely those on sacral kingship¹ and apocalyptics.²

On the one hand, I am interested to investigate his first contribution to the field of the history of Iranian religions, the 1938 monograph on the high gods. On the other hand, I propose to provide a fresh review of the ‘King and Saviour’ series, which follows two main lines of inquiry: the integration of the (then) newly discovered Manichaean literature and his approach to Near East kingship, with a particular focus on whether it paved the path to the understanding of Iranian kingship.

2 The Influence of Henrik Samuel Nyberg

In 1937, Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1889–1974) published in Swedish the synthesis *Irans forntida Religioner* (Stockholm, Svenska Kyrkan Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag), which was translated into German one year later by Heinrich Hans Schaeder (1896–1957) as *Die Religionen alten Irans*. The title points to a

1 See esp. Geo Widengren, “Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte,” *Numen* 1/1 (1954): 16–83. *Idem*, “Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte: II. Geschichte der iranischen Religionen und ihre Nachwirkung,” *Numen* 2/1–2 (1955): 47–134. *Idem*, *Sakrales Königtum im Alten Testament und im Judentum* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1955).

2 See the later synopsis on the state of questions in Geo Widengren, “Leitende Ideen und Quellen der iranischen Apokalypitik,” in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, ed. David Hellholm (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989), 77–162.

plurality of Iranian religions, in the same vein as Widengren's *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1965).³ This differentiates the work from other general works in the field, such as those by Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1910–2012) (*La religion de l'Iran ancien*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), Mary Boyce (1920–2006) (*History of Zoroastrianism*, 3 vols, E.J. Brill, 1975–1991) and Michael Stausberg (*Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale*, 3 vols, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2002–2004), which are concerned with a single Iranian religion, namely Zoroastrianism. Despite many divergences, these three latter works may have agreed on one point: from the *Gāthās* and the Achaemenid dynasty up to the contemporary Parsi communities in Mumbai, there was only one religion, the liturgical support of which was preserved in the sacred text of Avesta.

Contrary to this view, Nyberg proposed the hypothesis of a religious landscape which bore partial similarity to that of ancient Greece, and in which there existed a variety of cults and divinities. To quote Widengren's summarizing formula with regard to this specific subject: "[F]rom times immemorial Iran seems to have been the battle ground of rival religious systems and cults."⁴ Before the religion of Zarathushtra (or even regardless of it), a variety of cults devoted to different deities are thought to have co-existed on the Iranian plateau; these cults, which were of equal importance, underwent mutations from one geographical region to another over time.

In 1938 two other works had also been printed in Sweden: *Der arische Männerbund* (Lund) by Stig Wikander (1908–1983) and *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* (Uppsala) by Geo Widengren (1907–1996). Both authors were Nyberg's closest students and amicable colleagues.

While Wikander's doctoral PhD was indebted to the work of Otto Höfler (1901–1987),⁵ Widengren acknowledged the inspiration of Tor Andræ (1885–1947), his *Doktorvater*, who was both a bishop and a scholar of Islam. Widengren

3 Widengren's monograph was the only work of Swedish scholarship in zoroastrian studies translated into French. The circumstances whereby this translation was entrusted to no one other than Lionel Jospin, who many years later became French Prime Minister, remain unknown. This fact was underlined in Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "Geo Widengren (1907–1996). Obituary," *Studia Iranica* 25/2 (1996): 263–272, especially 266.

4 Geo Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism. Studies in Manichaeism, Mandaean, and Syrian-Gnostic Religion* (Uppsala-Leipzig: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1946/3), 10.

5 For a detailed account on the context of Wikander's PhD thesis, see Mihaela Timuş, "Quand l'Allemagne était leur Mecque ... La science des religions chez Stig Wikander (1935–1944)," in *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, ed. Horst Junginger. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007), 205–228.

also relied on the help of Kaj Barr (1896–1970), for the Pahlavi translations, and on H.H. Schaeder, for the correction of his German.⁶

Widengren’s theory of high gods was a particular synthesis in which he took a stand on various main lines of historical-religious theories, such as the views of the historian and philologist Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959) and those of the linguist and ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954) on the origin of monotheism and the Uranian nature of god, Iranian studies, and their ethnographic research into African tribes. While Pettazzoni identified God with sky, Schmidt thought that the essence of a high god was different from sky. Widengren, for his part, contributed to the debate by defining the high gods (such as Mithra, Sraoša, Vāyu, Zāman, etc.) as divinities of destiny (*Schicksalsgötter*).⁷ According to his approach, understanding the beliefs and practices of contemporary non-literate people in Africa would allow one to better perceive how high gods were conceived in remote ancient times. As in other cases too (see further on the series KS), he tried to place his work at the crossroads of various theories, many of which were among those most in fashion by the time of the publication of his own work.

In the introduction he explained some methodological choices which nowadays appear as rather problematic: firstly, by listing the huge amount of sources which he used, often in a rather non-selective way; and, secondly and more importantly, by describing the way he decided to use the Avesta. It is well known that Nyberg’s theories on various religious cults in ancient Iran relied on a thorough reading and his own translations of Avestan texts. Widengren himself used Avestan texts as well. Yet, his introductory statement appeared as rather astonishing, disqualifying him to a large extent from a scientific point of view. He confessed to having ignored previous translations of the Avestan texts, using his own understanding of them, in a process in which interpretation was given priority and philology was subordinated to interpretation. His own contributions, he stated, should not be judged from a philological point of view, but only as a means of serving his purpose: “(...) nicht als philologische Leistungen gewertet werden, sondern nur als Mittel zum Zweck dienen.”⁸ This

6 Geo Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran. Eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung* (Uppsala-Leipzig: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1938/6), v.

7 I have discussed elements of this theory in Mihaela Timuş, “Sur le vocabulaire du ‘destin’ chez les zoroastriens. Autour du pehlevi *baxt*,” in *Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea held in Ravenna, 6–11 October 2003. Vol. I. Ancient & Middle Iranian Studies*, ed. Antonio Panaino and Andrea Piras (Milano: Edizioni Mimesis, 2006), 725–746.

8 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*, 4.

is certainly one of the reasons why this early writing remained one of the most ignored contributions of Widengren. It used a method which easily led to the falsification of data and the distortion of the historical reconstruction, so as to render its results unreliable.⁹

It is interesting to note that one chapter in this work is devoted to the Iranian *Männerbund* (groups of warrior bands) as well. This shows that Widengren and Wikander were in close contact, debating about the same issues in the same period. Widengren almost always endorses Wikander's ideas,¹⁰ with one major exception. He openly attacks Wikander's views on the political meaning of these confreries, which allegedly revealed the 'deepest forces' of the Aryans,¹¹ by emphasizing the futility of such a question: "eine eindeutig klarlagende Antwort auf diese Frage kann man überhaupt nicht geben [one cannot at all give an unequivocally clear answer to this question]."¹² His main interest is focussed on the phenomenon of *furor* (*aešma*) as it manifests itself among the members of a *Männerbund*.¹³ He gathers more evidence in favour of it, relying on both Avestan and Middle Persian texts, thereby widening the rather scarce textual lore used by Wikander,¹⁴ and probably trying to save as much as possible the core of his colleague's approach. He also tries to relate the historical-religious investigation of an ancient phenomenon to the ethnographical research on African tribes, which was mainly represented at that time by the works of Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), particularly his *Erythräa: Länder und Zeiten des heiligen Königsmordes* (Berlin, 1931). It might also be significant to notice that, while Wikander never returned to address the question

9 For a systematic, and rather theoretical, criticism of this work, see Ugo Bianchi, *Zamān ī Ōhrmazd. Lo zoroastrismo nelle sue origini e nella sua essenza* (Torino: Società editrice internazionale, 1958), 60–61 (the idea of *Hochgott* is not sustainable from a historical-religious point of view), p. 130, p. 195, note 12 (*Hochgott* is an arbitrary notion), pp. 193–195, note 10.

10 See Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*, 325, 328.

11 "war ihr Ethos etwas, das die tiefsten und wertvollsten Kräfte der Arier hervorrufen, ihre geschichtliche Entwicklung positiv bestimmt konnte?"; Wikander, *Der arische Männerbund* (1938); cf., Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*, 323–324.

12 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*, 324.

13 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*, 330 (the fact that *furor* is known by the African tribes as well: "das räuberische Treiben des Geheimbündler ist aus Afrika wohl bekannt").

14 In a previous work I argued that the rather few quotations of the Iranian material largely weakens Wikander's demonstration: see Timuş, "Quand l'Allemagne." More recent research has attempted at filling the gap by putting forward further contexts of the Iranian / Zoroastrian literature which could bring support to Wikander's theories, see Touraj Daryaei, "The Iranian *Männerbund* Revisited," *Iran & Caucasus* 22/1 (2018): 38–49.

of *Männerbund* in his last career, Widengren still devoted a chapter to this topic in his late monograph on the Iranian feudal structures.¹⁵

3 The *King and Saviour* Series (1945–1955)

A couple of years later, Widengren largely changed his perspective, his theoretical and comparative framework, and the methods of his approaches. Especially in his five-volume series “King and Saviour”,¹⁶ he progressively affiliated himself to the vision of two scholarly lines, influential in his time: the *Myth and Ritual School* (Cambridge)¹⁷ and *die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Göttingen).

The works of various representatives of the first school, such as William Robertson-Smith (1846–1894), James Frazer (1854–1941) and Samuel Henry Hooke (1874–1968), influenced him greatly. Their main working hypothesis, namely that “the myth is the illustration of a ritual”, received particular importance. Such a theory seemed to provide a compensation to the paucity of historical sources concerning kingship in ancient Near East and Iran. One could formulate various hypothesis with regard to ritual aspects, answering questions such as: how was the king enthroned? Who took part in such a ritual? What were the main stages of the process? Widengren used texts from various traditions, many of them of a religious character, in order to extract “evidence” concerning (possible) former ritual structures of kingship.

The second term of the series title, namely “Saviour”, led Widengren to eschatology and apocalyptic ideas, and especially to the other school of thought to which he related himself, namely *die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, in a positive as well as a critical way.¹⁸

15 Geo Widengren, *Der Feudalismus im alten Iran. Männerbund – Gefolgswesen – Feudalismus in der iranischen Gesellschaft im Hinblick auf die indogermanischen Verhältnisse* (Köln-Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1968).

16 For the full list of titles, see the Bibliography at the end of this article.

17 Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School. J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York-London: Routledge, 2002).

18 As seems to have been the case with his interpretation of the Manichaeic Middle Persian and Parthian notion of *manohmed* in KS 1. See Geo Widengren, *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God. Studies in Iranian and Manichaeic Religion* (Uppsala-Leipzig: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1945/5).

4 Integrating Manichaeism (KS I and KS II)

The two first monographs of the series, namely *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God* (henceforth KS I) and *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism* (henceforth KS II) are mainly concerned with the integration of the (then) newly discovered Manichaean literature to the study of Iranian religions. Friedrich Carl Andreas (1846–1930) and Walter Bruno Henning (1908–1967) had just published the “Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch-Turkestan” (1932–1934, 3 fascicles), in which an important amount of Iranian Manichaean texts was made accessible in a German translation. Widengren was keen to integrate these materials and explore them in support of his theory at the time, which was borrowed from Nyberg, on the multiplicity of ancient Iranian religions.

KS I is mainly devoted to the Iranian god Vohu Manah according to both the Zoroastrian and the Manichaean religious systems. As a matter of fact, this is probably the only monograph of the KS series in which Widengren dealt with Zoroastrian sources and generally remained a partisan of *die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and Reitzenstein’s research,¹⁹ while also largely siding with the ideas of his master H.S. Nyberg and his colleague Stig Wikander.²⁰ One of these ideas is, for instance, Nyberg’s hypothesis, largely

19 See esp. Reitzenstein’s identification of *manohmed*, “the saved Saviour (der erlöste Erlöser)” as a part of the threefold Manichaean formula: Jesus Splendor, Maiden of Light and Great Manohmed. See Widengren, *The Great Vohu*, 19.

20 The words addressed to him are particularly warm: “During the course of my research I received much inspiration from the general tendency in Dr. Wikander’s various important publications on Iranian subjects, and was able to ascertain that our statements must be considered as showing a remarkable coincidence. I deeply regret that external circumstances have prevented me from delving deeper into Indian speculation”, Widengren, *The Great Vohu*, 3. However, in a couple of letters, which the late Professor Emeritus Carl-Martin Edsman kindly addressed to me, he shared a few pieces of information, which I find useful to include here. On the one hand, when defending his PhD thesis on Aryan *Männerbund*, Stig Wikander did not receive a qualification to become a *Dozent* and thereby ensure the pursuit of his academic career. The indologist Ernst Arbman heavily criticised Wikander’s work. It was only after the publication of his second monograph on *Vayu* (Lund, 1941) that Wikander could receive the title of *Dozent* (see letter of Carl-Martin Edsman to Mihaela Timuş, Uppsala, 28th of June 2003). Edsman and Wikander both applied for the same position of Professorship in the history of religions and psychology of religion, firstly at the University of Lund (1949) and then at the University of Uppsala. While neither of them was successful in landing the Lund position in 1949, Edsman was given the chair at the University of Uppsala, despite the fact that two members of the selection committee were supporters of Wikander, namely H.S. Nyberg and Geo Widengren (see letter of Carl-Martin Edsman to Mihaela Timuş, Uppsala, 4th November 2002). In a letter dated to May 16th 1951, Eliade mentioned the

embraced by Widengren (in his *Hochgottglaube ...*), according to which god Sraoša / Srōš is an aspect of Mithra.

A first chapter is devoted to the Manichaean Middle Iranian and Parthian notion of *manohmed* (Light-Nous or Great Nous), which Widengren, following in the footsteps of Ernst Waldschmidt (1897–1985) and Wolfgang Lentz (1900–1986), the co-authors of a monograph on the figure of Jesus Christ within Manichaeism (*Die Stellung Jesu im Manichäismus*, Berlin, 1926), as well as H.H. Schaefer, read as an equivalent of the Zoroastrian / old Iranian Vohu Manah. A second chapter is mainly devoted to Zoroastrian sources related to Sraoša / Srōš and Vohu Manah, in which he uses a very large category of texts rather indiscriminately, such as *Yasna* (33.5 and others), *Vendidad*, Avestan or Pahlavi, and *Dēnkard*.

According to the Manichaean fragment M738, Srōš is described as both a “column” and a “living tree” (*drxt hy ‘y zyndg / draxt hē ī zindag*).²¹ On this basis, and after adding in the evidence of the Manichaean fragment S9 (in Middle Persian), Widengren explains the notion of the *Great (wuzurg) Manohmed* as the sum of all individual rescued souls, which climb up to the sky, at the time of death, in the form of a pillar of light.²²

In light of the scholarship of the last decades, in both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, one can better understand how this work was problematic in more ways than one. Here I shall restrict myself to two main issues.

On the one hand, Widengren’s main argument is built on the false assumption that the Manichaean *manohmed* equates to the Zoroastrian Vohu Manah. As Sundermann asserted, already in Widengren’s time, Walter Bruno Henning had argued in favour of the equivalence of the Manichaean *manohmed* with

rumors circulating in Paris (most likely in the circle of Georges Dumézil) according to which ‘Edsman’s chair’ in Uppsala would be eventually given to Wikander, see Mihaela Timuş, *It is always the Orient. The Correspondence Mircea Eliade – Stig Wikander* (Iassy: Polirom, 2005), 112. Combining Edsman’s and Eliade’s testimonies, one could reasonably suppose that Nyberg and Widengren tried their best to turn the tables on Edsman and help Wikander to obtain the position in Uppsala. One can also assume that Eliade’s enthusiastic words might not have been altogether sincere. Yet, after 1951, the relations between Wikander and Widengren seem to have become increasingly distant. In a letter to Eliade dated to the 29th of September 1952 from Lund, Wikander acknowledged that he had not heard news from Widengren for more than one year; see Timuş, *It is always the Orient*, 144. In March 1953, Wikander was eventually appointed professor at the University of Uppsala, but for the chair of Sanskrit and Indo-Europæan studies. In a letter to Eliade, sent from Damascus and dated to July 25th 1953, he confessed to having been on bad terms with Widengren for a while: see Timuş, *It is always the Orient*, 156.

21 Widengren, *The Great Vohu*, 13.

22 Widengren, *The Great Vohu*, 15.

the Av. *manajhasća humaiti* / MP *menišn humat*, which represented an element (good thinking) of the classical triad “good thinking, good speech, good action”.²³ Following Henning, instead of Lentz and Schaefer, would have saved Widengren from producing a work which has since been quoted rather critically among scholars of Iranian studies.²⁴

Jean de Menasce corrected this false assumption in a short article on the MP *manohmed*, which focussed on a few chapters of *Dēnkard* 3 (42, 264, 290, 299, 409),²⁵ but which were never referred to by Widengren. De Menasce thought that the most reasonable meaning of the notion in the Zoroastrian contexts would be: “*mēnōg* de réalités concrètes dont ils sont les archetypes”.²⁶ Later, however, Werner Sundermann provided a significant argument against the Lentz-Widengren hypothesis: there are Manichaean contexts in which both *manohmed* and *Vohu Manah* are used with slightly different meanings, which makes it impossible that they are entirely interchangeable.²⁷ The solution firstly proposed by Schaefer (who later abandoned it), approved by Henning and taken up by Sundermann shows that, as the latter underlined, Mani had a precise knowledge of Zoroastrian sources.²⁸ This suggests that he would have borrowed central notions for Zoroastrianism, such as the “good thinking”, and given to them particularly different meanings, but which were plainly in agreement with his own system of thinking.

On the other hand, the methodology of ks I is problematic. While clearly intending to make a confrontation between the Manichaean and Zoroastrian sources, from the first category he used only two fragments, namely M783 and S9. Wherever he made a comparison between the two literatures, he saw only the similarities between them²⁹ without taking into account the fact that the same notions were used differently in the two main contexts or the significant polysemy of certain terms, such as *manohmed* (as Sundermann stressed, for the Manichaean literature) or *Srōš*, within one field or the other. In doing so, Widengren ignored the profound polemical constitution of Manichaeism,

23 Werner Sundermann, “*Manohmed rōšn* ‘der Licht-Nous’, Ursprung und Wandel eines manichäischen Begriffs,” in *Memoriae Munusculum. Gedankband für Annemarie von Gabain*, ed. Klaus Röhrborn and Wolfgang Veenker (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1994), 124.

24 See Jean De Menasce, “Exégèse spirituelle d’un mythe géographique mazdéen,” *Journal Asiatique* 259 (1971): 21–24; Sundermann, “*Manohmed rōšn* ‘der Licht-Nous’”. Sceptical remarks with regard to this work can be also found in Bianchi, *Zamān ī Ōhrmazd*, 218–219, note 75.

25 De Menasce, “Exégèse spirituelle.”

26 De Menasce, “Exégèse spirituelle,” 23.

27 Sundermann, “*Manohmed rōšn*,” 127.

28 Sundermann, “*Manohmed rōšn*,” 129.

29 See Widengren, *The Great Vohu*, 52, 54, 55, 57, 59, 67.

which borrowed many Zoroastrian notions while subtly changing their meanings. For instance, within Zoroastrianism, Sraoša, together with Ahura Mazdā and Mithra, is one of the main divinities invoked during the long liturgy. Both categories of the Avestan texts, Yasna and Yašts (the hymns), attest a very complex structure of Sraoša as an intercessor of the great god Ahura Mazdā (see Yasna 56; Yašt 11).³⁰ Sraoša also plays the role of a psychopomp, but his main function is cosmogonic: he implements the creation which is the transcendent project of Ahura Mazdā. Yet, this is not the Manichaean understanding of Sroš.

Most likely such a problematic method is the result of a hidden intention. By integrating both Iranian literatures, Zoroastrian and Manichaean, in a rather indistinct way, Widengren meant to reconstruct an ‘old Iranian’ background, in which the distinction Zoroastrian – Manichaean was no longer functional. Widengren inherited this agenda from Nyberg’s theory of a variety of Iranian religions and cults which were either prior or parallel not to Islam but to Zoroastrianism, to which the later Sasanians gave an orthodox unity. On this basis, Widengren dealt with Zoroastrian texts as sources of something other than Zoroastrian, with Manichaean texts being viewed as something other than Manichaean. Whether or not he was really aware of these methodological difficulties, his second monograph of the ‘King and Saviour’ (KS II) series relied mainly on Manichaean texts and almost completely ignored the Zoroastrian ones.

Despite its methodological problems and philological shortcomings, it is possible that Widengren’s work can still be partly rehabilitated for two reasons. On the one hand, Nyberg’s theory of a diversity of old Iranian cults and rituals, some of which were reflected in the text of the Avesta, seems to acquire new relevance in light of the most recent research. On the other hand, the publication of the Manichaean Dublin Kephalaia, with their more obvious Iranian content, today encourages the comparison between the two systems, Manichaean and Zoroastrian. In this respect, Widengren counts among the first historians to have attempted to build up a path between the two respective fields.

Between KS I (1945) and KS II (1946) Widengren’s methodological options obviously evolved. In KS II he concentrated exclusively on Manichaeism, the general framework of this second monograph having been inspired by three main avenues of interpretation of this religion. The first avenue, which was represented by Konrad Kessler (1851–1905), defended the Mesopotamian

30 See, for instance, Jean Kellens, Jean, *Lacmé du sacrifice. Les parties récentes des Staota Yesniia (Y 27.13–Y 59) avec les intercalations de Visprad 13 à 24 et la Dahmā Āfriti (Y 60–61)* (Paris: De Boccard, 2011), 63–106.

background of the Manichaeism religion. The second, which emphasized the Iranian background, was developed by Richard Reitzenstein (1861–1931), in the wake of the discovery of many fragments in Middle Iranian languages, in China. The third, which conceived Manichaeism as a Christian Gnostic sect, was proposed by Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864–1935) and taken up by H.H. Schaeder, who shared many views with Adolf von Harnack (1850–1931), to the extent that Hans Joans described Schaeder as a ‘Harnack redivivus’. According to Widengren, his main contribution was to conceive the difference between Eastern and Western Manichaeism as the difference between areas where Christian (Western) and Iranian (Eastern) notions respectively were borrowed and used to express a new system of thinking. This idea pushed Schaeder to consider the Iranian influence on Manichaeism as ‘elements of style’ rather than constitutive parts of the new religious system, in a way which departed Nyberg and other defenders of the Iranian hypothesis. This view is described in summary by Widengren himself in the Introduction to his second monograph, which is here referred to as KS II.³¹

Widengren also underlined the main connections with *die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, positioning himself most closely to the ideas of Reitzenstein. Reitzenstein himself, who followed in the footsteps of Wilhelm Bousset, defended the idea of a popular Iranian religion as distinct from the orthodox Zoroastrianism, which was promoted by the high priests of several Sasanian kings. This popular religion might have inspired Mani in shaping his system of thinking.

Even though Widengren underlined that Reitzenstein’s view was not perfectly in tune with Nyberg’s hypothesis of different Iranian religions and cults, he concluded that they could be seen as complementary, as long as the various religions were perceived as offshoots of the later, popular, single Iranian religion. The fact that Zurvan has such an important place within the Manichaeism system, as another name for the ‘Father of Greatness’, brings further support to his theory of high gods. The same theory was endorsed by Wikander’s book *Feuerpriester in Kleinasien und Iran*, which was published the same year as KS II, in which the goddess Anāhitā was presented as the object of a major cult in Western Iran. Finally, the idea of Zurvanism as a religious movement that paralleled the Zoroastrian orthodoxy and played an important role in the constitution of Manichaeism, was embraced by both *die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of Reitzenstein and Nyberg and other scholars (such as Benveniste). This shows how important the discovery of the

31 This paragraph summarizes the Introduction in Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements*, 9–12.

Manichaean Middle Iranian fragments was in supporting the theories of the Swedish scholars in Iranian studies.³²

Yet, and this may seem striking, the content of KS II is not at all concerned with Iranian sources. It is focussed only on the Mesopotamian and Jewish heritage and the Christian dimension of Manichaeism. In other words, Widengren leaves aside his affiliation with *die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* to explore and do justice to the hypothesis of the German orientalist Kessler.

5 The Structure of Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia and Islam (KS III, KS IV, KS V)

The other three monographs of the KS series are mainly devoted to the question of kingship according to three main types of sources, namely: (i) Near East, (ii) Jewish (i.e. the texts which preceded or accompanied the installation of the Iranian Achaemenid dynasty or accompanied it), and (iii) later Muslim (Arabic and Iranian) literatures. Although referred to here and there, the Achaemenid inscriptions are conspicuously absent from this inquiry.

In KS III, Widengren explored the elements of kingship in depth, relying on the works of the representatives of the Myth and Ritual school. Even though the main sources are religious texts (and in certain cases one can also include iconography), they pertain to ritual structures as well. In this way, various mythical aspects are considered to reveal elements and narratives concerning the earthly, historical royal ritual. One prominent example is the enthronment of the king (which mirrors that of the mythical king Enmeduraki)³³ in the presence of an assembly (which mirrors the assembly of gods),³⁴ who gather together at the New Year's feast in order to decide the fate of the coming year,³⁵ and who endow the ruler with extensive knowledge and heavenly wisdom,³⁶

32 Apparently, Wikander was preparing an article or a monograph on the terminology and practice of confession within the Manichaean religion, most likely on the basis of the newly discovered Iranian fragments, cf. Widengren 1946, p. 10, note 3. As far as I know, the work by Wikander entitled “La confession des péchés dans le manichéisme” was never published. During my research stage (summer 2001) in Wikander's archive I did not find any such manuscript, nor could any mention of it be found in his annotated bibliography I published, Mihaela Timuş, “La bibliographie annotée de Stig Wikander,” *Studia Asiatica* 1/1–2 (2000): 209–234.

33 Geo Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* (Uppsala-Wiesbaden: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1951/4), 7.

34 Widengren, *The King*, 8.

35 Widengren, *The King*, 9.

36 Widengren, *The King*, 12.

making him a wise scribe and a visionary seer.³⁷ Indeed, Widengren was cautious enough to admit that this scenario, having been reconstructed on the basis of religious, visionary texts, remains speculative.³⁸

The tenth chapter of the second monograph KS II dealt with the Tree of Life. Here, Widengren identified various instances, most of which were taken out of the Syriac Christian literature, in which this symbol was identified with Jesus. KS IV is entirely devoted to the symbolical connection between the king and the tree of life in Mesopotamia. The major sources used are the Babylonian texts (the *Epic of Gilgamesh*), often together with iconography, all of which preceded the Old Persian royal inscriptions, which are not included in the discussion. Interestingly, Widengren describes a complex of symbols: the tree and water of life, the paradise, the cedar staff and other plants which have a connection with kingship. According to the old Mesopotamian sources, the king appears to be the one who waters the Tree of Life, and this event takes place in the garden of paradise. As the “custodian” of these two vital elements, the water and the tree, the king also receives the title of “gardener” in both Sumerian and Accadian sources.³⁹ Moreover, there is a connection between the gardener and the substitute king. During certain festivals,⁴⁰ a gardener was placed on the throne as a substitute.⁴¹ All these elements would serve as materials for describing the typology of kingship in ancient Near East.

I should add here that recent research on ancient Iran has highlighted the fact that this typology was inherited by the Achaemenian tradition as well. Their practices, as are attested by both archaeological evidence and old literary sources (such as the writings of the Greek historian Xenophon or the *Book of Esther* of the Old Testament), show that the motif of the king as a ‘gardener’ also stood at the center of their ideology.⁴² Widengren did not integrate such a perspective into his analysis, either in the KS series or in the few works he devoted later on to Iranian kingship.

37 Widengren, *The King*, 13. On the basis of Sumerian and Accadian tablets, some more elements of the definition of the king are added. Among other things, he is supposed to guide the country properly, be a shepherd for the people, entertain the cult-centers, and look after the temples; see Widengren *The King*, 20.

38 See esp. Widengren, *The King*, 18.

39 Widengren, *The King*, 15.

40 Widengren assumes that this took place during the New Year’s festival, but without giving any proof; Widengren *The King*, 17.

41 “Ira-Imitti, the king, placed Enlil-Bani, the gardener, as a substitute king on his throne,” Widengren, *The King*, 16.

42 Bruce Lincoln, *Politique du Paradis. Religion et empire en Perse achéménide* (Genève: Éditions Labor et Fides, 2015), 107–109.

In KS v, Widengren again takes the topic of the apostle of God and his ascent to heaven, but this time makes use of Muslim sources, Arabic and Iranian. A great deal of attention is directed towards the pre-Islamic background (Christian, Gnostic, Manichaeism, Zoroastrian) of the Arabic term for ‘prophet’ or ‘messenger’ (*rasūl*) and the terminology related to it. Particular interest is paid to the importance of Manichaeism in the construction of part of the Muslim vocabulary. By the 4th c. CE, already on Arabic soil and particularly in al-Ḥira, Manichaeism influenced the Arabic vocabulary long before the emergence of Islam.⁴³ In this respect, the assimilation of *frēstag*, the Middle Persian word for ‘apostle’ which was largely used in both Manichaeism and Zoroastrian literatures, with *rasūl* could have taken place long before the 7th c. AD. On the other hand, according to Islamic sources such as Muṭahhar’s *Book of the creation* (French edition by Cl. Huart, Paris, 1899–1919), the Mazdakites of Islamic times (called Khuramdīnān) would have had apostles whom they called *firištagān*.⁴⁴

One of Widengren’s methodological positions was to take the Arabic sources for granted when they spoke about Zoroastrians.⁴⁵ In this way, and consistently in tune with Wikander’s recent results published in the monograph *Feuerpriester in Kleinasien und Iran* (Lund, 1946), Widengren thought that all the Arabic texts which discussed Zarathushtra the prophet and his book were likely to have been inspired by the reports which the Zoroastrian priests themselves gave on their own tradition, and which are reflected in the *Dēnkard*, the most complex theological treatise of their exegetical literature after the Arab conquest.⁴⁶ This would explain why Zoroastrians were qualified as ‘people of the book’ (*ahl al-kitāb*) within the Muslim juridical corpus. Indeed, this perspective has since remained less explored within Iranian and Zoroastrian studies and would be worth investigating more.

Concerning the ascension to heaven (Arabic *mī‘rāj*), Widengren identifies similar steps to those which he had already made in KS IV with regard to Mesopotamian documents. Here, one may assume that he considered such a scheme, obtained by the investigation of a mainly religious literature, helpful for the description of the kingship in ancient Iran as well. When composing his KS v, Widengren obviously planned a monograph with the title *La royauté*

43 Geo Widengren, *Muḥammad, the Apostle of God, and His Ascension* (Uppsala-Leipzig: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1955/1), 28, 62.

44 Widengren, *Muḥammad*, 27.

45 Widengren, *Muḥammad*, 28.

46 Widengren, *Muḥammad*, 29.

de l'Iran antique. Eventually he published a five-page article under this title as late as 1974.⁴⁷ The description of Iranian kingship given in the Proceedings of the IAHR congress in Rome differs visibly from the 'kingship scheme' drawn in KS III and KS V respectively, as can be shown by the following table:

	KS IV (Ancient Mesopotamia)	KS V (Islam), p. 92	Widengren 1959 (Iran)
1.	The ascent to heaven	The ascent to heaven	The king is elected from a certain family
2.	Entering the heavenly palace	The presentation before God	Election by means of an omen
3.	Reception by the highgod in his assembly	The clothing in a garment and adorning	The assembly electing the king represents the people
4.	Purification	The crowning	The king's secular authority is great, but not unrestricted
5.	Anointing	The calling by name (i.e. proclamation as the Elect and the Beloved)	The king's own person is holy and inviolable
6.	Cummunion	The enthronment on God's own seat	The king's descent is from gods
7.	Clothing in the royal garments	The gift of knowledge of God's own doing	The king's divine status is reflected in court ceremonies (<i>proskynesis</i>) and insignia of royalty (throne)
8.	Handing over of the regalia	The communion by drinking from God's own cup	The king's divine origin is reflected by his birth
9.	Entrusting of world sovereignty	The union with God	Royal ideology: the king is the cosmic ruler, the Lord of the seven climes
10.	Calling with names of honour	The return with a special commission	The king functions as a priest, a firepriest and a sacrificer

47 Geo Widengren, "La royauté de l'Iran antique," in *Commémoration Cyrus* [Acta Iranica 1 / 1] (Téhran-Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1974), 85–89.

(cont.)

KS IV (Ancient Mesopotamia)	KS V (Islam), p. 92	Widengren 1959 (Iran)
11.		The great mythic-ritual occasion of the year was the New Year's festival
12.		The coronation day takes place on the king's birthday
13.		The king's death and burial involve a ceremony of state

In fact, this reconstruction of the Iranian kingship is just a brief attempt, which is mainly based on the use of a single, rather late source, namely Plutarch (45–125). Criticism (both direct and indirect) of Widengren's view on Iranian kingship was presented by Gherardo Gnoli, who was right to distinguish between kingship under the Achaemenids and that under the Sasanians later on, as his two fundamental works show.⁴⁸ A deeper analysis of sources from the Achaemenid period or related to it today could reveal even further solidarities between Iran and the Near East in general than Widengren could have ever dared to imagine. With an eye on the future research on Iranian kingship, Widengren's obsolete works might paradoxically still prove to be useful.

6 Conclusions

As this short survey has attempted to demonstrate, Widengren's early writings were very varied both in their primary sources and in the methodologies chosen. The ancient Iranian sources are present, but so are Accadian and Sumerian ones. Some scholars tend to ignore, as I have long done myself, that Widengren's main field of investigation was not ancient Iran, but the Near East, which was the focus of his PhD on “The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms

48 Gherardo Gnoli, “Politica religiosa e concezione della regalità sotto i Sassanidi,” in *Atti del convegno internazionale sul tema: La Persia nel Medioevo (Roma, 31 marzo–5 aprile 1970)* (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1971), 225–253. Gherardo Gnoli, “Politique religieuse et conception de la royauté sous les Achéménides,” in *Commemoration Cyrus [Acta Iranica 2]* (Téhéran-Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1974), 117–190.

of Lamentation as Religious Documents” in 1937, completed under the supervision of Tor Andræ (see Eidevall’s chapter in this volume). It is in such a context that he could obtain quite early on (1936) a position as lecturer in the History and Psychology of Religion at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Uppsala. At the same university he was later on (1940) appointed a full professor.⁴⁹ Thus, Iranian studies was a secondary field for him and in it he relied often on Nyberg and his colleague Stig Wikander. In this regard, it is all the more astonishing how easily he seemed to switch from one set of sources to another as each year went by, from the Hebrew Psalms (1937) to the Avestan and Middle Persian texts in *Hochgottglaube* (1938). Yet, such a versatility in handling so many sources and areas was not devoid of scholarly risks. I have put forward certain problematic aspects in the case of *Hochgottglaube* and KS II. More in-depth studies could bring out further lines of critique.

Finally, it should be underlined that his contribution to the study of ancient Iranian kingship is rather minor. His programmatic article on this topic, published in the Proceedings of the first congress of the IAHR⁵⁰ and which sought to announce a whole investigation, was not followed by any monograph, as Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin has already noticed.⁵¹ As many of these early writings show, Widengren studied the respective phenomena much more in the context of Accadian and Sumerian and Old Testament / Jewish sources. Consequently, he eventually devoted a full monograph to the subject of kingship in the Jewish world.⁵² As for ancient Iran, his works on the feudalism and the administrative structures are much more significant, and in them the investigation of kingship is rather restrained.⁵³

Further studies could better highlight to what extent Widengren continued to defend Nyberg’s theories or if they were abandoned as soon as he applied them in these early monographs. It is indeed a paradox that he became so much of a scholar of Iranian studies and Zoroastrianism. Surely this ability to pursue a multidisciplinary approach rendered a service to the Iranian studies themselves: it gave them a visibility that they may never have acquired

49 Anders Hultgård, “Geo Widengren,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/widengren-geo>.

50 Geo Widengren, “The Sacral Kingship of Iran,” in *The Sacral Kingship. La Regalità Sacra. Contributions to the Central Theme of the VIIIth International Congress for the History of Religions (Rome, April 1955). Contributi al tema dell’VIII Congresso Internazionale di Storia delle Religioni (Roma, Aprile 1955)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959), 243–257.

51 “Ce schéma devait être développé dans un livre sur la royauté, qui n’a jamais paru”, Duchesne-Guillemin, “Geo Widengren (1907–1996). Obituary,” 265.

52 See Widengren, *Sakrale Konigtum im Alten Testamen und im Judentum*.

53 See Widengren, “Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte,” and Widengren, *Der Feudalismus im alten Iran*.

until more recent times within the wider context of the study of the history of religions.

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PART 3

A Phenomenological Approach



Geo Widengren and Swedish Phenomenology of Religion versus Italian Comparative Historical Typology

Giovanni Casadio

1 Introduction

I have the age and I have had the luck and the privilege of meeting Geo Widengren (1907–1996) twice, both times in Rome. I met this great personage first in 1982 on the occasion of the lecture he gave to the students in history of religions of Ugo Bianchi (1922–1995). Widengren was in Rome, invited by Gherardo Gnoli (1937–2012) for the first meeting of the Steering Committee that led to the formation of the *Societas Iranologica Europaea* (SIE),¹ coordinated by Gnoli himself. At the time, I had recently graduated and was the only one in Bianchi's seminar who was familiar with Iranian studies and could communicate in basic English. For this reason, Bianchi encouraged me to accompany him in the car that brought the professor back to his hotel. We had a very intense conversation on issues of Iranian religious history (at that time I was not so much concerned with the historiography and methodology of the study of religion as I am now). I was a total beginner, while he was the leading figure in the field, so his cordial openness in an informal atmosphere was really stunning for me, accustomed as I was to the hierarchical standard of the

1 “The *Societas Iranologica Europaea* (S.I.E.), an international learned society in the field of Iranian Studies with members from European and non-European countries. The SIE was founded in 1983 in Rome with the support of the European Science Foundation and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (later Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente) on the occasion of the First European Colloquium of Iranology. The aim of the S.I.E. is to promote, develop and support Ancient, Middle and Modern Iranian Studies in all subject areas of the field, including philology, linguistics, literature, history, religions, art, archaeology, philosophy, ethnology, geography, human sciences, jurisprudence”. See: <http://www.societasiranologicaeu.org/>. The association, whose current President is the Italian archeologist Pierfrancesco Callieri, had its seat at the IsMEO/IsIAO until its last days, then was transferred to the new ISMEO, which is now hosted by Sapienza University of Rome. “The SIE brings together more than four hundred specialists in Iranian studies, who are active in universities and scientific institutions around the world.” See: <http://www.societasiranologicaeu.org/content/iranianstudies.html>.

current Italian academic relations.² I met him a second time, in June 1983, at the IsMEO, where I attended a public lecture on the topic of the Parthian background of the “Song of the Pearl”, from the *Acts of Thomas*, that he gave after the conclusion of the “First European Colloquium of Iranology”, following the invitation of the IsMEO’s President and nominated President of the *Societas Iranologica Europaea G. Gnoli*.³ I tried to approach him, but he froze me with his distant cold gaze, as if he had not preserved any memory of our previous confidential meeting. It was no consolation for me to know that his approach to that topic was quite obsolete,⁴ as my mentor Bianchi remarked later rather dismissively, because my admiration for him as an unique figure of universal historian of religions and philologist who mastered most of the Indo-European and Semitic languages was immense.

I do not want to refrain from mentioning these autobiographical episodes because I am convinced that personal acquaintance with a scholar is invaluable for appreciating the psychological frame that shapes the scope of his/her scholarly vision. For obvious anagraphic reasons, I have not been able to meet the founder of the Italian “Scuola romana di storia delle religioni”, Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959), in person, but, after the use and perusal of *Raffaele Pettazzoni. Materiali per una biografia*,⁵ and a long time spent going through his epistolary exchanges (some of which I have personally edited and published), I feel very familiar with his life and work. With regard to U. Bianchi, Pettazzoni’s main disciple and follower, I was his student, I have been in close

2 Widengren’s uncommon attitude vis-à-vis junior scholars is confirmed by one of his Uppsala students: “It happened now and then that students were given tasks that they were not yet competent for. But once he had accepted a Ph.D student, no matter how green he might be, Geo Widengren treated him like a colleague.” Jan Hjärpe, “Obituary: Geo Widengren,” *IAHR Bulletin*, 34 (1996), 22.

3 See the proceedings: *The First European Colloquium of Iranology*, Rome, June 18th–20th, 1983, ed. by G. Gnoli (Rome: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1985).

4 At that time, I had already perused the works by Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, Carsten Colpe, Mary Boyce and Kurt Rudolph who were already, or were to become, figures very familiar to me. For a comprehensive and authoritative criticism of Widengren’s views on the Iranian origins of Gnosticism see Mary Boyce and Frantz Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism: Zoroastrianism Under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, Vol. III (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 462, n. 494; for the specific issue of the Parthian origin of the Hymn, see the insightful remarks by Duchesne-Guillemin: “Widengren ne changeait pas facilement d’avis, comme s’il s’agissait de positions conquises militairement, qu’il ne faudrait céder à aucun prix.” Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “Geo Widengren (1907–1996),” *Studia Iranica*, 25 (1996), 267.

5 A work published in 29 instalments at San Giovanni in Persiceto (Bologna), 1989–2009, including a full index of names and the complete bibliography of Pettazzoni’s writings, masterfully collected and organized by Mario Gandini (1924–2021). Even available online: www.raffaelepettazzoni.it/MGANDINISM.htm.

contact with him for twenty-five years (1970–1995) and I have published a book (Casadio 2002) and several articles about him.

The Swedish scholar was in contact even with two other representatives of Pettazzoni's Roman School, Angelo Brelich (1913–1977) and Alessandro Bausani (1921–1988). Brelich, who, without being Pettazzoni's actual pupil, was first his assistant and then the successor to his chair of the history of religions, is a peculiar representative of the tension between historicism and comparativism in his approach to the study of the history of religions. Due to the difference of their respective fields of research, he was not in close relationship with Widengren, though he is present in the *Festschrift* that was dedicated to Widengren in 1972.⁶ Bausani worked with philological expertise and phenomenological empathy in two fields, Iranian religious history and Islam, which were at the centre of Widengren's concerns, but his approach was that of a scholar of Islamic studies (including literature and science) rather than that of a comparative historian of religions, although we do owe him a fundamental study on the typology of monotheism. Bausani and Widengren were in any case active participants to – and had the occasion to discuss during – the conference organized in 1969 by Bianchi, Bleeker and Bausani himself in memory of Pettazzoni.⁷ For these reasons, and for space economy, we will focus our attention exclusively on the relationships of Widengren first with Pettazzoni, then with Bianchi, who must be considered the two emblematic representatives of the historical-typological approach of the School of Rome vis-a-vis the historical-phenomenological approach of the School of Uppsala, of which Widengren was undoubtedly the leader and main champion.

In our study we make a substantial use of exchanges of letters between the Swedish scholar and the two Italian scholars, letters that are mostly unpublished and that I copied and transcribed from the archives of Pettazzoni in San Giovanni in Persiceto and of Bianchi in Rome (both Italian scholars kept carbon copies or preliminary manuscripts of their letters which have been available to researchers, whereas unfortunately Widengren's *Nachlass* is still unexplored). These letters, 35 exchanged between Pettazzoni and Widengren (20 penned by the former, 15 signed by the latter) and 7 between Widengren

6 See Angelo Brelich, *Storia delle religioni. Perché?* (Napoli: Liguori, 1979), 96 and 110–112, some autobiographical pages where it is made evident that he was more interested in Sweden as a touristic attraction than in the Uppsala School.

7 Cf. Geo Widengren, "La méthode comparative: entre philologie et phénoménologie," in *Problems and Methods of the History of Religions*. Edited by Ugo Bianchi; C.J. Bleeker and Alessandro Bausani (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

and Bianchi (4 and 3 respectively) are reproduced in an Appendix in chronological order and are referred to by means of their number and date.⁸

2 Phenomenology of Religion

Before focusing on the relationship between these three scholars, we shall present an outline of the approach to the study of religion denominated “phenomenology of religion”, to which explicitly or implicitly refer both Widengren and the two Italian historians of religions. It is assumed that among the various branches of humanities there is one usually known as *Religionswissenschaft* in German (the original language of the discipline, founded by Fredrich Max Müller, a German scholar who was academically active in England), Comparative (Study of) Religion first, then simply Study of Religions (or Religious Studies) in the Anglosphere, *Histoire des religions* in the Francophone space, *Storia delle religioni* in Italy. Within the framework of the (comparative) study of religion as an academic field, phenomenology of religion has its own status as a scientific discipline (a usage limited to the past Dutch and Scandinavian academic milieu) or, more generally and appropriately, as a particular perspective, method, approach, or paradigm. It is generally maintained that phenomenology of religion can be practiced in two⁹ or three,¹⁰ or even

8 To qualify some methodological statements made in a series of contributions where I have drawn broadly on scholarly correspondences (especially concerning the two masters of the Roman School, Pettazzoni and Bianchi), I recognize that we must make a cautious usage of evidence drawn from letters. On this issue some considerations made by Antonio Gramsci related to the reconstruction of Marxian thoughts are of particular relevance even in this concern: “Un’affermazione recisa fatta in una lettera non sarebbe forse ripetuta in un libro. La vivacità stilistica delle lettere, se spesso è artisticamente più efficace dello stile più misurato e ponderato di un libro, talvolta porta a deficienze di argomentazioni; nelle lettere come nei discorsi si verificano più spesso *errori logici*; la rapidità maggiore del pensiero è spesso a discapito della sua solidità.” Quotation taken from Eugenio Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico. Con un saggio autobiografico* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1990), 94.

9 Cf. Zwi R.J. Werblowsky, “Is there a ‘Phenomenology of Religion in the Study of Religions?’” *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 7, 1 (1983), 56–57; Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, “Is a Phenomenology of Religion Possible? A Response to Jeppe Sinding Jensen,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 6, 2 (1994), 163, 170; Indrek Peedu, “The Curious Case of the Phenomenology of Religion,” in *When Gods Spoke. Researchers and reflections on religious phenomena and artefacts: Studia in honorem Tarmo Kulmar*. Edited by Peeter Espak, Märt Läänemets and Vladimir Sazonov (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2015), 249.

10 Cf. C.J. Bleeker, “The Phenomenological Method,” *Numen* 6, 2 (1959), 101.

four ways, which evidently merge with each other:¹¹ at one end of the spectrum we find a philosophical-psychological (virtually theological) phenomenology of religion and, at the other end, a descriptive, systematic, comparative, and historical phenomenology, which verges from the pure descriptive style of the first Dutch and British comparative religionists to an approach aiming at comprehensive phenomenology (*phänomenologisches Verstehen*) which is typical of the second generation of the Dutch and German schools. A *tertium genus*, combining the two perspectives outlined above, is the hermeneutical phenomenology,¹² whose most productive and characteristic representative is Mircea Eliade (1907–1986).

To be more factual let us introduce attempts at definitions formulated by some very representative, self-labelled phenomenologists of religion. The term itself as an academic notion for the study of religion was created by the Amsterdam-Leiden historian of religions P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920), in the introduction to the first edition of his *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, dated 1887.¹³ Chantepie conceptualizes his notion of phenomenology against the backdrop of the Hegelian philosophical *Encyclopedia*, positing phenomenology of religion as a kind of taxonomy, finalized to collect and classify the most relevant ethnographic and historical materials connected with various religious phenomena.¹⁴ Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), in the “Epilegomena” of his classical *Phänomenologie der Religion*, gives the following concise, strictly descriptive and aporetic definition of phenomenology: “Phenomenology is the systematic discussion of what appears. Religion, however, is an ultimate experience that evades our observation, a revelation which in its very essence is, and remains, concealed. But how shall I deal with what is thus ever elusive and hidden? How can I pursue phenomenology when there is no phenomenon? How can I refer to ‘phenomenology of religion’ at all?”¹⁵

11 Cf. Douglas Allen, “Phenomenology of Religion,” in *Encyclopedia of Religions*. Edited by Lindsay Jones, Vol. 10 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 7086–7087.

12 Cf. Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, “The Phenomenology of Religion and Theories of Interpretation,” *Temenos*, 20 (1984), 32–34.

13 Cf. Bleeker, “The Phenomenological Method,” 97–98; Werblowsky, “Is there,” 56, n. 5.

14 Cf. Åke Hultkrantz, “The Phenomenology of Religion – Aims and Methods,” *Temenos*, 6 (1970), 69; Giovanni Filoramo, “Geo Widengren e la fenomenologia storica della religione,” in Geo Widengren, *Fenomenologia della religione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), 32–33; and Thomas Ryba, “Comparative Religion, Taxonomies and 19th Century Philosophies of Science: Chantepie de la Saussaye and Tiele,” *Numen*, 48, 3 (2001), 311–315, the last two underlining various shortcomings in the approach of the Dutch scholar.

15 Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 683.

The resolution of these apories comes from the adoption of the philosophical categories of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), i.e. the hermeneutics of “understanding” (*Verstehen*),¹⁶ and Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), i.e. the concepts of “suspension of judgment” (*Epochē* or *Zurückhaltung*), that involves the “bracketing” of religious phenomena, subjecting them to a transcendental suspension of conviction without ceasing to believe in them,¹⁷ and of “eidetic vision”, i.e. intuition of the essence and the structure of the religious phenomena.¹⁸

Claas Jouco Bleeker (1898–1983) claims that “phenomenology of religion is not a philosophical discipline, but a systematization of historical facts with the intent to understand their religious meaning”,¹⁹ a science which “has to make inquiries into: 1) the *theoria* of the phenomena, 2) the *logos* of the phenomena, 3) the *entelecheia* of the phenomena. The *theoria* of the phenomena discloses the essence and the significance of the facts [...]. The *logos* of the phenomena penetrates into the structure of different forms of religious life. [...]. The *entelecheia* of the phenomena reveals itself in the dynamics, the development of which is visible in the religious life of mankind”.²⁰ To come to another scholarly and cultural tradition, the Swedish anthropologist and historian of religion(s) Åke Hultkrantz (1920–2006), starting from a severe criticism of the German and Dutch philosophically and theologically inclined phenomenology and drawing on the definitions given by three Scandinavian historians of religions (the Norwegian W.B. Kristensen, the Swedish Geo Widengren,²¹ and the Danish J. Prytz Johansen), states that phenomenology of religion is

16 Cf. Allen, “Phenomenology of Religion,” 7091.

17 Cf. Bleeker, “The Phenomenological Method,” 99–100.

18 Cf. Hultkrantz, “The Phenomenology of Religion,” 71–73; James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion. Key figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates* (London-New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2006), 9–33; Jonathan Tuckett, “Clarifying the Phenomenology of Gerardus van der Leeuw,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 28, 3 (2016) and idem, “Clarifying phenomenologies in the study of religion: separating Kristensen and van der Leeuw from Otto and Eliade,” *Religion* 46, 1 (2016).

19 C.J. Bleeker, “The Contribution of the Phenomenology of Religion to the Study of the History of Religions,” in *Problems and Methods of the History of Religions*. Edited by Ugo Bianchi; C.J. Bleeker and Alessandro Bausani (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 51.

20 Bleeker, “The Contribution,” 42; cf. Olof Pettersson and Hans Åkerberg, *Interpreting Religious Phenomena. Studies with References to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1981), 32–35; Allen, “Phenomenology of Religion,” 7092; Cox, *A Guide to*, 126–138; Peedu, “The Curious Case,” 251–253.

21 According to Widengren, in Hultkrantz’s English translation, the phenomenology of religion tries to “classify all the different phenomena in religion, portray religion as it appears in its differing manifestations in life. The phenomenology of religion is thus the knowledge of the different ways in which religion appears.” Geo Widengren, “Religionshistoria och religionsfenomenologi,” *Religion och Bibel*, 1, (1942), 21–25, 21.

“the systematic study of the forms of religion, that part of religious research which classifies and systematically investigates religious conceptions, rites and myth-traditions from comparative morphological-typological points of view”.²² Notably, Hulkrantz views phenomenology “as a religio-scientific perspective rather than as a religio-scientific subdiscipline”.²³

This definition of the aims and methods of the phenomenology formulated by the Swedish scholar on the basis of his familiarity with the theoretical perspective of his senior Uppsala colleague fits to the vision of both Pettazzoni, who talked of a “science of religion” unifying the phenomenological and historical approaches that should integrate and somewhat interpenetrate each other,²⁴ and Bianchi, who preferred to denominate the discipline “history of religions” *tout court* and to denominate the proper approach “historical typology”.

3 Nemo Propheta in Patria: Geo Widengren, a Top World Scholar in the Swedish Academic Milieu

If we consider the current scholarship dedicated to these three key figures in the European study of the history of religions, a very unbalanced situation emerges. In regard to Pettazzoni, besides the unvaluable aforementioned *Materiali*, we have three monographs in Italian (U. Casalegno, G. Mihelcic, and V.S. Severino), one monograph in Japanese (Junichi Egawa) and one in Portuguese (M. Enéas Costa), and a series of miscellaneous volumes, not to mention single articles prevalently in Italian and English but even in French, German, Turkish and Japanese.²⁵ Coming to Bianchi, who was younger and

22 Hultkrantz, “The Phenomenology of Religion,” 74–75.

23 Hultkrantz, “The Phenomenology of Religion,” 77.

24 Raffaele Pettazzoni, “Il metodo comparativo,” *Numen*, 6, 1 (1959), 14.

25 Mario Gandini, “Pettazzoni, Raffaele,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, x. Edited by L. Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005) (edited by the present writer) is the most comprehensive synthesis with full bibliographical references, updated by Giovanni Casadio, “Introduzione: Raffaele Pettazzoni a cinquant’anni dalla morte,” *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, 77, 2 (2011), see esp. 31, n. 11. After that date, especially relevant in this context Marco Toti, “Il carteggio Raffaele Pettazzoni-Claus Jouco Bleeker (1949–1959),” *Historia Religionum*, 5 (2013) and three articles in English published in leading international journals by B. Rennie, R. Nanini and V.S. Severino. See, Bryan Rennie, “Raffaele Pettazzoni from the Perspective of the Anglophone Academy,” *Numen* 60–5/6 (2013): 649–675; Valerio S. Severino, “For a Secular Return to the Sacred: Raffaele Pettazzoni’s Last Statement on the Name of the Science of Religions,” *Religion* 45–1 (2015): 1–23 and Riccardo Nanini, “Raffaele Pettazzoni’s Attitude Towards Gerardus van der Leeuw’s Phenomenology of Religion,” *Mythos*, 6, n.s. (2012), 81–97.

internationally less prestigious than Widengren, we have the proceedings of three conferences dedicated to him,²⁶ a monograph (M. Monaca) and several articles in Italian and English, including some encyclopedia entries.²⁷ The situation is quite different in the case of Widengren. No monograph, no volume of critical and historiographical essays penned by scholars who were in contact with him, but only sporadic mentions in general surveys of the field or specific studies of the Uppsala School,²⁸ four obituaries by colleagues or pupils²⁹ and two encyclopedia entries.³⁰ It should be pointed out that, instead of being virtually ignored or hastily passed over, the Swedish leader of the Uppsala School,³¹ is worthy of the amplest historiographical consideration.

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- 26 The first one is Giovanni Casadio (ed.), *Ugo Bianchi. Una vita per la storia delle religioni* (Roma: Il Calamo, 2002) that contains Bianchi's complete bibliography.
- 27 The most detailed is Giovanni Casadio, "Bianchi, Ugo," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 11. Edited by L. Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), including a survey of secondary literature.
- 28 Walter Capps, "Geo Widengren on Syncretism: on Parsing Uppsala Methodological Tendencies," *NVMEN*, 20, 3 (1973) and idem, "Uppsala Methodology and the Problem of Religious Syncretism: An Afterword on Prolegomena," in *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity: Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren*. Edited by Birger Pearson (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975); and Birger Pearson, "Introduction," in *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity: Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren*. Edited by Birger Pearson (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975); Pettersson and Åkerberg, *Interpreting Religious Phenomena*; Carl-Martin Edsman, "Ein halbes Jahrhundert Uppsala-Schule," in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Anders Hultgård*. Edited by Michael Stausberg and Olof Sundqvist (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001).
- 29 Anders Hultgård, "In memoriam Geo Widengren," *Orientalia Suecana*, 43–44 (1994–1995); Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "Geo Widengren (1907–1996)," *Studia Iranica* 25 (1996): 263–271; Gherardo Gnoli, "Geo Widengren," *East and West* (1996); Hjärpe, "Obituary"
- 30 Eugen Ciurtin, "Widengren, Geo," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, XIV, 2nd ed. L. Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 9732–9734 and Anders Hultgård, "Widengren, Geo," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (2017; Online edition). Peculiarly enough, the only comprehensive critical treatment (although superficial and not without mistakes) is by an Italian scholar: Filoramo, "Geo Widengren."
- 31 With the exception of Stig Wikander (1908–1983) all the scholars belonging to the Uppsala School were, in a way, his pupils, from the older Ivan Engnell (1906–1964), Carl-Martin Edsman (1911–2010) and Helmer Ringgren (1917–2012), who had him as supervisor of the doctoral thesis and then became his colleagues at Uppsala, to his many younger direct students who have been prominent figures in various fields of the history of religions: Åke V. Ström (1909–1994), Anders Olerud (1916–2010), Hans Söderberg (1913–1988), Sven Hartman (1917–1988), Eric Segelberg (1920–2001), Jan Bergman (1933–1999), Allan Dahlquist (1917–2009), Anders Hultgård (b. 1936), Tord Olsson (1942–2013), Jan Hjärpe (b. 1942). With Bergman, Ström and Olsson I have had fruitful contacts that improved my knowledge of the Uppsala academic milieu. Even the Uppsala Egyptologist and Coptologist Torgny Säve-Söderbergh (1914–1998) considered him a mentor in matter of Mandaean studies. Amazingly enough, while Widengren wrote a conspicuous monograph

Widengren has been in fact the only scholar of comparative study of religions in the 20th century that deserves to be put on the same scale with giants like Pettazzoni and Eliade, for the broadness and methodological consciousness of his scholarly focus, which in his lifetime gained him an outstanding reputation in Northern Europe, Germany, Italy and the anglophone world.

It is perhaps convenient at this point to present briefly the characteristics of Widengren's approach to the study of religion and his methodological contribution. But first it is necessary to underline an aspect of his biography that differentiates him deeply from many scholars of the history of religions of his time. The professor of the theological faculty of Uppsala was not what is called a bookworm. All his life was patently marked by his juvenile military practice. In 1927 he attended military college; in 1928 he entered the Swedish army with the grade of ensign and pursued the military career until he became lieutenant in 1932 and then captain in 1942, discharging military residential service in Uppsala. This position was not at all a sinecure; at least for lieutenant Widengren, who in 1940 volunteered in the Finnish army as company commander to fight against the Red Army invasion of 1939–1940. During the entire span of his long life he preserved a military sporting attitude. As reported by his colleague Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "il raffolait d'équitation, montant à cheval chaque matin. Invité à Liège pour trois jours, il demanda un cheval et l'obtint, pour aller se promener dans les bois d'environs, en plein hiver".³² A reflex of this virile hard-boiled education and deportment is apparent even in his scholarly work where he frequently assumed a bellicose virulent attitude.³³

To identify Widengren's scholarly attitude nothing is more appropriate than using his own words, taken from a self-portrait included in a publication which is scarcely known even to specialists.³⁴ Approaching the end of his academic career (he was in fact only 65 years old), after having mentioned

about his mentor Tor Andræ (1885–1947), none of his numerous disciples has written more than a few pages on such a complex figure as Widengren. See Geo Widengren, *Tor Andræ* (Uppsala: J.A. Lindblad, 1947).

32 Duchesne-Guillemin, "Geo Widengren," 263.

33 This is particularly evident in Geo Widengren, "Die religionswissenschaftliche Forschung in Skandinavien in den letzten zwanzig Jahren," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 5, 3–4 (1953), which is a critical survey of the discipline in Scandinavia, and in numerous devastating reviews (e. g. that of Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösmythus*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). See in general Pettersson and Åkerberg, *Interpreting Religious Phenomena*, 24 and 72, n. 10.

34 Geo Widengren, "Cultural Contact, Cultural Influences, Cultural Continuity, and Syncretism. Some Views Based on my Previous Work," in *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity: Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren*. Edited by Birger Pearson (Missoula, Montana:

the names of his teachers in Uppsala (Tor Andræ and H.S. Nyberg) and Copenhagen (Johannes Pedersen and O.E. Ravn) and resumed the main issues of his research on Iranian and Semitic studies characterized by an interest in “cultural (and inter-cultural) continuity”, he looks backwards “to see what he has achieved of what he once hoped to achieve”.³⁵ The conclusion of this confession is of remarkable methodological value and density and is worth being quoted in its entirety. “It goes without saying that I did not start my research work in the firm conviction that it had to be concentrated on cultural contact, cultural influence and cultural continuity. Therefore, it is but natural that most of what I have written does not fall under such headings. On the whole, I have tried, even if I have not been successful, to be *an all-round historian of religion, including also phenomenology and psychology of religion* into the sphere of my interests. But it is inevitable that I was concentrating more on some things than on other things. When I was a comparatively young professor, I got a label attached to my person, and that label was: ‘Antievolutionism,³⁶ High-Gods and Sacral Kingship.’³⁷ Well, I have struggled rather hard to get rid of that label. I do not think that I ever ran the risk of being classified as a specialist in syncretism, but it has been of great interest to me to see how far my work could be said to be useful for the study of syncretism. On the other hand, I think that most of what I have written may be *useful for the phenomenological synthesis of religious studies*.”³⁸ (Italics mine, to underscore the challenge between history and phenomenology that he took up by himself, and was eventually able partially to meet, in strenuous competition with the two Italian colleagues I have mentioned at the beginning).

Scholars Press, 1975). This chapter is missing from the bibliography published in *Acta Iranica*, 20, 1979, 541–547, where it should be located at p. 547.

35 Widengren, “Cultural contact,” 18.

36 In Geo Widengren, “Evolutionism and the Problem of Religion,” *Ethnos*, 10 (1945) we find a full dismantlement of evolutionistic theories concerning the origin of religion and a plea for independent development and convergence against the diffusionism of the Wien School. His arguments, based on the perceptive criticism by the French sociological school (H. Hubert, M. Mauss), German ethnologists (R.F. Lehmann) and historians (W. Baetke), and especially the Boasian cultural anthropological American school (A. Goldenweiser, R. Lowie and P. Radin), are still tenable. The conclusion of the article is worth mentioning: “The attempt to find the origin of religion must be annulled as well as the old evolutionistic methods.”

37 At the end of his unflinchingly severe survey of Scandinavian comparative religion research in 1940s, Widengren (“Die Religionswissenschaftliche”, 334) states cogently the scope and aim of his own research: “Anti-Evolutionismus’, ‘Hochgottglauben’ und ‘mythisch-rituelle Deutung’”, issues investigated “in the light of special problems” and with “specific methods”.

38 Widengren, “Cultural Contact,” 19.

We find the synthesis of his peculiar phenomenological approach in the conclusion of the lecture he gave at the conference organized in Rome by the “Società Italiana di Storia delle religioni” on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the death of Raffaele Pettazzoni, the scholar that he considered at the same time a mentor and a competitor. “La méthode phénoménologique, en se basant sur la philologie et la méthode comparative, comprends donc les stades suivants: 1. Description des faits. 2. Arrangements des faits dans un ordre systématique. 3. Interprétation des faits pour en comprendre la signification. 4. Essai d'établir un type, une structure, un mécanisme, sans en aucune manière violer les faits historiques, mais aussi sans confondre phénoménologie et histoire”.³⁹ Based on this clear-cut statement, it is important to situate the particular position of Widengren vis-à-vis the phenomenology of religion, very distant from that of Gerardus van der Leeuw and closer to that of the other Dutch – most representative – phenomenologist of religion, C.J. Bleeker, with whom he had also a deep professional and personal connection.⁴⁰

In the first paragraph of the first chapter of his *Religionsphänomenologie* (1969; the Swedish original is dated 1945/1953)⁴¹ he presents the phenomenology of religion as a classifying science, at the borderline with and complementary to the more empirical history of religions which is concerned with the development (*Entwicklung*) of the single religions. The aim of the phenomenology of religions is, in fact, to give a complete description of all the multiple phenomena of religion. Hence, it becomes a systematic complement to the history of religions. The results of the systematic and the historical methods must often complement each other. Widengren seeks to give the phenomenology of religion an empirical, scientific basis, avoiding the metaphysics of the Dutch

39 Widengren, “La méthode,” 14. This version, published in the proceedings of the Roman conference, is slightly different from the text published in the IAHHR official journal one year before, see Geo Widengren, “La méthode comparative. Entre philologie et phénoménologie,” *NVMEN*, 18, 3 (1971), 172.

40 Cf. Geo Widengren, “Professor C.J. Bleeker. A Personal Appreciation,” in *Liber amicorum* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 5–7 and idem, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1969), 2, n. 3. Here, instead, he distances himself starkly from the method adopted by the German phenomenologist Kurt Goldammer. Widengren's good balance between history and phenomenology, along with a remarkable impartiality, becomes apparent in his insightful profiles of K. Kerényi and M. Eliade, two scholars whose approach to the history of religions was quite different from his own perspective, see Geo Widengren, “Karl Kerényi Siebzig Jahre,” *NVMEN*, 14, 3 (1967) and idem, “Mircea Eliade Sixty Years Old,” *NVMEN*, 14, 3 (1967).

41 Of this “epoch-making book” (Pearson, “Introduction,” xiv), unique in its kind, we have a translation in Spanish (1976) and one in Italian (1984). Unfortunately, no translation in English, despite the promise of the author (Widengren, “Culture contact,” 19) and the fervent wish of his compatriot Pearson (*supra*).

and German traditional phenomenology, as expounded above. His programme (*supra*, in the French original version) consists of: 1. Description of data, 2. Systematic arrangement or classification of these data, 3. Interpretation of these data, in order to understand their meaning, and, finally, 4. Establishment of a typology or structure respectful of the historical phenomena in their diachronic development.⁴²

To typify further Widengren's approach, we can try to elucidate the principles that rule his wide-ranging work on so many specific subjects. These principles, informed by professed empiricism, are the "concreteness" and the "particularity". Widengren does not begin with a notion of religion, sacred kingship, high god, or syncretism (to mention some of his favourite topics) and then proceed to cover all the elements that these cultural categories may have in common. Religious or broadly cultural phenomena are not regarded as species, or manifestations of some higher and broader genus. "Rather, the emphasis is upon understanding each phenomenon within its proper sphere of meaning, regardless of the phenomenon which one attempts to understand."⁴³ To introduce an example of his empirical methodology, in the conclusion of the dense chapter 11 of *Religionsphänomenologie* dedicated to the cult-place ("From temple to basilica"), he individuates a "general tendency" in religious architecture which differentiates the building destined to the liturgy of the word from the building destined to the liturgy of sacrifice.⁴⁴ On specific topics of historical idiographic concern Widengren himself makes a detailed rigorous evaluation of the scholarly outputs of his activity during the past twenty years.⁴⁵

42 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 1. Here he refers to a methodological paper in English (Geo Widengren, "Some Remarks on the Methods of the Phenomenology of Religion," in *Universitetet och forskningen. Studier tillägnade Torgny T. Segerstedt på sextioårsdagen* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 250–260), which is unfortunately unavailable to me (resumed in Pettersson and Åkerberg, *Interpreting Religious Phenomena*, 51).

43 Capps, "Geo Widengren," 180 = Capps, "Uppsala Methodology," 40. Capps also aptly underscores that "Widengren's methodological propensities are in fundamental keeping with dominant tendencies of the controlling philosophical orientation" (Capps, "Geo Widengren," 177). The Uppsala dominant orientation in philosophical milieu was positivistic, devoid of ontological commitments, and Widengren himself admits the presence of a philosophical mentor in his scholarly training (Capps, "Geo Widengren," 175 = Capps, "Uppsala Methodology," 35). Remarkably enough, even Pettazzoni's formation took place in a positivistic milieu, cf. Giovanni Casadio, "Raffaele Pettazzoni ieri, oggi, domani: la formazione di uno storico delle religioni e il suo lascito intellettuale," in *Il mistero che rivelato ci divide e sofferto ci unisce. Studi pettazzoniani in onore di Mario Gandini*. Edited by G.P. Basello; P. Ognibene and A. Panaino (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), 227.

44 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 359.

45 Widengren, "Die religionswissenschaftliche", 196–197, 199–202, 204, 207–208, 212, 220, 222.

Overall, Widengren's work makes a monumental impression of solidity challenging attacks by opposers. Actually, things are not exactly like that. Besides a series of devastating attacks on the results of his research in the historical domains in which he made major contributions, namely Iranian religions,⁴⁶ Gnosticism,⁴⁷ and Manichaeism,⁴⁸ Widengren's global oeuvre and methodology have been subject to punctilious discussion and stern criticism, especially, if not exclusively,⁴⁹ from scholars of his own Uppsala school or, more generally, working in the same Scandinavian academic milieu.⁵⁰

46 See n. 4, *supra*, and the chapters by A. de Jong and M. Timuş in this volume. Widengren has been frequently accused of Iranocentrism, with some good reasons (cf., for example, Frantz Grenet, "Y a-t-il une composante iranienne dans l'apocalyptique judéo-chrétien? Retour sur un vieux problème," *Archaeus*, 11–12 (2007–2008), 18), but recent, textually grounded and cogently argued research has demonstrated that Widengren's views about the originality and influence of Iranian key ideas on Jewish-Christian apocalypticism were not so objectionable as was generally supposed (Grenet, "Y a-t-il", with specific reference to Widengren at 26, n. 23).

47 See n. 4, *supra*, and the chapter by Einar Thomassen in this volume. Note, however, the distinctly positive opinion of such a prominent expert as Pearson, ("Introduction," xiv).

48 See, besides the critical reviews by Mary Boyce, "Review of Mani und der Manichäismus by Geo Widengren," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 7–1 (1963) and Carsten Colpe, "Review of Mani un der der Manichäismus," *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, 63 (1968) (including an indictment of pan-Iranism and a blatant disregard of basic rules of historical research), the devastating treatment by Gilles Quispel, "The Birth of the Child. Some Gnostic and Jewish Aspects," *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 40 (1973), 297 = 230, and a specific philological remark by Giovanni Casadio, "The Manichaean Metempsychosis: Typology and Historical Roots," in *Studia Manichaica*. Edited by G. Wiessner and H.J. Klimkeit (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 110, n. 18. More in the chapter by Chiara Tommasi in this volume.

49 Even the thorough review of an exacting scholar like Kurt Rudolph, "Religionsgeschichte und 'Religionsphänomenologie,'" *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 96–4 (1971), despite criticisms of detail, is overall rather positive.

50 Cf. Pettersson and Åkerberg, *Interpreting Religious Phenomena*, 50–52, who, paradoxically enough, labels Widengren's method both as "subjective", "non-empirical" and devoid of "understanding" (*Verstehen*) and furthermore (pp. 84–85) stresses that Widengren's rationalistic attitude "often implies the elimination of the psychological view", whereas "the psychological references to the sacred, and all the other irrational elements in religion are left more or less disregarded" (more positive and balanced at pp. 69–73); Edsman (mentor, along with Erland Ehnmark, of the two above-mentioned scholars) 2001, a cumulative, methodologically (and psychologically!) founded, drastic critique of the Uppsala School, which merciless falls on the shoulders of its founding father Geo Widengren; and two following attacks by Rafael Karsten (see Göran Larsson, "It's not *mana*, It's High Gods!," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religions*, 31 (2019), 450–455), claiming that in his work (see esp. Widengren, "Evolutionism") he is unable to read carefully his historical sources and to pay sufficient attention to scholarship that contradicts his own preconceived opinions, and, incredibly enough, dismissing him as an amateur scholar and a "mere theologian."

4 Widengren and Pettazzoni

Let us come now to the core of my chapter, that is Widengren's scholarly and personal relationship first with Pettazzoni, who was his elder and, by the way, was also his predecessor as President of the IAHR, and then with Bianchi, who was a younger colleague, and, significantly, his third successor as President of the IAHR. As a graduate student and doctorate candidate,⁵¹ Geo Widengren met senior professor Raffaele Pettazzoni for the first time in October 1935, when his professor Tor Andræ invited the Italian scholar to give the Olaus Petri Lectures at the University of Uppsala.⁵² As he writes in much later personal recollections, he had become familiar with Pettazzoni's work *Dio. Formazione e sviluppo del monoteismo nella storia delle religioni. Volume I. Lessere Celeste nelle credenze dei popoli primitivi* (1922), beginning in the academic year 1929–30.⁵³ Despite the formidable impact that the lecture on “Die Religion unter den Völkern der Urkultur” of Pettazzoni's opponent Pater Wilhelm Schmidt had made on him and other students a few months before at the University of Copenhagen, Widengren recognizes that “Pettazzoni das richtige gesehen hatte”. The material collected by him (to demonstrate the celestial, uranic character of the all-knowing high god) “konnte man nicht neglieren”. On the other hand, Schmidt's theories, based on his “Kulturkreislehre” (“culture spheres”, better than “culture circles” doctrine) seemed to him “hypothetisch und abenteuerlich”.⁵⁴

The influence of Pettazzoni's *magnum opus* was evident ever since his first great “religious phenomenological” (i.e., comparative) monograph.⁵⁵ At the

51 Licensed in philosophy (Stockholm) and theology (Uppsala) in 1934, Widengren defended his doctoral thesis in Spring 1936, see Geo Widengren, “Pettazzoni's Untersuchungen zum Problem des Hochgottglaubens. Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen,” *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, 7, 1 (1983), 30–31; Hjärpe, “Obituary,” 21; Hultgård, “WIDENGREN,” 2. On Widengren's thesis, see Göran Eidevall's chapter in this volume.

52 Five lectures in German entitled “Die Allwissenheit Gottes”. Cf. Widengren, “Pettazzonis,” 29–31; Mario Gandini, “Raffaele Pettazzoni intorno al 1935,” *Materiali per una biografia. Strada maestra. Quaderni della Biblioteca comunale “G.C. Croce” di San Giovanni in Persiceto*, 52 (2002), 122–128 (with the summary of the lectures and a lot of other details, but ignoring Widengren's witness of his personal attendance).

53 “Je me souviens que c'était comme tout jeune participant au séminaire de THOR ANDRAE à Stockholm, peu avant 1930, que je rencontrais pour la première fois le nom de PETTAZZONI.” (Widengren, “Raffaele”). Cf. Widengren, “Pettazzonis,” 29.

54 Widengren, “Pettazzonis,” 31.

55 Geo Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran. Eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung* (Uppsala-Leipzig: Lundequist-Harrassowitz, 1938).

beginning of the introduction, after having mentioned W. Schmidt's assumption that the high gods live in the sky but should not be identified with it, he writes: "Nun haben jedoch die Untersuchungen Pettazzonis deutlich gezeigt, dass der grundlegende und elementare Zug im Charakter der Hochgötter eben ihre Verbindung mit dem Himmel ist [...]. Ursprünglich wohnt nicht der Gott im Himmel, sondern: er ist der Himmel [...]. Pettazzoni hat die Aufmerksamkeit besonders darauf gerichtet, dass die Allwissenheit der Hochgötter ganz aus ihrer uranischen Wesensanlage zu verstehen sei."⁵⁶ The comparison between the African high gods and the Iranian ones is based on this premise (on these aspects, see Andersson's chapter in this volume). As his personal contribution, Widengren adds that these high gods manifest themselves as destiny deities.⁵⁷ In his article on evolutionism, which is perhaps his most important theoretical contribution (still valuable in most of its points), he goes so far as to pair up with Pettazzoni, as both supporters of the same position opposed to that of the Vienna School regarding the African original religion.⁵⁸ Eight years later, in his extremely exacting survey of Scandinavian religious-historical research, Widengren recognizes again the role played by Pettazzoni's doctrine of the Uranian character of the high gods in his own work and in that of his disciple H. Ljungberg (on the Nordic god Tor), but at the same time he explicitly states that he has gone beyond Pettazzoni in establishing a more complex typology, wherein the high god is also a god of fate that controls human destinies and stands beyond Good and Evil.⁵⁹

Actually, it is in Widengren's great phenomenological treatise that the debt to Pettazzoni becomes more evident. The Italian scholar is, by far, one of the most quoted authorities, on a par with his mentor Nyberg and his companions Dumézil and Wikander, although after the *religionsgeschichtlich* siren Richard Reitzenstein. The Swedish scholar draws on the theories of Pettazzoni not only in chapter IV, dedicated to "The belief in God: pantheism, polytheism, monotheism", where he shares the results of Pettazzoni's conclusive research on the "all-knowing god" (Pettazzoni 1955 = 1956), underscoring that the Italian historian of religions has definitely demonstrated that the omniscience of god

56 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*, 1. Cf. also Widengren, "In memoriam," 76c: "there can be no doubt that his demonstration must be held to be successful [...]. In conscious opposition to Schmidt he declined – and here again he was obviously right – the term 'original monotheism' as total inadequate."

57 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*, 2 and 383–395.

58 Widengren, "Evolutionism," 92.

59 Widengren, "Die religionswissenschaftliche," 196–197 and 198.

can be explained only through the heavenly nature of the Supreme Being,⁶⁰ but also in chapter VI on “Myth as ritual text”, where he completely adheres to Pettazzoni’s theory on the “Truth of myth”.⁶¹ On the other hand, in the chapter on Iran of his most comprehensive monograph (686 pp, in the Italian edition), Pettazzoni simply ignores the contribution of his younger Swedish colleague.⁶²

The attitude of Widengren vis-à-vis the Italian scholar is instead quite reserved and qualified, if not overtly critical, if we come to the issue of the relationship between the historical and phenomenological method. This is already implicit in the obituary that Widengren compiled for NVMEN,⁶³ but becomes evident in two successive interventions, one on occasion of the tenth anniversary of Pettazzoni’s death, the other on occasion of the centennial of his birth. Widengren on the one hand criticizes the approach of his senior colleague on specific details of remarkable philological and historical relevance, related to the method applied by Pettazzoni in his work on the omniscience of the supreme gods. For example, he disapproves his usage of the term “primitive religions”,⁶⁴ points out that Ahura Mazda is at the same time an omniscient sky-god and a creator,⁶⁵ and denies the possibility of a fruitful comparison between Yahweh, a god belonging to a culture of nomadic cattle raisers peoples, and Tetzcatlipoca, the god of the Aztecs who were sedentary farmers.⁶⁶ On the other hand, he basically objects⁶⁷ to the practice by Pettazzoni of combining phenomenology and history into a “single science of religion on its essential basis and in its undivided form.”⁶⁸ For Widengren,

60 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, Chapter IV, nn. 133 and 134. Cf. also Widengren, “In memoriam,” 76^d: “the intimate relation between God being a sky-god and his being omniscient is clearly demonstrated.”

61 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, Chapter VI, nn.72, 99. Cf. Chapter VII on “Belief and myth”, n. 7: no difference between real history and mythical history.

62 As a matter of fact, the bibliographical references in this chapter are very selective and limited to literature preceding the Second World War.

63 Widengren, “In memoriam,” 76^d: “... he tried to combine in a very personal way the historical and phenomenological methods.”

64 Widengren, “La méthode,” 162–163 = Widengren 1972, 6.

65 Widengren, “La méthode,” 165 “Le dualisme prétendu n'est donc pas aussi stricte que l'auteur ne le pense” = Widengren 1972, 8.

66 Widengren, “La méthode,” 167 = Widengren 1972, 9. Of course, the criticism is not so stringent because, before becoming sedentary in central Mexico, around the beginning of the 13th century, the Aztecs probably were a nomadic tribe in northern Mexico. Widengren, “Pettazzonis,” 36–37, reminds us that even early Semites cannot be considered exclusively nomads.

67 Widengren, “La méthode,” 165 = 1972, 8.

68 Raffaele Pettazzoni, “History and Phenomenology in the Science of Religion,” in Raffaele Pettazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 218.

instead, a phenomenological typology or structure should be respectful to the historical data, “without mixing up phenomenology and history of religion.”⁶⁹ Referring explicitly to Pettazzoni,⁷⁰ he points out that the attempt to find the *historical* origin of the conception of the Supreme God in the cultures of the nomadic herding peoples implies crossing the boundaries of a phenomenological investigation. And, in any case, he argues, a sound phenomenological methodology should be based on a satisfying historical analysis that Pettazzoni in many instances is unable to produce (at least according to Widengren). In general, for him it is more important to fix a phenomenological typology without being caught by the temptation to demonstrate the presence of “cultural influences.”⁷¹ However, in agreement with the Italian colleague he definitely rejects “eine radikale Sonderung zwischen Religionsphänomenologie und Religionsgeschichte,”⁷² and finally recognizes the monumental character of Pettazzoni’s achievements in the field of the phenomenology of religion.⁷³

In the thirty-five letters between Pettazzoni and Widengren (all written in French, except the last one by Widengren) the dominant issues of discussion are the creation and development of the IAHR (until 1955 named IASHR) and the foundation and progression of its official journal (and the world’s leading journal devoted to the study of the history of religions), *NVMEN*. I have already dealt with these two subjects in a specific contribution (Casadio 2016) to which I can only refer, but it is interesting to give a list here of the main topics debated by the two scholars (see also Fujiwara and Jensen’s chapter in this volume).

The letters that deal with the International Association for the (Study of the) History of Religions are seventeen, virtually one-half of the total series, and most of them concern the preparation of the Rome 1955 congress.⁷⁴ Letters 6 and 7, referring to the death of the first IASHR President, G. van der Leeuw, and his succession by the senior Vice-President Pettazzoni, are very representative

69 Pettersson and Åkerberg, *Interpreting Religious Phenomena*, 51, echoing Widengren, “Some Remarks,” 260. In French: “sans confondre phénoménologie et histoire.” (Widengren, “La méthode,” 172).

70 Widengren, “La méthode,” 165–167. Widengren, “Pettazzonis,” 34 remembers that after a table conversation during which Pettazzoni tried to explain his approach he was unable to understand the concrete application of his method.

71 Widengren, “Cultural contact,” 10. Cf. Widengren, “La méthode,” 167: “On aimerait mieux voir que l’aspect dynamique d’un certain phénomène est pris en compte par la présentation des différents stades du développement de ce dernier, sans pour autant vouloir donner une explication historique du phénomène en question.”

72 Widengren, “Pettazzonis,” 42.

73 Widengren, “Pettazzonis,” 53.

74 Nr. 1, 3–7, 9, 16–19, 25, 29–33.

of the sober style of both scholars.⁷⁵ Letters 31–33 treat a very delicate subject: the mutual irreversible antagonism between the leader of the Uppsala School, Widengren himself, and the leader of the Lund School, Martin Persson Nilsson (1874–1967), the doyen of international studies on Greek religion, with whom Pettazzoni had a strong long-lasting relationship. As it is evident from the letters sent to the two obstinate contenders, both the President and the Secretary General Bleeker made all the efforts in order to favour the unification of the two Swedish national groups on the occasion of the Roman congress. Their efforts were nonetheless unsuccessful, and the unification was implemented only in 1975, at the IAHR meeting in Lancaster, thanks to the conciliatory efforts by Professor Åke Hultkrantz who succeeded in merging the two associations into the Svenska Samfundet för Religionshistorisk Forskning (SSRF).⁷⁶

The letters that deal with the planning of the IAHR journal, the finding of a publisher (Brill, after the failure of other projects), the choice of a chief editor (Pettazzoni), the evaluation of a management through the appointment of an editorial committee, the invitation to prospective contributors, the acceptance of submissions and the problems connected with these issues, are twelve.⁷⁷ Two remarks by Widengren, in the first and the last letter to Pettazzoni are worth mentioning because they are of methodological relevance. In the first case, the Uppsala scholar underscores the necessity of a periodical journal dedicated to the history of religions “dans le but de publier des articles surtout phénoménologiques.” In accordance with his views and in a slight dissent from the Roman scholar, he means phenomenological in the sense of comparative-historical in a cross-cultural perspective. In letter 35, dated 2.6.1959, which is doubtless the last letter sent by Widengren to his correspondent six months before Pettazzoni’s death, the language used is English and the attitude is quite distant and cold. It is evident that Widengren did not

75 “La mort inattendue de van der Leeuw mette entre les mains de vous – comme le vice-président le plus aîné – la tâche de diriger notre association.” (letter 6 by Widengren). “La mort de notre cher Professeur van der Leeuw m’a touché profondément. C’est une perte irréparable pour notre science et pour l’organisation de nos études. Je vous suis très reconnaissant, de même qu’aux autres Collègues, de {bien} avoir bien voulu me proposer de le remplacer dans ses fonctions de président de la I.A.S.H.R. Si je me suis décidé à accepter une tâche pareille, c’est surtout parce que je suis sûr de pouvoir compter sur la collaboration précieuse et amicale des autres membres du Comité exécutif, et notamment sur la vôtre.” (letter 7 by Pettazzoni).

76 Cf. the short history by Peter Schalk at: <https://svenskreligionshistoria.wordpress.com/om/>. For the scholarly debate underlying this opposition mainly, with particular emphasis on the issue of the sacred kingship, cf. Edsman, “Ein halbes” (a contribution which is not impartial at all).

77 Nr. 1, 6, 10, 14, 19, 20–24, 30, 35.

appreciate the solitary auto-referential style adopted by Pettazzoni in managing the editorship of *NVMEN*.⁷⁸

Of remarkable historiographical importance are the two letters in which both show their ambivalent (and broadly coincident) opinion vis-à-vis Eliade's particular hermeneutics. In the first letter by the Roman scholar, we read: "Dans cela Mr. M. Eliade, *que j'estime beaucoup*, pourra rendre d'excellents services." (Letter nr. 2). Three years later, Widengren, coming back to the issue of Eliade's possible participation in the editorship of *NVMEN*, points out, in his customary direct style, that, having studied more closely the latest publications of "our friend Eliade", he finds him "un peu trop aventureux pour occuper plus que la position purement technique d'un secrétaire de rédaction."⁷⁹

From this correspondence we learn also that the two colleagues used to consult each other about scholarly topics connected to books they were engaged in writing or evaluating. In letter nr. 11 Widengren recognizes the expertise of Pettazzoni "sur les mythes des peuples non-civilisés" (he scrupulously avoids the usage of the word "primitive!") and asks for an evaluation (in current terms a peer-review) of a monograph of a graduate scholar from the Uppsala ethnological School: Hans Abrahamsson, *The Origin of Death: Studies in African Mythology* (Uppsala 1951). In letter nr. 12, Pettazzoni immediately provides a concise but suggestive feedback: "Le travail de M. Abrahamsson est, à mon jugement, excellent. Le sujet est de grand intérêt pour l'histoire générale des religions. La documentation est la plus étendue qu'on puisse désirer. La classification typologique, qui représente la partie la plus importante du travail, est bien faite, d'après des motifs typologiques bien choisis. Bref, il fait honneur à l'école d'où il sort." Three years later Pettazzoni, in his own turn, consulted the colleague concerning an Iranian topic about which Widengren had clearly a better philological expertise. In letter 28 and his annexe 28 a, the Swedish Iranologist contributes an introductory information, a transcription and a translation of a passage of the Middle Persian "Encyclopedia of Mazdaism" called *Dēnkard* or *Dēnkart* ("Acts of Religion"). Pettazzoni was obviously interested in the six eyes (distributed into three heads) of the Saoshyant, the

78 "On the other hand, I didn't feel that I could postpone other duties, and above all urgent scientific work, in order to secure the future publication of *NUMEN* without sharing in the capacity of a co-editor the official responsibility for the journal which actually was the proposal put forward by Prof. Bleeker." (My emphasis).

79 Letter nr. 9. More details on his qualified views about Eliade's approach in Geo Widengren, "Mircea Eliade Sixty Years Old." *NVMEN* 14 (3): 165–166, a very insightful and unconventional profile of the Romanian scholar, "one of the great names in our field", whose "pretended lack of sense for history" seems an accusation that the Swedish scholar considers "founded on a misunderstanding."

eschatological saviour figure who will bring about *Frashokereti*, the final restoration of the world in which evil is destined to be destroyed. In the *magnum opus* on the divine omniscience published the next year, Pettazzoni will fully recognize this philological debt.⁸⁰

5 Widengren and Bianchi

The relationship (and the consequent confrontation) between Widengren and Pettazzoni's pupil Ugo Bianchi spanned almost thirty years, from Bianchi's first approach to Zoroastrian studies in the early 1950s until Widengren's last visit in Rome in 1983, that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. And it was based on two shared concerns, the study of Iranian religion, in connection with Gnosticism and Manichaeism, and the scholarly as well as organizational work within the context of the IAHR.

In *Zamân i Ôhrmazd*, the first volume of a trilogy of books that Bianchi achieved in 1958 to obtain the qualification for a post of full professor (Ordinarius) in an academic competition at the University of Rome, the entire discussion is directed towards the Uppsala School (Nyberg, Widengren and Wikander),⁸¹ and the main target of the criticism is Widengren's conception of Zurvan as a *Hochgott*.⁸² The arguments raised by the Italian professor have found a virtually unanimous critical reception by leading specialists,⁸³ although Bianchi had no real philological expertise in the Iranian field and used to read the sources in translation. This was one of the two reasons for which Widengren refused to take into consideration Bianchi's forcible objections to his phenomenological construct in the wide-ranging survey of Iranian religions he was to write in the subsequent years.⁸⁴ The second reason stands

80 Pettazzoni, *L'onniscienza di Dio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1955), 203, n. 23: "... di cui cordialmente lo ringrazio."

81 Cf. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion*, 398: "... presque entièrement consacré à une réfutation de Zaehner, ainsi que des vues exprimées par Widengren sur le même sujet."

82 See Ugo Bianchi, *Zamân I Ôhrmazd. Lo zoroastrismo nelle sue origini e nella sua essenza* (Torino: SEI, 1958), 15, 60–61, 130 and passim.

83 Duchesne-Guillemin, "Rev. of G. Widengren," 238, who was a tenacious opponent "de la these panzurvaniste"; and Antonio Panaino, "Il contributo di Ugo Bianchi allo studio del pensiero religioso dell'Iran antico," in *Ugo Bianchi. Una vita per la storia delle religioni*. Edited by Giovanni Casadio (Roma: Il Calamo, 2002), 168: "Pienamente condivisibili sembrano le argomentazioni contro l'idea di uno Zurvan avestico come *Hochgott*."

84 This is explicitly stated in a note of the French (slightly modified) translation (1968) of Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), where the author tried to meet the pungent comment by Duchesne-Guillemin, "Rev. of Geo Widengren,"

out clearly in a letter (nr. 1) that the Swedish scholar wrote to the Italian one to thank him for the gift of his “interesting and stimulating book”. In his characteristically brisk style, Widengren intimates: “After only a very cursory reading of your book it is too early for me to say how far your views will change my ideas of the development of Iranian religion in ancient times, ideas in general shared with such scholars as Nyberg, Wikander, Benveniste, Dumézil *et alii*. In some cases, I dare say already at this moment that *I am not afraid of being without arguments when it comes to a discussion. There is much more in the texts than you would seem to have picked up!*” The sentence that I have emphasized is quite revelatory of Widengren’s supercilious attitude vis-à-vis critiques that challenged his basic views. A different kind of response – characterized by open-mindedness and self-reflexivity – arrived from another member of the Uppsala School who had been perhaps the most versatile of Widengren’s students, Helmer Ringgren. This prominent scholar of Persian literature, Islam and especially Old Testament, in a letter in reply to Bianchi who had sent to him *Zamân i Ôhrmazd* and *Il dualismo religioso*, the second volume of the trilogy, writes: “I have not been able to read them thoroughly, but what I have read, especially of the first one, impresses me. It may be that several of the theses concerning Zervanism and related problems, put forward by Uppsala scholars will have to be revised along the lines you have indicated.” (Letter nr. 1b) This is, in my view, an impressive document of critical reflexive reception in the field of the history of religions.⁸⁵

Besides the two visits of Widengren in Rome that I have mentioned at the beginning, the two scholars had occasions of encounter and collaboration during three IAHR events. First was the Messina conference dedicated to the “Origins of Gnosticism”, organized by Bianchi at Messina in 1966, of which the Swedish scholar was undoubtedly one of protagonists,⁸⁶ although he was relatively isolated in his strenuous defence of the Iranian origins. The second time was at the conference organized by the SISR on the occasion of the tenth

238, who reproached to him this suspicious lack of bibliographical information (“*italicum est, non legitur?*”).

85 On Ringgren’s well-balanced attitude vis-à-vis controversial topics see Larsson, “It’s not,” 454.

86 As IAHR president, and probably not only because of that, Widengren had the honour to speak second, immediately after the introduction by the convenor. Further, the entire first section (“Le gnosticisme et le monde indo-iranien”) of the second part of Ugo Bianchi, “Perspectives de la recherche sur les origines du gnosticisme,” in *The Origins of Gnosticism/Le origini dello gnosticismo*. Edited by Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967, 716–724 = 264–272) is virtually all dedicated to a (mostly positive) discussion of Widengren’s positions.

anniversary of the death of Pettazzoni, that we have already mentioned.⁸⁷ Finally, Bianchi participated to the IAHR 12th Congress at Stockholm in 1970 and, without presenting any paper, he took part not only in the International Committee, as the secretary of the Italian association, but even on the Executive Committee (August, 16), as a guest, most probably because of his special, close relationship with IAHR President Widengren.⁸⁸

Let us introduce now what is perhaps the most important document of the relationship between the foremost representatives of the Uppsala School and the Roman School of history of religions, namely the foreword that Widengren wrote for the Swedish translation (slightly revised and provided with a full index of names and concepts, absent in the Italian original edition) of the third volume of the above mentioned trilogy.⁸⁹ Expectedly, the attitude of the Swedish scholar is, on the whole, largely positive. In Bianchi's outline of the main issues of the historical study of religion, Widengren spots the methodological provisos (typical of the Roman School but absent in other academic milieus) that he himself considers an indispensable premise for a scientific study of religion. He underscores that, following the mentorship of Pettazzoni, Brelich and Bianchi devoted themselves to religious phenomenological tasks, but both want to appear primarily as historians. He appreciates especially the strong assertion of religious history as a historical discipline and the warning against a religious phenomenology that tries to get its way without history, while in other countries, including Sweden, there is a clear tendency to ignore the historical factors and privilege an old style phenomenology.⁹⁰ He also approves what Bianchi has to say about the interrelationship of the history of religions and theology (against the bias of secularist scholars), and he cites the case of the French Semitist and religious historian Edouard Dhorme, who formulated the relationship in these terms, that theology – not only Christian, but the theologies of all religions – is a research object for religious history. Finally, he praises some “utmärkt träffande reflexioner” “[excellent apt reflections]” concerning the typology of Gnosticism, a religion that “constantly made itself felt in connection with certain educational and institutionally already established

87 Significant details, concerning practical issues but even of methodological interest (esp. nr. 6 by Bianchi) are to be found in letters 2–7.

88 Cf. Widengren's confidential remark in letter nr. 7: “Je serai heureux de vous revoir à Stockholm.”

89 See Ugo Bianchi, *Problemi di storia delle religioni* (Rome: Studium, 1958) and Geo Widengren, “Förord,” in Ugo Bianchi, *Religionshistoriska Problem* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1968), 5–10.

90 Widengren, “Förord,” 5–6.

religions.”⁹¹ In the conclusion, he welcomes the opportunity offered by this Swedish edition to become acquainted “with such a prominent representative of Italian phenomenological research as Professor Bianchi.”⁹²

On the other hand, he underlines, with characteristic rigorous inflexibility, what in his opinion (and the writer can only agree) are the weak points – true idiosyncrasies – in Bianchi’s approach. Reasonably enough, he disapproves Bianchi’s too radical and generic dismissal of the philosophy of religion.⁹³ In a subtly argued way, he also takes a stand against the thesis that the history of religions would have the right to make value judgments about the object of its study. His arguments are quite cogent, based as they are on historical positive knowledge and methodological agnosticism, and they deserve to be taken up here in a paraphrase of the original Swedish text, because they have a certain relevance in current times.

The acceptable objective standard would surely be that such value judgments can be made? To ask the question is to answer it! Such an objective norm does not exist. As a sentient and reflective individual, I can enjoy certain religious phenomena and loathe others, but *as a historian of religions I have not the opportunity to objectively justify my sympathies and antipathies and therefore no right to a scientific opinion* [my emphasis]. What the author says about ‘an Islamic Arabia’s superiority over the pre-Islamic-pagan’, I, as an Islam scholar, cannot find anything other than

91 Widengren, “Förord,” 7.

92 Widengren, “Förord,” 11.

93 Conversely, as Pettersson and Åkerberg, *Interpreting Religious Phenomena*, 84–86 (cf. 136–137), accurately pointed out, Bianchi and Widengren shared a marked distrust towards the psychology of religion. They can be taken as examples “of historians of religion and phenomenologists with no real understanding of the essential position of psychology in historical and phenomenological contexts.” This is due to a common “striking tendency towards over-emphasizing the rational element in religion which – indirectly – as often implies the elimination of the psychological view.” (p. 84). More specifically, the Lund docent of psychology of religion finds in Widengren “some lack of congeniality with his object of research, with the living and dynamically active religion”, and in Bianchi “a directly pronounced attitude of hesitation against the importance of the psychological view in history of religion and phenomenology” (p. 85). Both scholars exhibit “a certain rationalistic one-sidedness which definitely limits their field of vision as to the science of religions, as well as their ability to understand religion in its invariably integrated historical-psychological contexts” (pp. 85–86). Having been first the student and then the assistant of Bianchi and owning consequently a close acquaintance with his personality, I can confirm that this was the case. For him “psychologism” was a forbidden way to approach the religious materials, as implying a type of reductionism no less dangerous than political or economic explanations.

a purely private emotional attitude. And with such an attitude towards the subject matter of research, it will never be possible to achieve what must be the task of both the religious historian and the religious phenomenologist: to work out the factors of the treated religion that for its confessors appear as the inalienable religious values. A valuing attitude deprives the researcher of the ability to empathize and understand what can let us achieve the goal. Of course, the historian of religions, as a historian, depends on the demands of objectivity of historical research.⁹⁴

This foreword, in my view, represents an apt conclusive synthesis of the scientific and human personalities of three scholars who shaped the field of the discipline in dialectical cooperation and whose legacy still constitutes a stimulus and a challenge for contemporary scholarship.

6 Conclusions

If, finally, I were to present more general conclusions, I would first recall what I wrote almost two decades ago, sketching the portrait of Widengren in the context of the historical-religious historiography of the twentieth century. “The Swede Geo Widengren has been the champion of a historically oriented phenomenology and has been one of the few scholars to combine a theory of religion (and a method of research, broadly inspired by his teachers Andrae and Nyberg, as well as by the Italian Raffaele Pettazzoni) with an imposing scientific production dealing with crucial issues of Near and Middle Eastern religious history (Iran, Old Testament, syncretism). His studies, with their emphasis on patternism and scrupulous philology, are (in spite of the haunting ghost of Iran) still a source of inspiration for specialized scholars.”⁹⁵ Now, after having retraced his work as a whole, dwelling above all on his contributions of historiographical and methodological interest, and especially after having enriched my experience by musing on the interventions at the Stockholm conference (especially the most critical ones: Jong, Timuş and Thomassen), I think I should reformulate this judgment only slightly, precisely in the part

94 Widengren, “Förord” 6–9. Less relevant is the ample discussion about the usage of the term “pagan” that the author considers a trite classification and a suspect concept. I have no doubt that Bianchi would had never included Buddhism and Manichaeism in the category of pagan religions.

95 *Historiography: Western Studies [Further Considerations]*. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. VI, Edited by Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005, vol. 6, 4042–4052, here 4042.

that concerns “scrupulous philology”, which should be rephrased as “large and bold philological expertise”. Mastering a lot of languages in fact gives overconfidence in text interpretations.

I believe instead that I should not significantly change the rest of the profile. The unparalleled knowledge that the Swedish historian of religions had of historical-religious facts in countless historical-cultural contexts (as can be seen in the lessons in history he gives to his Italian colleagues Pettazzoni and Bianchi, for whom he still had a deep respect), combined with the critical analytical mindset, devoid of respect for any form of “church”, including his own, stills make him a champion of the comparative historical study of religion who challenges the new generations of historians of religions, who, mainly interested in contemporary manifestations of living religious traditions, have lost contact with the historical, diachronic dimension of these same traditions.

From a more general historiographical point of view, the figure of Widengren towers in the field of the historical study of religion in the twentieth century for a series of marked traits that assimilate and at the same time differentiate him from other figures of universalist historians of religions such as Pettazzoni, Eliade and Robert C. Zaehner (1913–1974) who were his peers. His role as a protagonist in the history of the history of religions cannot be denied, insofar as his theory and his method, although unpretentious and apparently unsophisticated, are based on philological-historical research. This must be reiterated when we are witnessing a rewrite of the history of studies in our field, a self-styled scientific rewrite which is in our view plagued by ideological bias and a lack of familiarity and real confrontation with historical primary sources.⁹⁶

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96 We especially refer to two books recently appeared in a series entitled “Scientific Studies of Religion: Inquiry and Explanation” and published by a prestigious British publisher, which deal with two favourite subjects of our author, the history of religions as a discipline and the Gnosticism as a category (L. Ambasciano, *An Unnatural History of Religions Academia, Post-truth and the Quest for Scientific Knowledge*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020; and David G. Robertson, *Gnosticism and the History of Religions*, London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

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The World of Religion: A Reevaluation of Geo Widengren's Phenomenology of Religion

Clemens Cavallin

1 Introduction

In many ways, with the publication of Geo Widengren's book *Religionens Värld* (*The World of Religion*) in 1945, and the expanded edition in 1953, Phenomenology of Religion as the systematic complement of a philologically based history of religions reached a high point in Sweden. It had begun with Nathan Söderblom, the famous Archbishop, who, in the first decades of the 20th century, occupied the same professorial chair in Uppsala as later Widengren.¹ In the 1950s, the discipline History of Religions had grown from an extension of Christian theology to a non-confessional historical and comparative study of mostly non-Christian religions.² In Sweden, the Lutheran church was, however, still a state church (up to the year 2000) and until freedom of religion was introduced in 1951, no professor at a Swedish university could, for example, be Catholic or Orthodox, nor could any member of the state church leave to become a Hindu or a Muslim.³

Widengren continued as professor in Uppsala until the mid-seventies, but then the complementary relation between philological studies and systematic phenomenology already had begun to wane; and from the 1980s, the crisis of phenomenology became acute.⁴ A new vision for the study of religion in Sweden, as well as internationally, emerged.⁵ The combined pressure of the

1 Jonas Jonsson, *Nathan Söderblom: Called to Serve* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016), and Dietz Lange, *Nathan Söderblom und seine Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

2 Jan Hjärpe, "Religionsvetenskap och teologi i ett 100-årsperspektiv – Nathan Söderblom, Tor Andræ och vår tid," *Religionsvetenskapliga sällskapet* (2006): <http://www.religionsvetenskapligasallskapet.se/relvet100-hjarpe-20061014.htm>.

3 Yvonne Maria Werner, "The Catholic Danger: The Changing Patterns of Swedish Anti-Catholicism – 1850–1965," *European Studies* 31 (2013): 137.

4 Michael Stausberg, "The Study of Religion(s) in Western Europe III: Further Developments after World War II," *Religion* 39 (2009): 261–282.

5 See e.g. Ingvild Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson, *Nytt blick på religion: Studiet av religion i dag* (Oslo: Pax, 2001).

importance of a contemporary focus due to the renewed political salience of religion, the zeal of emancipatory discourses, and the influx of various methods and theories from the social sciences pushed the marriage of a philologically grounded history of religions with typological phenomenology into an identity crisis from which it has not yet recovered.

Having lost its phenomenological framework, history of religions in Sweden for the most part stays content with importing theories and methods from other fields within the humanities and the social sciences. The difference and borders to sociology, psychology, and anthropology of religion are mostly gone, but still lingers in the formation of organizations and the self-understanding of some scholars. The result is the more amorphous field of religious studies.

It is symptomatic that the society for research within history of religions in Sweden (Svenska Samfundet för Religionshistorisk Forskning) and its mother organization IAHR (International Association of History of Religions) of which Geo Widengren was Vice President (1950–1960) and President (1960–1970) have repeatedly been discussing name changes, in which “history” is given up and the more generic name “the study of religion,” or something similar, instead become the new identity. So far, this has not happened. Instead, the organizations insist that the main distinction between studies of religion proper to the field, and those not, is that the former are non-confessional. To the next general meeting of IAHR the following Nota Bene is affixed stating that all papers should adhere to the IAHR mandate which includes the “historical, social, and comparative study of religion” but not “confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns.”⁶

In my reading and reevaluation of Widengren’s version of the phenomenology of religion, I probe the hypothesis that with the demise of phenomenology, the discipline of the history of religions lost a vital support that provided it with a basic taxonomy bringing order to an increasing mass of data. And with the reliance on theories and conceptual schemes primarily designed for the understanding and analysis of human sociability, psychology, or economic thinking, religion comes to be seen as an epiphenomenon. Such a perspective destabilizes the discipline, leading to a stronger emphasis on the methodological rejection of religious worldviews as the primary disciplinary identity marker, signaled by the importance of the principle of non-confessionality. In this way, history of religions is founded on a rejection of, or a struggle to achieve distance from what it studies – resisting to be absorbed into its object – leading to a tensed professional *tremendum et fascinans*.

6 IAHR, “About,” accessed October 15, 2019, <http://www.iahrweb.org/about.php>.

2 Phenomenology of Religion According to Widengren

On the first pages of *Religionens Värld*, Widengren declares that the relation between history of religions and the phenomenology of religion is that between historical analysis and systematic synthesis.⁷ At the same time, he remarks that the border between the two disciplines is fluid, and that the relation tends toward complementarity rather than strict separation. This is evident in the rest of the book as for Widengren phenomenology foremost functions as a conceptual framework for detailed analyses of historical forms of religious thinking and behavior. This theoretically restrained approach was characteristic for Scandinavian phenomenology; and in 1973, Walter Capps connected it with the anti-metaphysical, positivist reaction in Sweden, spearheaded by Axel Hägerström (1868–1931), who rejected the idealism of the 19th century Swedish philosopher Christopher Boström (1797–1866).⁸

The lack of a well-developed phenomenological theory or even a critical introduction or prolegomenon in Widengren's book is somewhat perplexing when compared with other leading phenomenologists of the 1940s and 50s, such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). Capps remarks that

several topics are explored in both minute and almost encyclopedic detail. But the book exhibits no interest in showing that these many topics are manifestly interrelated. It is even difficult to know on what basis Widengren made his selection of topics, perhaps on precedent, perhaps on others' authority, perhaps because he had done more work on some of these themes than on others. In short, the selection cannot escape the hint of being arbitrary; at the same time, it is manifestly defensible, but on grounds Widengren senses no great responsibility to articulate.⁹

7 Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld: religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter*, 2nd and revised edition (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1953 [1945]), 9.

8 Walter Capps, "Geo Widengren on Syncretism: On Parsing Uppsala Methodological Tendencies," *Numen* 20/3 (1973): 172.

9 Capps, "Geo Widengren," 181. Despite these somewhat exasperated comments on the phenomenology of Widengren, Capps dedicated his historical overview of religious studies to Widengren; Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), writing "For *Geo Widengren*, in deepest gratitude for the example of keen scholarship and knowing sense of how the discipline is knitted together." *Ibid.*, v.

Religionens Värld begins with a short definition of religion as focused on the belief in gods, which Widengren contrasts with magic; then he deals with the notions of taboo and holiness, gods, myth, rituals, sacrifice, sacral kingship, death and burial, spirit and soul, eschatology and apocalypticism, Gnosticism, mysticism, the relation between individual and group, and finally the book ends with a chapter on sacred words and scripture. There is no real introduction, as already mentioned, providing an overview of the tasks and challenges of phenomenology, nor any conclusion summing up what has been discussed.

The thematic heart of this edited volume is Widengren's belief in the centrality of belief in gods, especially so-called high gods, both in the definition of religion he adopts (that of J.B. Pratt from 1934) and its historical development. He thus rejects Rudolf Otto's (1869–1937) and Söderblom's focus on the impersonality of the Holy. That Gnosticism gets a whole chapter is surprising, and probably only reflects Widengren's interest and competence in this subject.¹⁰ In a similar way, the chapter on sociology of religion is seemingly squeezed in between mysticism and scripture; and in it, Widengren is clearly venturing outside his main area of competence.

There is in Widengren's survey of religious phenomena a striking tension between, on the one hand, the proliferation of details from historical religions, and, on the other hand, a frustrating lack of theoretical and metatheoretical discussions;¹¹ and, furthermore, a puzzling absence of a treatment of the relation between modernity and religion, especially in the chapter on sociology of religion. When offering criticism of Widengren's approach, one must, therefore, emphasize what is not there and what is there but as hidden presuppositions. This is in stark contrast to the bold hermeneutical program of Mircea Eliade, for whom the history of religions was part of the promise of a new humanism.¹²

In his short text in *Numen*, the journal of IAHHR, in 1967, honoring Mircea Eliade turning sixty, Widengren could not help himself commenting on Eliade's critique of his phenomenological approach as "too much occupied by historical and philological problems and therefore miss[ing] something of the necessary survey of the field."¹³ It is clear that for Widengren, phenomenology

10 Helmer Ringgren, "Professor Dr. Geo Widengren Sexagenarius," *Numen* XIV/1 (1967): 2. On Gnosticism and Widengren, see Thomassen's chapter in this volume.

11 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*. 2nd edition (London: Duckworth, 1986): 243.

12 Mircea Eliade, "History of Religions and a New Humanism," *History of Religions* 1/1 (1961): 1–8.

13 Geo Widengren, "Mircea Eliade Sixty Years Old," *Numen* 14 (1967): 165f.

provides merely themes within which one can bring together primarily philological investigations of historical religious cultures. Nevertheless, as Capps writes, one cannot but help to wonder how Widengren thought these topics were interconnected.

In his attempt in the 1990s to reform the comparative study of religion, The Danish scholar of religion, Jeppe Sinding Jensen, refers to the Scandinavian understanding of the phenomenology of religion as “not [...] a method, but as a discipline alongside, and within, the history of religions. It is classificational, typological, and descriptivist – a strictly empirical discipline in its own self-understanding.”¹⁴ After this characterization, Jensen quotes from the first page of the 1968 German edition of Widengren’s *Religionens Värld* (*Religionsphänomenologie*), which, as I have already mentioned, contrasts historical analysis with systematic synthesis. One can understand the frustration of Eliade, when, as Jensen writes, Widengren makes “no special appeals to intuition, empathy (*Einführung*), no metaphysical pretensions nor sweeping generalizations; all the grand questions were to be left to theologians and philosophers.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, what for Capps was a lack is here presented as a virtue, which is not surprising as since 1973 there had transpired twenty years of devastating critique of both the methodological naivety and partly hidden metaphysical agenda on the part of Eliadean hermeneutical phenomenology. As Michael Stausberg remarks (with some regret?) in 2009,

[...] for scholarship in general the 1970s mark the twilight of the phenomenology of religion. At present, the works of the phenomenologists (apart from Eliade and Smart) are hardly read anymore, and the diversity of phenomenological approaches is often ignored in a common polemic, where a routine dismissal of phenomenology has become something like the standard prologue to contemporary self-understandings. Anti-phenomenology or post-phenomenology seems to be one of the few common denominators of the present state of the art.¹⁶

Moreover, one of the crucial components of this common denominator is the rejection of the revelatory metaphysics built into the notion of The Holy and its manifestations.

14 Jeppe Sinding Jensen, “Is a Phenomenology of Religion Possible? On the Ideas of a Human and Social Science of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 5/2 (1993): 114.

15 Jensen, “Is a Phenomenology?”

16 Michael Stausberg, “The Study of Religion(s) in Western Europe III: Further Developments after World War II,” *Religion* 39 (2009): 267.

Widengren's version of phenomenology, with its focus on the fundamental importance of belief in gods, of whom holiness is a quality, lacks the transcendent dynamics of The Holy. Instead, the crucial question becomes how beliefs in gods originated and what ground they have in human psychology. This is in harmony with earlier forms of theorizing regarding religion, and the concerns of cognitive theories of religion,¹⁷ despite Widengren's rejection of evolutionary models.¹⁸

Widengren refrains from theorizing the importance of the beliefs in gods. In the first pages of *Religionens Värld*, he merely writes, "Supported on the conviction that the innermost nature of religion is the belief in gods ..." ¹⁹ Something similar to an essence of religion is operative here; it is not argued, but functions as an axiom. And the final sentence of the chapter on holiness is, "We are brought back over and over again to the same fact: holiness is God's nature and holy is everything that belongs to the divine sphere."²⁰ Moreover, in the following chapter, "Belief in gods: The nature of the high god," he refers to "belief in gods at certain less developed stages"²¹ and maintains in a footnote on the following page that "The belief in High Gods among indigenous peoples and peoples of ancient cultures is not a *theory* but a *real phenomenon*."

The question is what to do with such a universal phenomenon besides providing an ever-growing catalog of examples. The lack of theory then becomes palpable as one suffers from empirical overload.

In his overview of the history of comparative religion up until 1975, and in a second edition until 1986, Eric Sharpe chronicles the increasing intensity of methodological conferences and discourses within the study of religion from the early 1970s and onward. For a phenomenology of religion such as Widengren's, which stays close to the history of religions and its textual craftsmanship, this was a difficult challenge. Sharpe writes,

17 See e.g. Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Armin Geertz, ed., *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014); Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe, eds., *Religion Explained?: The Cognitive Science of Religion after Twenty-Five Years* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

18 Geo Widengren, *Religionens ursprung*. 2nd and extended edition (Aldus/Bonniers: Stockholm, 1973 [1946]).

19 Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 10. All the translations of passages from *Religionens värld* and other texts in Swedish are my own.

20 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 53.

21 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 54.

It seems that the phenomenologist of religion must, if he is honest, confess that the enterprise on which he is engaged cannot but involve the subjective faculty of interpretation if it is to avoid degenerating altogether into a barren catalogue of what are taken to be religious "facts." But this once having been admitted, it seems that the would-be phenomenologist is plunged into unfathomable depths of epistemological theory.²²

He even remarks regarding Widengren that "... it is at this point that the phenomenologist who wants at the same time to claim objective status for his work may well find himself in something of a dilemma."²³

If the lack of a theoretical framework in the *Religionens Värld* is conspicuous, Widengren actually wrote an introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion in 1968 for a festschrift for Torgny Segerstedt.²⁴ The first distinction he makes is that between comparative religion in general (which is influenced by the evolutionary paradigm) and the phenomenology of religion proper – a distinction which Widengren thinks Gerardus van der Leeuw failed to do. Especially critical is Widengren of van der Leeuw's reliance on evolutionary explanations and that he was, "much influenced by certain theological presuppositions of a non-scientific character."²⁵

Widengren continues and remarks that despite these flaws (an evolutionary model and theological influences) van der Leeuw put forward two important principles. The first was that of *epoché* (even if Widengren dislikes the word itself), that is, to withhold judgments and decline to make decisions on

22 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd edition (London: Duckworth, 1986): 248.

23 Sharpe, *Comparative*, 243.

24 It was republished in 1972 by Walter Capps in an edited volume, Geo Widengren, "An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion," in *Ways of Understanding Religion*, edited by Walter H. Capps (New York: Macmillan, 1972): 142–151, and in German translation two years later in a volume edited by Günter Lanczkowski, Geo Widengren, "Einige Bemerkungen über die Methoden der Phänomenologie der Religion," in *Selbstverständnis und Wesen der Religionswissenschaft*. Edited by Günter Lanczkowski (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974): 257–271.

25 Geo Widengren, "An Introduction," 143. Interestingly, footnote number seven provided by Widengren in the English version to this sentence is much shorter than that of the German translation appearing in 1974, which provides an example from van der Leeuw's book ending with, "... daß das Evangelium sich als Erfüllung der Religion überhaupt zeigt." To which Widengren comments on page 258, "Wie sollte es möglich sein, das mit Hilfe wissenschaftlicher Methoden zu beweisen."

the truth-value of religious propositions.²⁶ Nevertheless, Widengren remarks, neither van der Leeuw nor Söderblom were true to this principle as “strong Christian feelings” suffused their scholarly work.²⁷ The same was true of C. Jouco Bleeker and Ugo Bianchi, according to Widengren, who states:

For what would be the objective standard according to which a branch of the science of religion were to formulate opinions of the type quoted? In a manifest way such judgements transgress the borders of objective scholarly work. Here a very strong epoché is surely called for.²⁸

The second principle of van der Leeuw that Widengren mentions with appreciation is that of *eîdos*, that is the search for the essentials of the religious phenomena. Here, Widengren's critique is fundamental for his own brand of phenomenology. He remarks that the central problem with such a principle is methodological. How is one to know what is essential when a phenomenon literally means that which shows itself? Maybe what shows itself hides the essence so to speak and the scholar needs to “search behind the phenomenon in order to find the essentials.”²⁹

For Widengren, the full context is central for scholarly work attempting to lay bare the essentials. In addition, attention to the historical development is crucial in order to avoid creating misleading, static snapshots of religious phenomena. However, Widengren acknowledges that it is not possible to provide the full historical context of all examples of a particular phenomenon, and one must be satisfied with representative examples. Widengren quotes K. Goldammer who called this method “a collecting of a lot of impressionistic pictures and sketches.”³⁰ Widengren's reply is that “in the ideal phenomenological monograph the basic material should be presented as complete as possible, but that in the phenomenological text-book we have to be content with representative illustrations ...”³¹

Unfortunately, this methodological principle of historical fullness leads to a theoretical deficit, which in a second step, as both Capps and Sharpe observe, makes it hard to avoid arbitrariness in the choice of what is representative.

26 Geo Widengren, “An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion,” in *Ways of Understanding Religion*. Edited by Walter H. Capps (New York: Macmillan, 1972):143.

27 Widengren, “An Introduction,” 143.

28 Widengren, “An Introduction,” 144.

29 Widengren, “An Introduction,” 144.

30 Quoted in Widengren, “An Introduction,” 145.

31 Widengren, “An Introduction,” 146.

It is noteworthy that Widengren in his freestanding introduction still relates to the status of the phenomenology of religions as it was during the 1950s. For example, Mircea Eliade's hermeneutical approach is only dealt with in the footnotes of the German translation in 1974 (not the English version from 1968) and then only *Traité d'histoire des religions* published in 1949. The impression is that Widengren's interest in phenomenology had waned since the 1940s and he had focused mainly on historical investigations.

We can compare his introduction to the phenomenology of religion with another prolegomenon he wrote in 1969, but now to a handbook of the History of Religions. Strikingly, the complementary relation between history and phenomenology is nowhere to be found. The principal question is that of source criticism with special attention to the biographies of the founders of the major religions. As his phenomenological grand oeuvre, it consists mostly of discussions of detailed examples and does not rise to a consideration of hermeneutical principles on a higher level of abstraction. The lesson provided is in the specifics. However, if the phenomenology of religion was the systematic brother of the history of religions, why is this not acknowledged, while in *Religionens värld*, the historical dimension is everywhere?

3 Does the Phenomenology of Religion Have Any Future?

If since the 1970s, the reflexivity of the study of religion has increased and with it a nominalist tendency to deconstruct central notions of the field such as religion, ritual, and myth, the fundamental problem is that we now have an even greater mass of material than in Widengren's time and no agreed-upon system of classification. Our situation is similar to a librarian buying more books each year but mostly putting them in idiosyncratic heaps or using many different mutually exclusive labels. Widengren focused mainly on premodern historical religions and their texts, but if one adds anthropological and archeological reports and the studies of modern religious traditions plus all online media, then the amount of data is simply overwhelming. No single person even when as polyglot as Widengren can even aspire to take account of all this material.

According to my opinion, if a humanities approach to the study of religion, in distinction to that of the social sciences and the natural sciences, is to have any future, it needs to have a set of basic categories of its own formed in close attention to the detailed study of concrete religious traditions.

The problem is that the history of religions, at least as practiced in Sweden, has not only internalized postmodern skepticism as regards its fundamental conceptual categories – seeing them as based more on Western privilege and

power than the intuiting of essences – but its historical dimension has also grown weaker. This is not unique to the discipline and mirrors a general intellectual trend, but lessens its “humanities identity.” The comparative study of religions, seeking to understand and as being open to edification, is in this way dethroned by a social science approach fueled by a hermeneutics of suspicion and an agenda of emancipation.

Since the 1970s, there have been several attempts to reformulate the phenomenology of religion in a way that counteracts the increasing strength of the critique leveled at it. One of the first was William Paden in his book *Religious Worlds* in 1988.³² His guiding idea is the necessity of removing the transcendent reference of the Eliadean Holy and see religions as only human-made worlds. In this way, religion becomes an inseparable part of human culture, which is based on a species-specific worldmaking urge. With the help of reason and language, we construct life worlds consisting of empirical natural objects, animals, human persons, artifacts, norms, and symbols, but also superhumans, that is, gods and other spiritual entities such as souls. This approach is clearly in line with Widengren’s form of phenomenology, as he explicitly rejected all forms of metaphysical presuppositions and arguments in the study of religion.

Paden’s move towards world making and possible worlds tries to retain the preoccupation with understanding the fine details of human culture that is central to the humanities while providing a wider theoretical frame explaining this tendency to create cultural meaning. However, inherent in the metaphor of world making is the problem of relativism and incommensurability, which the phenomenology or comparative studies of religion has to handle when taking this route. If all human cultural creations are merely so many different imaginary worlds, that is, semantic universes, how are we then to compare phenomena across different worlds?³³

To overcome relativism, one has to construct a super world that rises above culture; a world of scientific reason that frames all cultures and whose abstract principles and models (theories) makes sense of all worlds (including its own). This upsets the democratic ethos of the world creation theory; and it can, therefore, be criticized for imposing a particular form of culture, a certain kind of world and ethos; which, moreover, explicitly negates the central notion of the other worlds, namely that there are gods: persons with superhuman qualities and powers who interacts with humans.

32 William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*, 2nd edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1988]).

33 See Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999).

If this scientific frame of all cultures is couched merely as a methodological principle, that is, as methodological agnosticism or naturalism, then it makes sense only if this constructed world (the godless universe) is true, or at least the most plausible. If it is false on an ontological plane, that is, there are indeed gods, then the super world (the frame of all worlds) of scientific rationality is an imposition of misguided principles on fellow attempts at cultural creation. That this question does not arise as readily when analyzing galaxies, nanoparticles, and electricity is natural, but when facing competing claims of describing and explaining the universe, and what lies beyond, it is inevitable.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Paden in recent years has turned to the fiercely naturalist cognitive study of religion as the theoretical basis of world making – in a similar way as Jensen, who in the 1990s was inspired by Paden's approach.³⁴ For the cognitive study of religion, as earlier for Widengren, the gods are central, in distinction to the focus of Söderblom and Rudolf Otto on the impersonal numinous. And it is we humans who make the gods. The revelatory dynamics of the Holy is thus absent.

The tricky question, as always for comparative studies, is how to take the step from concrete cases to accurate generalizations. The accusation of arbitrariness, as with Widengren, is never far away, as long as the comparative concepts are not founded on an explicit theory of religion and culture, which includes coherent meta-theoretical principles. In his 2013 retrospect, Paden acknowledges the problem.

But how to describe a culture world without using any generic concepts about social or cultural worldmaking? For all concepts are comparative: they hold together a number of instantiations within a larger taxon. How do we describe a sacred history or cyclical ritual practices without recourse to the concept of sacred histories and periodic rites? With these questions we find ourselves, like it or not, in the realm of cross-cultural patterns.³⁵

34 William Paden, "Connecting with Evolutionary Models: New Patterns in Comparative Religion?" in *Introducing Religion. Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, edited by Willie Braun / Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Equinox, 2014 [2008]): 406–417. Jeppe Sinding Jensen, "Normative Cognition in Culture and Religion," *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* 1/1 (2013): 47–70.

35 William E. Paden, "Tracks and Themes in a Shifting Landscape: Reflections on 50 Years of the Study of Religion," *Religion* 43/1 (2013): 97.

Paden refers with appreciation to Jonathan Z. Smith who tried to straddle both the relativity of all worlds and the importance of generalizations. However, to try to inoculate the phenomenology of religion onto the stem of evolutionary cognitive studies in order to solve this problem comes at a price, as the methodological naturalism of cognitive science is mostly explicitly founded on ontological materialism. As Jensen wrote in 2011:

Many cognitive science hard-liners are not just individually oriented materialists, but also (self-confessed) reductionists and eliminativists. Briefly characterized, the reductionist would say that religion is “nothing but,” e.g. an illusion, brain-control or social projection.³⁶

In contrast, Jensen makes a case for the importance of culture as environmental factors influencing the innate structure of the human brain. In this way, “Our understanding of ourselves and our relations to others and to the world(s) we operate in are governed, regulated and controlled by norms, prescriptions and ideas.”³⁷

I acknowledge the importance of attending to the general characteristics of how innate brain structures and cultural norms and narratives interact. What is missing, however, from such a project, and which I deem central to a phenomenology of religion at home primarily in the humanities, is first the attention to the details of individual cases, for example, the close reading of a text such as the Song of Songs in its attempt to bridge the gap between human and divine love. Secondly, this attitude of openness to the individual text and its message includes its possible contribution to human flourishing. Of course, one can produce an accurate description of the text, including its linguistic peculiarities and contextual factors, and explain its instantiations of general cognitive processes, such as anthropomorphism, but the hermeneutic ethos of the humanities includes also an openness to the message. That is, the scholar ponders whether it has something true and good to tell us; which, in a second step, might be of importance for our understanding of and being in the world. Alternatively, the scholar is attentive to whether the text, film or drama contains dangerous ideas that undermine human dignity such as racism.

36 Jeppe Sinding Jensen, “Framing Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture Theoretically,” in *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*. Edited by Armin W. Geertz and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (London and New York: Routledge, 2011): 39.

37 Jensen, “Framing Religious,” 41.

If a renewed phenomenology of religion is to be part of the humanities, and not only be a systematization of religious phenomena on the basis of theories from the natural and social sciences, it has to deal with the condition that even strictly neutral studies of world creation participates in refining or demolishing what they study. Scholars not only dissect imaginary worlds, but also uphold and criticize them, and charter new ways. The humanities are set in a normative framework and are greatly impoverished without such concerns. To withdraw, as Widengren, from all traces and accents of theology and metaphysics, and thus existential concerns, to the disciplined methodology of non-confessional historical science, is also to question the traditional role of the humanities. It is, therefore, not surprising that Widengren seems to have moved beyond phenomenology during the later phase of his career. His rejection of the metaphysics of the numinous gave his comparative project a certain existential stiffness, but then, on the other hand, he did not develop the full consequences of a naturalist perspective as Paden and Jensen later did. At the same time, Widengren's theoretical deficit left the overarching themes and organizing concepts of comparative religion without a strong justification.

Is it true, then, as Jensen writes that "... to the question 'Is religion transcendent?'" one is forced to answer "no"?³⁸ If the phenomenology of religion is a systematic classification of misguided ideas about reality, then, naturally, we do not expect to learn from them, except as models to avoid, if we are to be rational. Why invest work in understanding the peculiarities of religions instead of laying bare the general principles that gave birth to them? Principles that, moreover, are not unique to religious phenomena.

My worry is that such a comparative study of religion by overemphasizing neutrality and professional distance will lose its humanist, hermeneutical identity, and this development was probably already at play in Widengren's rejection of "theological presuppositions of a non-scientific character." Maybe, it is non-confessionality as the crucial – and perhaps last, marker of identity for the academic study of religion – which makes phenomenology of religion presently such a difficult project. A pure classificatory phenomenology with a naturalist fundament distances itself from the traditional value oriented intellectual work of the humanities in its relation to a cultural heritage with canons of literature and ideas of moral formation. We should be aware that with the legacy of Axel Hägerström, which Capps speculated was an influence on Widengren's lack of theoretical ambitions, it is not only the metaphysics of the divine that is deemed to be off bounds for rational scholarship, but

38 Jensen, "Framing Religious," 38.

Hägerström is foremost known for his value nihilism. He believed that “all of our moral judgments are only expressions of the internal capacity of an action to arouse pleasure or displeasure.”³⁹

If this is the case, then the humanities, including the comparative study of religious phenomena, consists in description, collection and analysis of data, with no attention to whether they are good or bad, that is, whether they are worthy of being listened to or not. Such normative concerns are outside the proper realm of reason, depending merely on the ideological beliefs and emotional dispositions of individuals. For such a value neutral, naturalist approach, Widengren might be an inspiration, but his avoidance of theory makes it necessary to find the organizing principles somewhere else, as concepts and classifications are theory dependent. And every theory of human culture and religion influence (more or less) what they theorize. Marxism in its various forms is a strong case, but also, for example, gender studies.

Therefore, a resurrected phenomenology of religion in the spirit of Widengren would be comparative through the taxonomy supplied by a theoretical perspective, but even the approach of Widengren rested on presuppositions of the cultural value of certain texts. There is in his focus on premodern religious high cultures lingering the idea of the worth of studying certain canonical texts in detail and depth. When this defining feature of the humanities withers away, part of the motive for engaging at length with particular influential cultural expressions is also lost. It is difficult to see how such a reborn phenomenology of religion would be different from present religious studies with its strong influence of social science theories and the understanding of religion as only culture.

4 Conclusions

To reconsider the phenomenology of Geo Widengren is a frustrating exercise due to the lack of theory in his mainly philological approach. His categorizations of religious phenomena lack a clear legitimizing foundation, which stands in stark contrast to Mircea Eliade’s hermeneutics of the sacred. Connected to Widengren’s empirical emphasis was his insistence on objectivity and the necessary distance between the history of religions and Christian theology. This lessens the humanities identity of the study of religion by combining value-neutrality with theory deficient classifications. For Eliade, the

39 Quoted and translated in Patricia Mindus, *A Real Mind: The Life and Work of Axel Hägerström* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009) 82f.

analysis of archaic religion was also a critique of modernity that he thought had lost valuable religious ways of thinking and acting. Widengren had no such humanist ambitions but stayed closer to the basic philological work of reading and interpreting texts. However, considering the present crisis of the humanities, the question of relevance inevitably requires the study of religion to address values, at least the value of painstaking studies of religious texts and practices, and then their classification. The present dominance of social science theories and ethnographic methods in the study of religion forces a philological comparative approach to justify itself in a stronger way than Widengren did. In such a situation, value-neutrality can be a hindrance.

My suggestion is, therefore, that a renewed phenomenology of religion critically investigates the possibility of an extension into applied religious studies and that it does not stay content with the argument of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. With this comes also a reconsideration of the relation to theology and a theoretical elucidation of the impact of academic studies on the religious phenomena that they study.

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PART 4

Method, Criticism and a Public Intellectual



The Reception and Criticism of Geo Widengren in the Nordic Countries: The Debate over the Origin of Religion

René Gothóni and Göran Larsson

1 Introduction

Many contributors to this anthology would agree that Professor Geo Widengren's main research in the field of the History of Religions concerned topics such as religious phenomenology, criticism of evolutionism, sacred kings and high gods. Although he also addressed other topics, such as Gnosticism, Islam and Mandeism, and sometimes lamented having been associated with these themes much too early in his career, they cannot be ignored in any survey of his importance as a historian of religions. At a workshop held in his honour at the University of Santa Barbara on 21–2 April 1972, Widengren referred to this fact by remarking:

It is understood that I [Geo Widengren] did not start my research work in the firm conviction that it had to be concentrated on culture contact, cultural influence and cultural continuity. Therefore, it is but natural that most of what I have written does not fall under such headings. On the whole I have tried, even if I have not been successful, to be an all-round historian of religion, including also phenomenology and psychology of religion into the sphere of my interests. But it was inevitable that I was concentrating more on some things than on other things. When I was a comparatively young professor, I got a label attached to my person, and that label was: 'Anti-evolutionism, High-Gods and Sacral Kingship.' Well, I have struggled rather hard to get rid of that label.¹

1 Geo Widengren, "Cultural contact, cultural influence, cultural continuity, and syncretism. Some views based on my previous work," in *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity. Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), 19.

Although Widengren is arguably one of Sweden's best-known scholars internationally in the field of the History of Religions, his hypotheses, typologies and explanations were not always accepted outside Uppsala. Despite his engagement in the International Association for the Study of Religions (IAHR; until 1955 IASHR) right from the outset, his scholarly work was rarely reviewed or discussed outside Sweden.² Two noteworthy exceptions are his textbook *Religionens värld* (first published in 1945³) and his contribution to the debate on evolutionism included in the book *Religionens ursprung*,⁴ which is based on an English article published in the Swedish journal *Ethnos* in 1945⁵ and partly translated into German in 1974.⁶ As we will show in this chapter, these two publications provoked a public debate, especially in Norway and Finland.

Although Widengren was seldom afraid to voice his opinion on any matter that had to do with the study of religions, it is surprising that he seldom if ever addressed the explicit criticisms he received from Nordic colleagues, such as the Norwegian Biblical scholar and philologist Sigmund Mowinckel (1884–1965) and the Finnish ethnologist and scholar of religions Rafael Karsten (1879–1956). Since we argue that a study of how Widengren's research was received by his contemporary colleagues in the Nordic countries casts light on some of the theoretical and methodological assumptions that explicitly or implicitly underpin his research, we will discuss Karsten's extensive criticism of the two books of Widengren's we have already mentioned, *Religionens värld* ("The World of Religions") and *Religionens ursprung* ("The Origin of Religion").

Unlike other critics, such as the Swedish philologist and classicist Martin P:son Nilsson (1874–1967) and the Norwegian scholar, Mowinckel previously mentioned, Karsten returned repeatedly to his criticisms of Widengren in reviews, books and articles, which call for a thorough analysis of his arguments. Therefore, the focus in this chapter is on the criticisms that Karsten voiced concerning Widengren's *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung*.

Apart from addressing Karsten's criticisms, our aim is also to analyse how Widengren and Karsten differed in their respective approaches to the study of

2 Some important exceptions are included in the chapters in this volume.

3 Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld. Religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1945).

4 Geo Widengren, *Religionens ursprung* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1946).

5 Geo Widengren, "Evolutionism and the Problem of the Origin of Religion," *Ethnos*, Vol. 10, Nos. 2–3 (1945): 57–96.

6 Geo Widengren, "Evolutionistische Theorien auf dem Gebiet der vergleichenden Religionswissenschaft," in *Selbstverständnis und Wesen der Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Günther Lanczkowski (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 87–113.

religions, and more specifically to the importance of high gods and animism as the earliest stages of religion in human history. As our analysis unpacks the debate between Widengren and Karsten, it will be clear that their theories about high gods and animism offer two different, but in many ways similar and overlapping hypotheses about early religious history. Both explanations are also related to a discussion of evolutionism, a term that Karsten and Widengren understood differently and often used to label scholars with whom they disagreed.

Although we cannot go into his biographical details here, Karsten was an internationally renowned ethnologist and scholar of the study of religions, especially for his many books and articles on various aspects of religion based on his extensive field studies of Native Americans in South America.⁷ Unlike Widengren, Karsten also had a strong interest in philosophy, as well as in the anthropology and sociology of religions. He was well prepared to discuss methodological issues that Widengren rarely addressed. In other words, Widengren was an archive and desktop scholar, whereas Karsten was a theoretician and a participant observer in the field. Whereas Widengren worked solely with texts, Karsten also included observations of human rituals and behaviour in real life.

Before analysing Karsten's criticisms of Widengren, we will provide a short presentation of Widengren's two books, *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung*. We will then continue by presenting Karsten's criticisms of Widengren before moving on to an analysis and contextualization of Karsten's and Widengren's positions on the origins of religion. The chapter closes with a conclusion.

2 *Religionens värld*: The Background

Even though *Religionens värld* was written as an introduction and textbook on the comparative study of religions, it is without doubt one of Widengren's best known and possibly also one of his most widely read books. With its three editions (1945, 1953 and 1971) and translations into German (1969), Spanish (1976) and Italian (1984), it made an impression on several generations of historians of religion, and not only in Sweden and the other Nordic countries.

The first edition of the book was published only five years after Widengren had been appointed Professor in the History of Religion and Psychology of

⁷ For a biography of Karsten, see Raili Gothóni and René Gothóni, *Rafael Karsten bland indianfolken i Sydamerika* (SFV:s biografiserie 15. Vasa: Svenska folkskolans vänner, 2018).

Religion at Uppsala in 1940. From the preface to the 1945 edition, we know that it was Widengren's aim to write a state-of-the-art introduction in Swedish that could be read by both university students and the general public. The textbook includes chapters on myth, magic, rituals, totemism, sacred kingship, the phenomenology of religion and high gods. Over time, it underwent major changes, the different editions containing new chapters, rewritten sections, fresh introductions and some sections that were excluded from the later editions.

Many of the references in *Religionens värld* are to Widengren's own publications. It is fair to state that the various editions of the book mirror his own research and interests. Without assessing the value of this specific book – we will return to this topic when we deal with Karsten's criticisms – it is evident that most students at Uppsala read the book in one of its editions from 1945 up until Widengren's retirement in 1973.

Although we do not have any data casting light on if and in what ways *Religionens värld* was used as a textbook at universities apart from Uppsala,⁸ its significance appears to have declined after Widengren's retirement. Nonetheless most if not all the contributors to this anthology testify to having read *Religionens värld* when they were fresh students and young scholars in the field of the History of Religions. It is therefore fair to say that the book and its specific outlook have had a great impact on how the History of Religions as an academic discipline was understood in the Nordic countries from the mid-1940s up until at least the mid-1970s.

When the book was first published in the mid-1940s, it stimulated several reviews in Swedish.⁹ The overall impression is that *Religionens värld* was generally applauded as a groundbreaking study that should be read by anyone who wanted to take part in public debates about religion. In *Vår Lösen*, for instance, the reviewer Helge Ljungberg concluded:

The publication of *Religionens värld* is surely the most remarkable event in Swedish research in the History of Religion since Nathan Söderblom's work on the origin of the belief in God. The work is not popular science in

8 The central role that *Religionens värld* played in the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University from the mid-1940s can be substantiated via the so-called study handbooks that were given to new students. These study handbooks were called *Teologiska fakultetens studiehandboken gällande föreskrifter och studieplaner för fakultetens examina* and were printed on a regular (but not yearly) basis by Wretmans boktryckeri in Uppsala.

9 See, for instance, Alfred Haldar, "Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld," *Kyrko-historisk årskrift* (1945), 376–380, and Sven Rodhe, "Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, Häfte 4 (1945), 307–308.

a conventional sense – on the contrary, it is here and there rather laborious to find one’s way through it – but the presentation throughout is clear and well arranged, and requires no previous knowledge of the history of religion. Everyone who at all wishes to discuss the basic questions in the history of religion first needs to make a thorough study of *Religionens värld*. Only then he is welcome to join the debate.¹⁰

Even though *Religionens värld* is presented as a textbook inspired by a phenomenological approach, it does not contain any references to continental philosophers like, for example, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) or Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Nor does Widengren include essential references to historians of religion like Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) or theologians like Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) when he addresses issues under the heading of phenomenology. Instead, he focuses more on scholars like Edwin O. James (1888–1972), associated with the British Myth and Ritual school, and historians of religion like Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959) and Claas Jouco Bleeker (1898–1983).¹¹

Regarding the specific approach adopted in *Religionens värld*, in 1942 Widengren had already published an article in the Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) Association’s journal, *Religion och Bibel*, in which he defines what he meant by this phenomenological approach to the study of religions. In this publication, he writes:

The phenomenology of religion is the study of religion in its different manifestations. It is on the contrary not a science of the manifestations of the religions ... This is the line of demarcation between the history of religion and the phenomenology of religion. The history of religion in its narrow sense studies the life and evolution of individual religions, while

10 Helge, Ljungberg, “Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld,” *Vår Lösen*, Årg. 36, Nr. 6–7 (1945): 244–248, our translation.

11 On the influence of phenomenology on the history of religions, see, for instance, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, “The Phenomenology of Religion and Theories of Interpretation,” *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, Vol. 20 (2012), 26–39. For an outline of Widengren’s understanding of phenomenology, see, for instance, W.O. Carver, “Reflection on Geo Widengren’s phenomenological method,” *Scriptura*, 2 (1986), 21–39. Like Widengren, Pettazzoni and Bleeker played crucial roles in the foundation of the International Association for the Study of Religions (IAHR; until 1955 IASHR) and its journal *Numen*. See, for instance, Giovanni Casadio, “NVMEN, Brill and the IAHR in Their Early Years: Glimpses at Three Parallel Stories from an Italian Stance,” in *NVMEN, the Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR*, eds. Armin Geertz and Tim Jensen (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016): 303–348. See also Jensen and Fujiwara’s chapter in this volume.

phenomenology deals with religious life in all its phenomena, which may appear in one or the other religion.¹²

Without going into details, the difference between a so-called phenomenological approach and the “ordinary” historians of religion approach is a matter for discussion, something Widengren also admits. One could easily argue that the overarching aim of *Religionens värld* is to provide an overview of the history of religions and to create typologies for classifying and comparing religious phenomena. In order to do so it is necessary to make classifications and categories to sort out the different “phenomena” that, according to Widengren, belong to the category of religion.

Widengren’s heuristic method unfolds in the chapters in *Religionens värld* that deal with various topics or phenomena, such as magic, rituals and holiness. Like most other scholarly works in the History of Religions at that time, Widengren’s book does not contain any methodological discussion (see, for instance, Jan Hjärpe’s chapter in this volume). As a result, it is difficult if not impossible for the reader to evaluate which data were included in and excluded from the textbook. This weakness has perpetually evoked critical comments on *Religionens värld*, being among the points stressed by the Norwegian exegete and philologist Sigmund Mowinckel in his review of the book. Mowinckel wrote sarcastically that the selection process and analysis were unclear because they were driven by Widengren’s personal tastes and preferences, rather than by objective criteria and a thorough methodology.¹³ The Finnish scholar Rafael Karsten voiced similar criticisms. Before we turn to his arguments, it is first necessary to say something about the book that Widengren wrote subsequently, *Religionens ursprung*.

3 *Religionens ursprung*: The Background

After the publication of *Religionens värld*, Widengren felt it necessary to defend himself against some of the criticisms he had received and to address the challenge presented by so-called evolutionist explanations in the History of Religions. The focus of this specific book is the origins of religion, a topic that was closely related to theories on topics such as *animism* and *mana*. Contrary

12 Geo Widengren, “Religionshistoria och religionsfenomenologi,” *Religion och Bibel*, 1 årgången (1942): 21–25, our translation.

13 Sigmund Mowinckel, “Heime og ute: En ny religionsfenomenologi. Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld,” *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift*, Hefte 1 (1946): 181–192.

to these theories, which Widengren dismissed as evolutionary hypotheses, Widengren proposed his own explanation for the origins of religion, namely the belief in a high god.

In his criticisms of what he regarded as evolutionist theories, it is clear that Widengren had been influenced by his teacher and supervisor Tor Andræ (1885–1947), a Swedish expert on Islam and specifically on the life of Muhammad (on Andræ's importance to Widengren, see Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). However, Widengren had also been influenced by the Russian-born American anthropologist and sociologist Alexander Goldenweiser (1880–1940), whom he frequently refers to in *Religionens ursprung*. Like Goldenweiser, Widengren was sceptical of what he considered to be static evolutionary schemas. Both believed that historical and anthropological studies had clearly demonstrated the impossibility of defending evolutionist explanations.

Instead of stressing the uniformity and parallelism of evolutionism (i.e. that all cultures have to pass through the same developmental stages and must evolve in similar ways), it was necessary to take into account the contradictions, internal variations and importance of outer forces when assessing cultural developments. It is elucidating to read Goldenweiser's belief that one academic guild had been more or less immune to evolutionist theories, namely the historians. For Widengren, history and philology were fundamental and indispensable cornerstones of all solid academic work, and it is therefore likely that he appreciated Goldenweiser's conclusions on this matter. On this specific point, Goldenweiser claimed that:

Of all social scientists the historian proved most nearly immune to evolutionism, for they knew the facts. They were accustomed to deal with series of successive events, and as their experience did not tally with evolutionism, they proceeded for the most part to ignore it. Had the evolutionists been historians rather than amateur anthropologists, the classical theory of social evolution would probably not have progressed beyond its early phases.¹⁴

In line with the quotation above, criticism of evolutionism became the central theme of Widengren's *Religionens ursprung*. As noted earlier, this book was first written as a lengthy essay in English, published in the Swedish journal *Ethnos*. Later he translated it into Swedish to challenge the evolutionist theories that, he felt, had become popular among Swedish scholars. In all its

14 Goldenweiser, Alexander, "Evolution, Social," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R.A. Seligman. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931, 661.

complexity it is, among other things, a fierce attack on Professor Martin P:son Nilsson and his study of classical religions in ancient Greece.¹⁵

In *Religionens ursprung*, Widengren accused Nilsson of advocating the theory that all civilizations have evolved according to a static schema ascending from the lowest to the highest. According to Widengren, theoreticians like Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) and Sir James Frazer (1854–1941), who base their readings of the past explicitly or implicitly on evolutionist schema, have had a devastating impact on a number of scholars, including in the Nordic countries. Widengren argues that those who advocate a static transition from the lowest to the highest and who hold that all civilizations must go through the same stages to develop and evolve have missed the complexity that also exists within and among so-called primitive civilizations.

While labelling several international and Nordic scholars evolutionists, especially for their attempts to find the earliest stages of religion known to humankind, Widengren proposes his own conception of the origin of religion. According to him, it is the belief in a high god that is the earliest and optimum explanation for all religions coming into being, and not contemporary theories involving, for instance, magic, mana or animism.¹⁶ In his presentation of the evolution of religion, and specifically of belief in a god, Widengren argues for a three-stage evolution from a belief in a high god to pantheism and polytheism, and then on to monotheism.

The evolutionists, on the other hand, conceived of religion as evolving from animism to polytheism and then in some cases to monotheism. The three-stage structure of these different versions is more or less the same. The crucial difference lies in the content of the structure, namely whether the origins of religion can be found in a belief in a high god or in a belief in spirits. The fact that his own suggestion (i.e. the high god theory) also can be read as a form of evolutionism in that it claims that a belief in a high god exists among all religious traditions did not strike Widengren as a problem. This is obviously one of the major weaknesses in *Religionens ursprung*, which Widengren's critics also noticed.

15 The conflict between Widengren and Nilsson is present in the correspondence between Pettazzoni and Widengren, see Letter 31–33 included in the appendix of this volume.

16 On this matter, see, for instance, Göran Larsson, "It's Not Mana, It's High Gods! Another Conceptual History or Another Explanation, but a Similar Problem," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 21, Issue 4–5 (2019): 447–456.

4 Straw Men and Weak Methods: Karsten's Criticism

As previously noted, Widengren's *Religionens ursprung* could easily be read as a full-blown attack on a number of Nordic and international scholars. Most of those whom Widengren addressed in this particular publication had died long before the book was published, and those who were alive did not care to reply, irrespective of the fact that the original text was first published in English and then translated into German.

As far as we know, neither the English article in *Ethnos* nor the German essay provoked any debates outside of the Nordic countries. They are rarely if ever quoted in studies of evolutionism or the History of Religions. Compared to the English and German editions, however, some responses were ventured by Nordic scholars, notably by the Finnish Rafael Karsten, at that time Professor of Practical Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki.

From our previous discussion it should come as no surprise that Widengren and Karsten completely disagreed on how to explain the origin of religion. According to Widengren, Karsten was among those scholars who argued that, in the earliest civilizations, the only form of religion was a belief in spirits, which in some cases was then elevated into a belief in gods. Consequently, Karsten positioned himself as a follower of Tylor and his animistic theory, thereby neglecting the function of a high god among the so-called "primitive civilizations", precisely the area of research Widengren considered his field of speciality.¹⁷ Likewise, as we shall argue, Karsten was not impressed by either Widengren's research or his explanations.

Whereas we know that Widengren had already made an acquaintance with Karsten's theories and explanations as a student under the guidance of Tor Andræ at Stockholms högskola in the 1930s,¹⁸ Karsten first showed an interest in Widengren's research when he reviewed the books *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung* in a lengthy essay published in *Finsk Tidskrift* (1947).¹⁹ In his book *Stridsfrågor inom den moderna sociologin och religionsvetenskapen*, published later the same year, he further elaborates and clarifies three critical comments on Widengren's work, namely his anti-evolutionist attitude, his

17 See, for instance, Geo Widengren, *Hochgottglauben im alten Iran. Eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets årsskrift 1938:6).

18 Geo Widengren, *Tor Andræ* (Uppsala: J.A. Lindblads förlag, 1947), 159.

19 Rafael Karsten, "Modern nordisk religionsvetenskap," *Finsk Tidskrift*, 141:1 (1947): 15–30.

conception of indigenous people's belief in high gods and his theory of the origin of religion.²⁰

To understand Karsten's fierce criticisms of Widengren's two books, one needs to know that the evolutionist and anti-theological position had been a cornerstone right from the beginning of his academic career. His quest at the very end of his essay clearly reflects his own vantage point. He asks:

... how long will it take before the study of religions is relieved from the tutelage of theology, before it will evolve into a positive science of [empirical] experiences, where theories are elaborated on the basis of real ethnological and historical knowledge, according to a critical method and above all – without any tendency.²¹

Given this attitude, it is not surprising that Karsten dismisses the quality of Widengren's books. Indeed, he gives them no credit at all as scholarly works and belittles them as belonging to the genre of popular science or even normative theology.

According to Karsten, Widengren's anti-evolutionist position is outdated and biased. For instance, Widengren had neglected to pay attention to contemporary research on evolutionist theories that pleaded for more nuanced descriptions of human evolution. Therefore, Karsten disparaged him for selecting only those theories that suited his purpose and argued that Widengren had failed to live up to his own criteria for qualitative research. According to Karsten, Widengren's presentations also suffer from weak and unclear definitions, making it hard for any reader to understand the arguments. Karsten writes:

Let us take a closer look at what Widengren means by 'evolutionism'. In the first chapter of *Religionens ursprung* he tries to answer this question, but the answer is so completely perplexing that it is obvious that the author did not really know himself what he meant by that word. The picture Widengren paints of the phenomenon is strangely bewildered and contradictory. With a free hand he draws the ghost of 'evolutionism' on the wall and then attacks his own imaginary picture without asking who

20 Rafael Karsten, *Stridsfrågor inom den moderna sociologien och religionsvetenskapen* (Helsingfors: Söderström 1947): 83–123.

21 Karsten, "Modern nordisk", 30, our translation.

is really hit by this criticism, and apparently without realizing that he himself, or the school he represents, is struck thereby.²²

According to Karsten, Widengren confines himself to referring to scholars who support his own reading of the history of humankind, rather than addressing scholars and theories that argue a different conclusion with the aim of finding better arguments for his own theories. By revealing Widengren's eclectic reading, Karsten dismisses him as a serious scholar and denounces him for creating a false straw man that suits his own purposes. He concludes:

In his criticisms, Widengren completely disregards the concept of 'evolutionism' [and] embraces the conviction that in the early history of humankind an evolution from lower to higher stages took place embodying a number of different and highly divergent trends of opinion. To lump all advocates of the theory of evolution together will simply not do. Therefore, Widengren's controversy over the evolutionists' main points is merely a waste of effort.²³

However, to understand Karsten's review of Widengren's books, one also needs to acknowledge his disappointment that Widengren almost totally ignored his own studies, *The Origin of Worship: A Study of Primitive Religion* (1905) and *Inledning till religionsvetenskapen* (1928). Karsten's doctoral thesis, *The Origins of Worship*, is based on an extensive reading of studies on the origins of religion at the British Library in 1903 and 1904. During these formative years, Karsten adopted his evolutionist standpoint from his teacher and mentor Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939). The fact that Widengren wanted to free himself from what he considered "rigid evolutionistic schema" was like a red rag to a bull for Karsten:

In his work *Religionens ursprung*, where Widengren is pleased to mention my name only in passing, he gives me to understand that my conception of primitive religion belongs to the past, is utterly out of date, and is already for that reason hardly worth anyone's attention.²⁴

22 Karsten, *Stridsfrågor*, 101–102, our translation.

23 Karsten, *Stridsfrågor*, 104, our translation.

24 Karsten, "Modern nordisk", 16–17, our translation.

According to Karsten, it is apparent that Widengren's anti-evolutionist position originates from his Catholic colleague Pater Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), whose thesis on the “primitive high god” is simply a variation on the perpetually re-emerging nineteenth-century theory of a primitive monotheism.²⁵ When Widengren was a doctoral student, he attended the Olaus Petri lectures given by Schmidt in 1936. Later, in his biography of his supervisor Tor Andræ, he testified that Schmidt's lectures were of great importance for him. It is no surprise, then, that Schmidt is mentioned in *Religionens värld*.²⁶

Yet another characteristic feature of Widengren's study is that he does not present any arguments of his own, but confines himself to referring to other scholars, especially Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and his so-called comparative method, also used by his followers, according to Karsten.

Moreover, Karsten discloses a link between anti-evolutionism and the theologians' antipathy towards studying the religions of the world in that they conceive of the concept of evolution mainly in relation to Darwin's ideas. Here again we find Schmidt's hypothesis of stages (*Stufen*), which have evolved uniformly in the various cultures from lower to higher, more or less according to a uniform schema, according to Karsten.

From the history of ideas, we know that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a relentless search for the origins of various phenomena. Naturally, the theologians sought for the origins of monotheism, which, according to Karsten, resulted in their favourite theory of the monotheistic high god. Contrary to the conceptions of Schmidt, Widengren and the school of cultural history, Karsten argues that no indigenous people, culture or religion has survived in its original form. Modern science now calculates the ascent of humans and religions much further back in prehistorical time. Even the most “primitive” people have a long history. Consequently, Karsten argues that it is absurd to think that culture and religious beliefs have survived unchanged over hundreds of thousands of years.²⁷

This is one of the reasons why Karsten, in his study *The Origins of Religion* (1935), reluctantly uses the word “primitive”. To his disappointment, Widengren does not even mention this study in his books, where Karsten thoroughly analysed Robert R. Marett's (1866–1943) “pre-animistic” concept of *mana* in the context of Native Americans in South America. Karsten concludes that the *mana* concept is based on a theory of pre-animism, though there is no ethnological material to support this hypothesis.

25 Rafael Karsten, “Teorin om »urmonoteismen«,” *Finsk Tidskrift* 141:1(1948): 254–255.

26 Widengren, *Tor*, 199.

27 Karsten, “Modern nordisk”, 24.

Besides his criticisms of Widengren's theoretical suggestions, based on his own anthropological research, Karsten did not find any evidence to confirm Widengren's notion of belief in a high god. Karsten is mightily surprised when Widengren states that:

Furthermore, as a religious-historical phenomenon, the belief in a celestial god is a characteristic of a myriad of historically given religions. In fact, this phenomenon is so universal that in many places in this phenomenon one sees the essential content of all faith in God at certain undeveloped stages.²⁸

No wonder, then, that Karsten disagrees with Widengren's statements that the origin of most if not all religions is a belief in a high god. According to Karsten, there is only one explanation for Widengren emphasizing this hypothesis – he is a crypto-theologian. Resembling the ideas of the Catholic scholar Wilhelm Schmidt, who had a decisive influence on a number of scholars in Uppsala, especially after his Olaus Petri Lectures, the belief in high gods fits nicely with a belief in Christianity as the highest religion. The theologians preferred this explanation because it gave them an opportunity to defend their own belief in God and to criticize Tylor's animism, which was regarded an attack on belief in God.²⁹ Karsten writes:

Nearly all movements and schools have their own fixed ideas and special favourite dogmas, which are often difficult to combat. This seems to be especially characteristic amongst theologians who study religions. In their studies, they assume certain dogmatic presumptions, for one thing because they have grave difficulties in liberating themselves from their inclination to apply theological viewpoints to questions that explicitly concern historians of religion. When the current [chair of] the History of Religion, as is the case in Sweden, is in the Faculty of Theology, it is an out-dated arrangement that does not at all redound to the study of religion.³⁰

Karsten elaborates on the issue of the existence of a high god further and claims that, if Widengren had only taken into consideration Karsten's own book *The Origins of Religion*, he would not have written that:

28 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 57–58, our translation.

29 Cf., Larsson, "It's Not mana".

30 Karsten, *Stridsfrågor*, 132, our translation.

... the serious mistake made by the advocates of animism is that they have entirely neglected the role the form of belief in a personal god we call belief in a high god has played already in the oldest cultures.³¹

According to Karsten, there is no evidence that belief in a high god played the vital role the advocates of a pre-monotheistic stage had argued. For instance, there are no sources supporting the notion that the Finno-Ugric peoples or the Native Americans believed in a high god as a universal intercultural category, two research fields that Karsten had studied in detail. To make a strong contribution to the study of religions, a scholar would need to be able to read literature not only in Oriental languages, German, French and in English, but also in languages such as Portuguese and Spanish. Moreover, the scholar should be familiar with the religions of the Finno-Ugric and other North Asian peoples, which also presupposes a knowledge of the literature in Finnish and Russian.

Given his linguistic background, Karsten could easily show that Widengren had not paid enough attention to sources written in Finnish or Russian, nor to those in Spanish or Portuguese, two languages that Karsten had mastered in his own field studies in South America. His critical comment may seem somewhat childish – “I know more languages than you do”. However, Widengren had often somewhat arrogantly referred to his own philological knowledge when he criticized other scholars for lacking the necessary language skills. One example of this argument is Widengren’s harsh criticism of Thede Palm’s (1907–1995) thesis *Wendische Kultstätten: Quellenkritische Untersuchungen zu den letzten Jahrhunderten Slavischen Heidentums* of 1937. In his evaluation of this work, he wrote:

The author from Lund is not a Slavist but has in any case achieved a good collection of material, which can serve as a starting point for future research. In principle, one must otherwise distance oneself from the previously abundant method of religious historians entering areas where they lack philological training. Such breaking-free strolls have caused a great deal of inconvenience and burdened research with unnecessary hypotheses.³²

31 Karsten, “Modern nordisk”, 26–27, our translation.

32 Geo Widengren, “Det senaste decenniets religionshistoriska forskning i Sverige,” *Ord & Bild* (1945), 561, our translation.

The attitude in the quotation above may have provoked Karsten to point out that all scholars have their shortcomings. Nevertheless, Karsten had acquired genuine and thorough insights into the beliefs of Indian tribes in South America due to his many periods of fieldwork in that continent. That was certainly one of the main reasons for his fierce criticisms of Widengren: he had acquired knowledge of the field through his personal encounters and ethnographic fieldwork, experiences that Widengren lacked.

5 Defence, Counter-Attacks by Proxy and Even Deeper Resentments: Analysing the Debate

Widengren never replied to Karsten's fierce and provocative criticisms, although he was surely aware of the review of his books in *Finsk Tidskrift*, which appeared only two years after the publication of *Religionens värld*. Nevertheless, it is likely that Karsten's criticism was painful for Widengren. Apart from considering himself a historian of religion who was competent to undertake a comparative phenomenological study, Widengren often stressed his own knowledge of languages and criticized other scholars for their weaknesses in philology and the necessary languages.

Instead of Widengren, it was his friend and colleague Helmer Ringgren (1917–2012) who tried his best to defend Widengren in a reply also published in *Finsk Tidskrift* in 1948.³³ In this short apology, he applauds Karsten for raising important questions, but considers him to be wrong in attacking Widengren's language skills and the theory of the high god. For instance, Ringgren stresses that Widengren knew Persian – a language mastered by neither Karsten nor Ringgren himself – and as a result surely knew his subject.

This response was odd, since Karsten never argued that Widengren did not know Persian or other oriental languages. On the contrary, Karsten's main and only argument is that Widengren's arguments were not supported by the sources that related to North and South America and the Finno-Ugric and other North Asian peoples. To know Persian or other Oriental languages does not, according to Karsten, justify general statements about all religions.

Furthermore, it is also clear that Ringgren shares Widengren's argument that we have good reasons to claim that the earliest and oldest belief in a religion is the belief in a high god, although no new facts, arguments or evidence

33 Helmer Ringgren, "Religionshistoriska stridsfrågor," *Finsk Tidskrift* 3 (1948): 132–139.

are provided to substantiate this statement. To Ringgren, it seems to be enough simply to say that a belief in a high god is most likely the origin of all religions. This theory (or hypothesis) does not require any empirical support if we are to agree with Ringgren and Widengren.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Karsten dismisses Ringgren's reply. For Karsten, Ringgren is best described as a faithful disciple who is trying to defend his teacher out of loyalty. In other words, Ringgren's reply to Karsten was a defence by proxy. However, we know of no data indicating that Widengren encouraged Ringgren to respond to Karsten's criticism.

Leaving aside Ringgren's reply, it is evident that Widengren and Karsten evaluated their earlier studies on evolutionism differently. While Widengren relied on a number of scholars associated with the British Myth and Ritual school – like, for example, James, Arthur M. Hocart (1883–1939) and Samuel Henry Hooke (1874–1968) – and American anthropologists like Robert H. Lowie (1883–1957) and Goldenweiser, Karsten was genuinely suspicious of these scholars and their explanations.

Although we have not been able to find any evidence of a personal conflict between Karsten and Widengren, it seems that Karsten was upset at the Swedish scholar having neglected him and that his name was only mentioned as a sloppy scholar who believed in the theory of animism. Initially, it seems that the conflict between Widengren and Karsten was only a conflict between two male professors with strong egos, but on closer examination it is fair to suggest that Widengren had a tendency to pay more attention to theories and scholars who supported his readings and explanations, and hence boosted his own ideas, than to his sceptics and critics. Perhaps Karsten saw this more clearly than most scholars did at that time. He had been trained in both the human and social sciences, especially in anthropological and sociological methods and theories. For Karsten, Widengren may have represented an outdated approach to the study of religions that belonged to the past.

Even though Karsten's criticisms of Widengren's books were unforgiving, they were not personal. Ever since his early years at the University of Helsinki, Karsten had fought to free the study of religions from the chains and prejudices of theology.³⁴ Consequently, it is evident that from the very beginning he adopted a critical attitude towards Widengren, who was then the holder

34 In his formative years Karsten had also studied theology for a year, mainly to satisfy his mother's wishes and to be able to argue with the theologians. Thereafter, he continued his studies of religions in the Faculty of Arts, supervised by none other than Edvard Westermark.

of the Chair in the History of Religions and Psychology of Religions in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Uppsala. In Karsten's view, the Chair of the Study of Religions should be in the Faculty of Arts, not the Faculty of Theology.³⁵ This was a matter of principle, and of the existence of the study of religions as an independent discipline. For Karsten, it is likely that Widengren was seen as a representative of the Faculty of Theology, rather than a professor of the study of religions.

With this in mind, it is understandable why Karsten disagreed with Widengren regarding the significance of a high god as the earliest stage of religion: his own field research did not support such an interpretation, and the theoretical underpinnings of this theory were seen as a defence of monotheism as the original religion (i.e., it was seen as a kind of *Ur-monotheismus*). Contrary to Widengren, Karsten's studies of the lives and beliefs of Native Americans in South America suggest that a belief in spirits was the earliest form of religion.

Karsten's own field materials confirmed Tylor's theory of animism and contradicted Widengren's hypothesis that the origin of religion was a belief in a high god. Therefore, it is wrong to argue that he blindly accepted the theory of animism as the earliest form of religion: his own research confirmed this notion. It is also evident that Karsten had a negative attitude towards theology, and from this point of view it was surely easier for him to accept Tylor's theories.³⁶

Consequently, Karsten believed that there was a connection between the theological atmosphere in Widengren's Department of Theology at Uppsala University and his conception of a high god. This link was unacceptable to Karsten. Ever since 1925, he had been firm in criticizing his colleagues, first Westermarck, and then Eirik Hornborg (1879–1965), Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), Wolfgang von Hagen (1908–1985), Thor Heyerdahl (1914–2002), Wilhelm Koppers (1886–1961) and Wilhelm Schmidt, for their theological preferences, theoretical weaknesses and scientific errors. Eventually, his undiplomatic attitude in his relations with other scholars made him an outsider within Finnish academic circles.³⁷ From this perspective, Widengren was just one of many colleagues whom Karsten criticized and with whom he eventually ended all contact.

35 This model was also introduced at the Uppsala university and Carl-Martin Edsman was appointed as the first professor at the Faculty of Philosophy (Humanities), see Larsson's opening chapter to this volume. It goes without saying that Widengren was very negative to this solution.

36 On Tylor and theology, see Timothy Larsen, "E.B. Tylor, religion and anthropology," *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 46:3 (2013): 476–485.

37 Gothóni and Gothóni, *Rafael*, 241ff.

Despite their differences, it is also possible to identify several similarities between Karsten and Widengren. Like Karsten, Widengren also fell out with several colleagues and was over-critical of theological explanations (on this matter, see Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). It is therefore surprising that Karsten and Widengren did not see these similarities.

However, on the level of the various academic disciplines, we should not forget that in the 1940s new disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology and the history of religions as a subject separate from theology were introduced in Sweden and Finland. One consequence of his long periods of fieldwork in South America was that Karsten had not been able to take part in planning the introduction of these new disciplines. Therefore, by the time he returned to Finland, the country had become independent, and newly elected professors were defining their disciplines in accordance with modern international trends. In this process, Karsten became an outsider.

Compared to Karsten, Widengren rather benefitted from the academic changes that took place from the 1940s onwards, and his own professorship was a break with his predecessors' (i.e., Nathan Söderblom and Tor Andræ) connections to the Church of Sweden. Although we should not turn to psychological explanations, this development had an impact on Karsten's personal psychology. Over the years he grew quick to take offence. He was constantly defensive in protecting criticisms of his own research and of the discipline of the study of religions itself. This is the context in which Karsten chose to criticize Widengren's books, *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung*.

That said, we need to remind ourselves that, although Widengren could be hard on others, he was also sensitive to criticisms of his own works. Unlike Karsten, he often met substantial criticism with silence or by holding on to his own cherished ideas and conclusions. It is hard to tell whether or not this was a conscious strategy that was common in Uppsala and Helsinki at the time, but it is nonetheless a factor that has had a negative effect on the legacy of the study of religions. Instead of paying attention to methodological issues, theoretical insights, critical objections and new scientific results that contradicted their respective earlier conclusions, both Karsten and Widengren refused to let go of their own ideas and their boosted egos.

6 Conclusions

In analysing Rafael Karsten's critical remarks on Geo Widengren's two publications, *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung*, we have uncovered certain theoretical and methodological differences between this Finnish and this Swedish scholar of religions.

As a scholar, Karsten had conducted ethnographic field studies, while Widengren had remained a so-called armchair scholar. From Karsten's critical remarks, it is obvious that he regarded Widengren as a flawed scholar who suffered from several important methodological weaknesses. For instance, instead of assessing the available sources and the most recent findings in the study of religions, Widengren desperately clung on to his favourite convictions. One case in point is Widengren's critical attitude towards evolutionist perspectives. According to Karsten, his criticisms were basically inaccurate, because they rested on outdated conceptions that belonged to the nineteenth century, rather than on the latest studies.

Widengren was unwilling to see that his suggestion of a belief in high gods as the earliest form of religious belief in human history was also a kind of evolutionism and a defence of the so-called *Urmonotheismus*, i.e. the earliest form of monotheism. In his criticisms, Karsten even accuses Widengren of being a "crypto-theologian" in disguise and claimed that his theory was in effect a defence of Wilhelm Schmidt's theologically motivated research programme. Although the criticism is justified on several points, it is unlikely that Widengren was a crypto-theologian. On the contrary, he often stressed the necessity of making a distinction between personal faith and the study of religions (see, for instance, Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). There is no evidence that Widengren was a believer in religion of any kind.

Leaving aside this scholarly debate, there are also personal similarities between Karsten and Widengren. Both had strong egos, were self-confident and were not afraid of voicing their opinions on any matter. Consequently, they had no problem attracting enemies both within and outside academia. Without exaggerating their personal traits, it is something of a mystery why Widengren never responded officially to Karsten's polemical and aggressive critique. Widengren's strategy seems to have been to ignore the criticism and to carry on his research with even greater passion. Instead of embracing the critique and assessing its validity, which we would argue is the only sound academic approach to criticism, he decided not to respond at all. It is unclear whether this was a conscious strategy or not, but it might be one of the reasons why Widengren's importance declined so rapidly after his retirement from Uppsala University in 1973.

To some extent, Widengren's retirement can be seen as the end of a golden era in the history of religions in Sweden. However, if we truly want to learn from the past (if indeed that is possible), Widengren's way of handling criticism reminds us that academic work and research are a cumulative process, not a one-man show. Instead of viewing criticism as personal failure, criticism is the nerve that drives future research and ensures that we acquire more solid and better knowledge about both the past and the present.

We all know it can be devastating to see one's cherished ideas being ripped apart, but that is the beauty of being a scientist and an academic scholar. If we are not prepared to accept criticism, our work has to some extent been pointless because it has not contributed to the cumulative learning we identify with science and scholarship. Future generations of scholars in the field of the studies of religions must therefore learn to live with criticism and to present their research so that it can be tested by other scholars. In our view this is one of the most important lessons we can learn from Karsten's and Widengren's quite futile academic skirmishes.

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Before the Bible: Middle-Eastern Religions and the Origins of Christianity in the Works of Geo Widengren

Christer Hedin

1 Introduction

In 1962 Cyrus H. Gordon published his book, *Before the Bible: The common background of Greek and Hebrew civilisations*. The book was translated into Swedish and published after careful scrutiny by Geo Widengren. In the foreword Widengren pays tribute to the author as an eminent scholar, who brilliantly has elucidated the origins of the Bible.¹ To take part in the scrutiny and peer-review process of manuscripts was an important part of the scholarship of Geo Widengren.

Geo Widengren's achievement reflects the transformation of religious education in Sweden. By the middle of the 20:th century Sweden was a secularized society. The curriculum of public schools had changed from Lutheranism to a non-confessional syllabus about world religions and ethics.² Globalisation and immigration had brought the world closer to everyone. The new situation created a great demand for knowledge. These changes in education from confessional Christianity to general surveys of other religions induced a widespread interest in questions about the relationship between Christianity, the Bible and other religions.

For Geo Widengren it was a big challenge to meet this demand. Widengren was not only a teacher for university students. He also had the ambition of mediating knowledge about the religions of humanity to a more general public. As I will show in this chapter, besides his academic work he was also fervently dedicated to adult education. With an excellent overview over the religions of the world from past to present times he was also eager to demonstrate how all religions are similar and might be dependent on each other. In that respect,

1 Cyrus H. Gordon, *Före Bibeln och Homeros* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1964), 9.

2 See, for instance, Karin Kittelmann Flensner and Göran Larsson, "Swedish Religious Education at the End of the 1960s: Classroom Observations, Early Video Ethnography and the National Curriculum of 1962", *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 36, 2 (2014): 202–217.

he might be regarded as the first modern professor of comparative religion in Sweden.

This chapter is a report on his achievements in the general enlightenment about the origins of Christianity. Everything in the Bible existed “before the Bible”, according to Widengren. As I will show, he demonstrated the influences on the Bible from all the countries in the Middle East and South Asia, especially the impact of the concept of ‘Divine Kingship’. Christianity seems to be unique in some ways. At first, he could not find the immediate influences which had created the special traits in the message of original Christianity. But in 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls solved the problem. They supplied missing links between Jewish and Christian religion. Geo Widengren was anxious to communicate the news to the general public.

2 The Impact of Middle Eastern Religions

Examples of the importance and continuity between the Bible and earlier civilisations and cultures is a recurring theme in Widengren’s academic life. For instance, in his rather popular book, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner* (“Kings, Prophets and Harlequins”), Widengren deals with the background of the Old Testament and emphasises the impact of the Mitanni Kingdom, which had a dominant role in the Middle East around 1500 BC.³ It is an exhaustive survey of the background of religion in ancient Israel. The highest strata in Mitanni Society were Arian and the kingdom is an intermediary between Arian and Semitic cultures, according to Widengren. In this book he further gives an account of the important role of the Hurru, whose language has become better known through the excavations at Ras Shamra, the ruins of the ancient Ugarit. He underlines that scholars realised immediately the important impact of the Hurru on Middle Eastern culture and its decisive influence on the culture of Israel in ancient times.⁴

Widengren critically scrutinises stories in the Bible which can be better understood through newly acquired knowledge, for instance the narrative

3 Wayne Pitard, “Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. Edited by Coogan, Michael D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37, 42–45; Carol A. Redmount, “Bitter Lives. Israel in and out of Egypt,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. Edited by Coogan, Michael D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 82, 84.

4 Geo Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Aldus/Bonniers, 1961), 12–15, Cyrus H. Gordon & Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 88–94.

about Abraham, Sara and Hagar (Gen 16: 21). According to Mitanni law, a wife was obliged to offer her husband a concubine if she did not bear a child. Sara demanded that Hagar and Ismael should leave the house when Isaac was born (Gen 21: 10). That seems to be an exorbitant demand in the light of the customs in the environment. Mitanni law says that the slave who has born a child has the right to stay in the house even if the wife later bore child.⁵

The story about Esau and Jacob (Gen 25: 29–34) also follows a similar pattern, well-known from Middle Eastern cultures. In this case, under Mitanni law, the firstborn brother could sell his rights, usually for a number of sheep. The enigmatic story about Rachel's theft of the household gods (Gen 31: 19) can be explained here by Mitanni law. It prescribes that the owner of the household gods is the legal heir of a person. So, Jacob is entitled to inherit his father-in-law through the ownership of the gods. All is understandable in light of Mitanni law, according to Widengren's readings.⁶

The story about the Flood (Gen 6: 5–9: 17) has been mediated from Mesopotamia through Hurru culture. This is apparent from the name of the hero in the biblical version, argues Widengren. In Mesopotamia the name is Utnapishtim, but in the Hurru texts the hero is called Nukh. For Widengren, Ras Shamra is the centre of the mediation of the culture from Mesopotamia to the Hurru people and further to the Israelites in Canaan. The revisions indicate that Hurru culture was the mediator of traditions from southern Asia.⁷ The entire Bible reflects traditions that existed before the Bible.

Geo Widengren's extensive knowledge suggests that he was very critical of books that were published on the Bible. For instance, with sarcastic commentaries, he dismisses the book *Und die Bibel hat doch recht*, (translated as, *Men Bibeln hade rätt* in Swedish) by the German journalist Werner Keller, published 1964. It seems contradictory that this book was published in a secularised society such as Sweden, but it might be the opposite. Probably the editors presumed that some Christians could find arguments for the truth of Christianity in the book and use them in defence of their religion. That is also an explanation for the great zest with which Widengren attacked the book. Widengren calls attention to the fact that everything of archaeological interest in this book is already published. He mentions that Keller is unaware of the findings at Ras Shamra, and for that reason the book excludes every opportunity

5 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 15f. Cf Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 190–197, 230–235.

6 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 16. Cf von Rad, *Genesis*, 307–310.

7 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 12–16. Gordon & Rendsburg, *The Bible*, 39–51.

to understand the Old Testament. To put it bluntly, it is not based on a solid scientific understanding of the Bible, but is an example of biased theological wishful thinking.

3 Divine Kingship

As shown by earlier research and several chapters in this volume, the main thread in Widengren's elaboration of the connection between the religions of the Bible and surrounding religions is 'Divine Kingship'.⁸ For Widengren, knowledge of Divine Kingship is an inescapable condition for understanding the Bible, Middle Eastern religions and the connection between them.⁹ He emphasises that he has no intention deciding whether this phenomenon is due to diffusion or if it has a structural position as *Elementargedanke*, a kind of basic religious conception in various cultures.¹⁰

The significance of Divine Kingship appears in the narrative about Solomon's wisdom. The Aqhat epic from Ras Shamra tells us about a goddess, Anat, who offers him immortality, the same gift as the king is offered by God in the coronation psalms from Israel. As shown by several Uppsala scholars, not the least Ivan Engnell (see Eidevall's chapter in this volume), the epic story from Ras Shamra demonstrates the connection to the Old Testament in this regard.¹¹

Divine Kingship is also important in the sacrifice of the scapegoat at the Atonement feast (Lev 16), according to Widengren. A bull is sacrificed at *Yom Kippur*, (Lev 16: 6) as the representative of God (1 King 12: 28). Widengren explains that this pattern is taken from the rite in Mesopotamia. The scapegoat is a substitute for the king and God as an atonement sacrificed for sins.¹² In Isaiah 53: 3–8 the suffering of the servant is described as the humiliation of the king at the New Year's feast in Babylon and the suffering of Tammuz in the underworld. The servant is compared to a lamb (Is 53: 6) and Tammuz is called the lamb in the story about violence in the underworld.¹³

8 Widengren has given an overview over the subject in *Sakrales Königtum im alten Testament und im Judentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1955).

9 The importance of this subject matter is obvious from Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1953), 254–288.

10 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 255.

11 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 40f. Quotation (translated here) from p. 41.

12 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 228.

13 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 230f.

Widengren is ardent to demonstrate that Christianity has inherited this view. Christianity regards Christ as a high priest (Hebr 9: 12–14). Christ may not have entered the Holy of the Holiest, but comes close to God himself in the heavenly temple and sacrificed himself singularly for all (Hebr 9: 25–26).¹⁴ This sacrifice means salvation for the members of the Church, because the Church is the body of Christ. God has made in Christ a sacrifice for sin. This is confirmed through the words of Paul: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5: 21). It is obvious according to Widengren that “sin” here means sacrifice for sin, because the Greek word is *hamartia* and is used in the *Septuaginta* to denote that.¹⁵ The idea of the world as the body of God was brought to Christianity by Gnosticism and changed by an adaptation to the body of Christ (Eph 5: 29–30).¹⁶

4 Influence from India and Iran

According to Widengren, Christian worship of the Spirit reflects influences from India and Iran. The idea of the Church as the body of Christ corresponds to Indian ideas about the world as the body of God. The idea of the Spirit of Christ is in the same way a counterpart to the Indo-Iranian idea of Atman or *manah*. According to Paul (1 Cor 2: 11–12) the Spirit permeates everything and everybody in the same way as the Iranian *manah*. Christ is the head of the body. Correspondence with the Gnostic view of the spirit as inherent in the universe is apparent, according to Widengren (for a critical discussion see Thomassen’s chapter in this volume).¹⁷

Christ was anointed king by the Spirit in his baptism, in the same way as for the kings in the Middle East (Acts 10: 38). The anointment by the Spirit is the core content of the narrative about the baptism in the Gospel (Math 3: 16). Jesus says that a prophecy by Isaiah refers to him (Lk 4: 18). In Widengren’s understanding, it is a hymn dedicated to the king in the book of Isaiah.¹⁸ In the Middle East, anointment by the Spirit is an elevation to Divine Kingship.

Christ is God, king and high priest anointed by the Holy Spirit. Christ quoted a hymn describing the king in order to explain his own mission. These

14 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 232f.

15 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 233.

16 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 112f.

17 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 115f.

18 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 182f., Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 48.

similarities are supplemented by a reference to the *hieros gamos* in the Bible (Rev 19: 7–9). The heavenly multitude praises God at the wedding of the Lamb, which will take place after the victory over the devil, the wild beast and the false prophet. Christ is called “the bridegroom” in the Gospels, because of the connection between baptism and wedding, according to Widengren.¹⁹

5 Apocalyptic Speculations

In secularised Swedish society some people are still drawn to a number of apocalyptic movements. The Church of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) sends well-educated missionaries to Sweden. And above all, the members of Jehovah's Witnesses visit every home in Sweden and pass out their publication, “The Watchtower”, on street corners. They predicted the apocalypse of the world, the Armageddon, in the year 1975. This created a certain interest in apocalyptic traditions and gave Widengren cause to talk about the backgrounds of these movements. Christian apocalyptic speculations and the idea of Christ as saviour had been taken over from the religions of the Middle East and from Indo-Iranian religions. This influence is most evident in the revelations of John in the Bible. The numbers seven and twelve are borrowed from Babylonian astrology, and has come to Christianity through Jewish apocalyptic speculations. The idea of the heavenly Queen has also a prototype in Babylonia.²⁰

The narrative about the dragon is derived from the Iranian stories about the terrible dragon Azdahak, who is fettered but breaks loose and causes destruction in the world. “I am the Alpha and the Omega’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the sovereign of all” (Rev 1: 8). The locution A and O is also borrowed from Iran, according to Widengren.²¹ Christian apocalyptic concepts have been taken over from religions with a belief in saviours and with repeated revelations. Jewish apocalyptic speculations expect only one saviour, the Messiah, but Hellenistic Jews embraced ideas about several saviours, and this idea survived among the Christian Ebionites, who regard Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Christ as saviours.²²

19 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 183–185.

20 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 365.

21 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 366.

22 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 364.

6 Divine Pregnancy

In the polemical debate in Sweden about Christianity, Mary's virginity was often mentioned, usually confused with immaculate conception. It was as if the verity of Christianity depended on this part of the Christian message. Widengren was eager to mediate the historical background. According to him, the narrative about the birth of Jesus has many prototypes in the Middle East. The Egyptian god Amon impregnates the queen, who thus enhances the glory of the god. In the Semitic culture of Syria, the gods generally give the father a prediction about the birth of a royal son through powerful divine intervention. This pattern usually consists of three components: The parents are told about the pregnancy, are given instructions about the name of the boy and are told about his future heroic deeds.²³

The Old Testament contains several stories drawn up along this pattern. Sara is told that she will bear a son (Gen 17: 19).²⁴ The mother of Simson (Judges 13–16) also receives a message about pregnancy and the future deeds of her son (Judges 13: 3–5). The book of Isaiah contains a prediction about a young woman, never characterised as a virgin, who will bear a son (Is 7: 14), called Immanuel. The common pattern of these prophecies is, according to Widengren, taken from the idea of *hieros gamos*. Texts from Ras Shamra and Egypt contain these kinds of narratives. In Egypt, the prediction is directed to the queen, in Syria to the king himself. The Roman emperor Heliogabalus (218–222 BC) from Emesa in Syria, accomplished, as representative of the gods, a *hieros gamos* with a Roman vestal in the intention of begetting a saviour. Widengren has also found a story in the Talmud about the Archangel Gabriel who, transformed to the husband of a woman, makes her pregnant with an important rabbi, Ismael ben Elisha.²⁵

Almost all parts of the story about the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary are taken over from Middle Eastern religions. The Son's name is important. Mary is exhorted to "give him the name Jesus (Saviour), for he will save his people from their sins" (Math 1: 21).²⁶ In the Gospels it is emphasised that Mary was a virgin. At the time of Jesus there are narratives about Syrian gods born by virgins and the Jewish philosopher Philon (25 BC–40 AD) tried to prove that Sara

23 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 69–71.

24 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 230–233.

25 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 76f.

26 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 78.

was a virgin when Isaac was conceived. This feature is a result of the impact of Iranian religion.²⁷

7 The Star

Stories about the star over the stable in Bethlehem (Math 2: 1–12) were, unlike the story about divine pregnancy, seldom discussed. People were generally convinced that two planets had conjunction in 7 BC and that this could explain the sighting of the star, signifying when Jesus was born. Widengren's great interest in the star story tells us instead about his ambition to emphasise the connection between Iran and the Bible. The star is said to have led astrologers to Bethlehem, where they presented expensive gifts to Jesus. The city of Pontus on the Black Sea was an important mediator of Iranian religion. The sovereign of Pontus was Mithradates Eupator, named after the Iranian god Mithra.

Astrologers in Iran gathered on a mountain every year in expectation of the birth of an incarnation of Mithra as saviour. The Great King would be born in a cave and a star in the sky would point out the place. The astrologers deliver gifts, not always gold, but their crowns. One detail seems to differ: The Bible locates the birth to a stable, but in early Christian art it is depicted as a birth in a cave. The older tradition about the birth of the Saviour in a cave has been replaced by a stable. Syrian traditions of the Iranian story are the model for the Christian narrative about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but in early Christian art the Syrian cave has come back. That indicates that the original story is the Syrian version, according to Widengren.²⁸

8 The Dead Sea Scrolls

Widengren published his overview of the phenomenology of religion in 1945. In this publication he demonstrates the connection between earlier religions and Christianity. But there is at times a gap between the two, which Widengren tries to bridge over with general references to multiplicity in antique Judaism. Widengren's search for missing links between older religions and Christianity entails a permanent search for connections. His efforts and hopes were rewarded in 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

²⁷ Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 79f.

²⁸ Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 80–91.

For Widengren they must have been something of a Holy Grail. Thus, he was eager to communicate to the general public about the findings and he wrote several texts in Swedish daily papers on this topic and gave several talks on this matter on Swedish Radio (see Larsson's chapter in this volume). It was an important task to inform people about the completely new situation in the investigations about the origins of Christianity. In national Swedish tradition, Christianity had been regarded as something unique. Now it was discovered that it was a product of historical influences, just like all other religions in the world.

In the following I will describe Widengren's view of the relationship between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the origins of Christianity. The discussion of the issue has continued since the 1960-ties.²⁹ It is not my intention to treat the whole matter here, but only to demonstrate Widengren's ideas on this specific topic. Widengren published at least four lectures that were intended to be adult education about the origins of Christianity in *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*. All these texts start with the Dead Sea Scrolls and demonstrate the close connection between them and early Christianity.

The common title of the four chapters is "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of Christianity". When he wrote these texts, Widengren was convinced that the investigation about the origins of Christianity is in a completely new situation because of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He writes that the investigation of the scrolls has just started and has given rise to extensive research but "So much is nevertheless already evident, that these findings from the first century BC will be of sensational importance for the permanently enigmatic problem of the origins of Christianity."³⁰ It is obvious that he regarded the scrolls as a decisive contribution to a solution of the problem.

Regarding the deciphering the content of the scrolls, Widengren refers to the French scholar and specialist in the Semitic languages, André Dupont-Sommer (1900–1983) who had published his research in French in 1950 and 1953. The results of his investigations were published in English in *The Jewish sect of Qumran and the Essenes: New studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls* in 1954. Dupont-Sommer was a strong advocate of the connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Essenes and he was convinced that Christianity had its origin in the Essene movement.³¹ Widengren never calls his statements into question.

29 James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (London: SPCK, 1994), 159–162.

30 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 43 and 46.

31 VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 160.

However, Widengren uses the Essenes and the “Qumran sect” as equivalent concepts.³² He calls them a ‘sect’, but makes a reservation about the term ‘sect’:

We can without hesitation call them just ‘the sect of Qumran’ if we remember that they did not constitute a ‘sect’ in the way the word is used today, because Jewish religion in those days was a most varying phenomenon, in which many incompatible tendencies appeared.³³

On this point, Widengren takes the interdependence between Qumran and the Church for granted. It is easy to find similarities, although there might exist differences as well.³⁴

The Qumran scrolls confirm the multiplicity of antique Judaism which Widengren earlier had referred to in his search for connections between original Christianity and Middle Eastern religions. He emphasises the connection between the Damascus Documents, the Jubilees and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. They are all parts of a greater movement, the Essenes. In this regard, Widengren refers to scholars who have found so many similarities that it seems evident that this line of Jewishness developed into the Christian religion.³⁵

To demonstrate his argument, Widengren elaborates on some important scrolls, which confirm the connection between the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls. *The Damascus Document* is of special interest because this document was known since Solomon Schechter found two copies of the work in Cairo in 1896 and published them in 1910. The age of the scroll was unknown until a fragmentary manuscript of it was identified in cave 4 at Qumran. The fragment “dates from about 75–50 BC, thus demonstrating that the artifact, which had previously been known only from medieval copies, was indeed ancient.”³⁶

It was argued that the Qumran sect revered a Righteous Teacher, who was martyred after persecution from an evil religious leader with political power in Israel. The Righteous Teacher was a master and lawgiver and “you have a feeling of an almost divine position” according to Widengren.³⁷ The Righteous

32 Cf Amy-Jill Levine, “Visions of Kingdoms: From Pompey to the First Jewish Revolt,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. Edited by Coogan, Michael D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 367–369.

33 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 49.

34 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 45, 56.

35 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 43–45.

36 VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 56; Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 33–71.

37 Widengren *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 44. Cf Levine, “Visions of Kingdoms,” 373.

Teacher was “The Chosen One of God” and in agreement with all the mysteries and secrets of the prophets. He proclaimed that he had learnt these from “the mouth of God”. The foundation of this apotheosis is, however, Divine Kingship. He is credited with the same canonizing titles as the kings of Israel, in Widengren’s understanding.

Consequently, together with the disciples, the Righteous Teacher is venerated as the founder of a community, called the New Covenant. The members are obliged to fulfil a commandment in the Mosaic Law:

No-one should walk in the stubbornness of his heart in order to go astray following his heart and his eyes and the musings of his inclination. Instead he should circumcise in the Community the foreskin of his tendency and his stiff neck in order to lay foundation of truth for Israel, for the Community of the eternal covenant.³⁸

The charitable disposition of the quotation above is a matter of vital importance. The Righteous Teacher demands “the circumcision of the heart” as Widengren asserts.³⁹ This idea is also important in the first Christian congregation. It is evident from Stephen’s defence according to Acts where he calls the Jews “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (Acts 5: 51–53). It is also clear that Jews in antiquity discussed the true meaning of obedience to the law. Jesus demanded obedience to every precept (Mt 5: 19) but also, he rebuked those who had forgotten the most important message: “... but you have overlooked the weightier demands of the Law: justice, mercy and good faith” (Mt 23: 23).⁴⁰ The same ambiguity seems to have characterised the Qumran sect.

When the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are compared to the ethical principles of the Essenes, many similarities are evident, according to Widengren.⁴¹ He obviously is referring to the idea of saintly persons who renounce revenge and are convinced that evil thoughts are as sinful as an accomplished act (Mt 5: 21–48). The Dead Sea Scrolls contain many descriptions of good and evil people. Good people are faultless and these alone deserve to be called good. It is apparent that all members of the Qumran sect did not reach this level, since the forgiveness of sins is mentioned as the most valuable gift of God.⁴²

38 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 8.

39 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 44f.

40 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 57f.

41 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 48.

42 See for instance Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 3–9, 317–331.

In his analysis, Widengren also elaborates on the competition between light and darkness, the division between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, which characterises the Qumran sect in a Gnostic way.⁴³ These terms occur in older Christian literature and have created immense problems, since it had been difficult for scholars to trace their origins.⁴⁴ According to Widengren, the solution is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where it is written: "In the hand of the Prince of Light lies the dominion over the sons of justice; they walk on paths of light. And in the hand of the Angel of Darkness lies total dominion over the sons of deceit; they walk on the paths of darkness."⁴⁵

On this point, Widengren claims that the influence from Gnosticism has an eschatological meaning; in the last days the perfect *gnosis* will be infused into all the members of congregation. *The Rule of the Community* describes the coming judgement:

Until now the spirits of truth and of injustice feud in the heart of man and they walk in wisdom or folly. In agreement with man's birth right in justice and truth, so he abhors in injustice; and according to his share in the lot of injustice he acts irreverently in it and so abhors the truth. For God has sorted them into equal parts until the appointed end and the new creation.⁴⁶

Consequently, Widengren regards the struggle between light and darkness in the Dead Sea Scrolls as a spiritual antagonism between good and evil. Another similarity to early Christianity is a special kind of antagonism: It is not martial conflict as in contemporary society. The Qumran sect makes a distinction between loyalty to God and loyalty to the emperor in the same way as Jesus is said to have taught (Mt 22: 21).⁴⁷ Instead, the War Scroll describes a struggle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness.⁴⁸ Widengren regards the Gnostic language in the Gospel of John as the result of influences from the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴⁹

43 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 45. See PHEME PERKINS, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 159–162.

44 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 45f.

45 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 6.

46 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 7.

47 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 45.

48 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* 1994: 95–125, Levine, "Visions of Kingdoms," 368f.

49 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner* 1961: 48.

In his comparison between the Qumran sect and the first Christian congregations, Widengren recapitulates all the similarities which Dupont-Sommer had pointed out.

They both revere a Saviour, who had been sentenced to death and killed. The picture of Jesus in the Gospels is almost identical with the picture of the Teacher of Righteousness in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Both propagated poverty, humility, charity, penance, and ascetics. Jesus proclaimed obedience to the Law, but a variant of obedience based on his own revelations.⁵⁰

Consequently, Jesus was the Chosen One of God, the Saviour of the world. The Teacher of Righteousness will once again return to the world and judge the enemies of his congregation. According to early Christianity, Jesus is a living Lord, who resides with God and will return to judge Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Romans as divine punishment for the crucifixion of Jesus. His believers wait for that Day of Judgement with great expectation. They will enter Paradise when their enemies are defeated.⁵¹

They both have joint property and a leader or superintendent of the congregations, among Christians the bishop. The Teacher of Righteousness seems to have been a priest who lived during the last century BC and was deprived of his position about a century before the crucifixion of Christ, so Dupont-Sommer is convinced that the dependence is expressed in the Christian Church – and Widengren agrees without reservations with this conclusion.⁵²

In conformity with early Christianity (2 Cor 3: 6 and Hebr 8: 6), the members of the Qumran sect regarded themselves as members of a New Covenant. The belief in a New Covenant refers to Jeremiah's words: "The time is coming, says the LORD, when I will make a New Covenant with Israel and Judah" (Jer 31: 31).⁵³ According to Jeremiah the New Covenant shall be characterised by obedience, the forgiveness of sins and deeper knowledge about God. Both the Qumran sect and the Church emphasised these qualities, in Widengren's reading.⁵⁴

It is not an exaggeration to say that Widengren considered these claims of a New Covenant as sensational and fundamental. He is convinced that the idea of a New Covenant in Christianity is taken over from the Qumran sect. It did not appear in any other strain of Judaism. In early Jewish religion, it is important to remain loyal to the Old Covenant. The prophets had spoken about a

50 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 45f.

51 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 47.

52 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 45f.

53 About the idea of a New Covenant, see Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 229–232, 269–271, 370–376.

54 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 46.

New Covenant, but that would be established by God. It was a radical deviation from Jewish traditions to proclaim a New Covenant as the Essenes had done.⁵⁵

“The idea of the New Covenant, which is Jewish and thus the historical authorisation of Christianity, was taken over fully by Jesus from the Essenes.”⁵⁶ Jesus spoke of a New Covenant which is ordained in the same way as earlier in Israel. The Covenant should be confirmed by blood: “They said: ‘We will obey and do all that the Lord has said’. Moses then took the blood and flung over the people, saying: ‘This is the blood of the Covenant which the Lord has made with you on the terms of this book’” (Ex 24: 7–8). So, it is argued in early Christianity that the blood and the New Covenant are intertwined (Mk 14: 22–25).⁵⁷

Furthermore, the early Christians had also borrowed the initiation by baptism and a special meal from the Essenes. At this meal the priests have an essential role: They bless and distribute the gifts. In the Qumran sect the members are invited to a common meal with bread and wine under the leadership of a priest whose presence is indispensable: “And when they prepare the table to dine or the new wine for drinking, the priest will stretch out his hand as the first to bless the first fruits of the bread and the new wine.”⁵⁸ The connection between the Covenant and the Lord’s Supper in early Christianity is therefore obvious in the narrative about the foundation of the Lord’s Supper (Lk 22: 17–20).⁵⁹

That the Qumran sect had baptism as a rite of initiation and a common meal as central parts of the Covenant are evident proofs of dependence, according to Widengren.⁶⁰ The connection between baptism and Holy Spirit is also established in the Christian Church. The Holy Ghost was seen as a dove when Christ was baptised by John and Christian baptism is a way to allow a Christian to participate in communion with the Spirit. The divine trinity is also prefigured in the Damascus Document, where God, The Anointed One and the Holy Spirit constitute a trinity.⁶¹

The connection between the Essenes and the origin of Christianity is supported by old traditions within the Syrian Church, according to Widengren. In the Qumran sect most members practice celibacy. This was regarded as the proper way of life in the New Covenant. A group of Christians in Syria were

55 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 46.

56 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 46, 58–61, quotation from p. 46.

57 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 46, 58.

58 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 23.

59 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 58–60.

60 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 45f, 53, 59–61.

61 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 46f. et passim, Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 55f.

called “Sons of the Covenant”. They practised an isolated and ascetic way of life in celibacy. This Syrian Church demanded celibacy as a precondition for baptism and only baptised persons had access to the Lord’s Supper. These Christians in Syria lived in the same manner as the Essenes and obviously imitated them in their Christian life.⁶²

Yet another argument for the connection between the Essenes and Christianity is the concept of “teacher”, according to Widengren. The Greek word here is *didaskalos*.⁶³ Nicodemus says, according to the Gospel of John: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God” (John 3: 2). That is the only text in the Gospels where Jesus is called *didaskalos*. Jesus says that “you have one teacher, the Messiah” (Mt 23: 10). The Greek word there is *kathegetes*, which mainly means guide. The Hebrew equivalent is *morae* and Widengren concludes with a reference to Qumran: “Jesus has taken over this term as well as others from his unknown predecessor.”⁶⁴

When Jesus acts as a teacher he also takes up this duty and role of Messiah, according to Widengren. This is a heritage from the idea of Divine Kingship in Israel, where the king at his appointment received the Spirit of God. This consecration also transferred great wisdom, which made him prepared to interpret and preach the message of the Law. This happened repeatedly at the festival of New Year. This tradition was alive in the time of the first Christians. King Herod Agrippa II (dead AD 100) took part in the Jewish festivals (Acts 25: 23–27). He also gave a lecture on the Law at the festival of Tabernacles.⁶⁵

Widengren was convinced that the Qumran sect had an impact on the organisation and leadership of the earliest form of Christianity. The organisation of the Qumran congregation is closely described in the Rule of the Community.⁶⁶ On this point, Widengren refers to the decisions about different classes of members. They are organised in three classes, the priests, the Levites and the people “in thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens so that all the children of Israel may know their standing in God’s community in conformity with the eternal plan.”⁶⁷

This kind of organisation is also manifest in the Gospel of Mark in the narrative about Jesus and the crowds of people around him who miraculously were fed with five loaves and two fishes (Mk 6: 39–41). In this case, Widengren

62 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 60f.; Cf. F. Crawford Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1904) s 125–140.

63 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 48.

64 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 48.

65 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 57.

66 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 3–32.

67 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 5.

emphasised that the number of people is exact and identical with the members of the Qumran sect. The people is divided into groups of fifty, as in the Qumran sect, and there are hundreds of rows. The numbers hundred and fifty recur and the crowd is all together five thousand, so the number thousand also occurs. The whole story has an eschatological touch: The final meeting with Jesus is often described as a celestial meal. This indicates influence from the Essenes.⁶⁸

The connection between the Qumran sect and Christianity also appears when the Gospel of Mark uses the word “many” in the story about food for five thousand people. First: “For they had no leisure even to eat, so many were coming and going” (Mk 6: 31) and soon afterwards: “But many saw them leave and recognised them, and came round by land, hurrying from all the towns towards the place, and he arrived the first” (Mk 6: 33). It is obvious that “the many” refers to the congregation, which is organised according to firm principles. The author of Acts (5: 12–16) uses the term *plethos*, which is translated “multitudes” and expresses a reference to the Qumran sect.⁶⁹

The congregation is, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, called “the many” and the corresponding Hebrew word is *harabbim*. In the Gospels the term “the many” describes the people around Jesus. Widengren discusses here the idea of “many”, in Greek *hoi polloi*, and its relation to the New Covenant. According to the Bible, Jesus spoke about “the many” in connection with the New Covenant when he ordained the Lord’s Supper according to Mk 14: 24. Widengren argued that the word “many” is used here in the same way as in the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁷⁰

The prototype for Jesus’ community, the Qumran sect, had a common meal. Widengren refers to Lk 22: 20 and Paul, who has written that Jesus said: “In the same way, he took the cup after the supper, and said: ‘This cup is the New Covenant, sealed by my blood’” (2 Cor 11: 25) and to Matthew where it is written about Jesus that “he did not come to be served, but to serve and to give up his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20: 28). These words imply yet another connection with the Essenes, since the Hebrew equivalent of *hoi polloi* is used as the technical term for members of the Essenes.⁷¹

Another proof of the dependence between early Christianity and Qumran is the rules for rebuking members of the congregation. The Community Rule contains the instruction: “And in addition, no one should raise a matter against

68 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 50f.

69 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 51.

70 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 47.

71 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 47, VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 164f.

his fellow in front of the Many unless it is with reproof in the presence of witnesses.”⁷² According to the Gospels you should first rebuke the sinner in private and then in the presence of one or two others (Mt 18: 15–17). On this point Widengren maintains that the content is the same: “The correspondence is complete.”⁷³

Furthermore, the Gospel tells us that Jesus said a prayer in which he gave thanks to his Father for the wisdom which poor people had received (Mt 11: 25–27). It has been difficult to understand the prayer and the role of the narrative, but according to Widengren the Dead Sea Scrolls can give substantial help in explaining it. In the Qumran sect the same kind of hymns appear. The hymns which are used in the Qumran sect always start with a thanksgiving. It is probably the Teacher of Righteousness who speaks. He thanks God for insights into divine secrets.⁷⁴ He is also grateful for divine inspiration which helps him to act righteously:

I give you thanks, Lord, for the spirits you have placed in me.
I shall find the reply on my tongue to recount your acts of justice,
The patience of your judgements, the deeds of your mighty right hand.⁷⁵

It is obvious that knowledge is a precious gift from God, given through the Spirit: “... you have favoured me with the Spirit of knowledge so that I can love truth and justice.”⁷⁶ With the help of the Spirit the Teacher of Righteousness can judge and teach in a righteous way: “I have known, thanks to your insight, that in your kindness towards man you have enlarged his share with the spirit of your holiness. Thus, you make me approach your intelligence.”⁷⁷ He knows God’s secrets and God knows him: “I know that every spirit is fashioned by your hand, and all its travail you have established even before creating him.”⁷⁸ Widengren asserts that the narrative about Jesus in this way has a counterpart in the hymns of Qumran.⁷⁹

72 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 9, 31.

73 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 52.

74 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 317.

75 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 318.

76 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 322.

77 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 321.

78 Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 323.

79 Widengren, *Kungar, profeter och harlekiner*, 53–58.

9 Conclusions

Geo Widengren wrote many articles for daily newspapers and gave radio presentations about the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christianity. These endeavours show that he was intent on spreading advances in modern scholarship to the general public. Today the situation in scholarship has changed and scholars are not always convinced of the interdependence between the Qumran sect and Christianity in the same way as André Dupont-Sommer and Geo Widengren were, but the connection is still important. The relationship seems to be more complicated than scholars have earlier thought and the typologies and patterns suggested by earlier research have been put to question.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, it is clear that Widengren studied the results from leading scholars in the world, and was an important link in the development of humanistic scholarship in the field. It is obvious that he had been interested in the origins of Christianity a long time before he heard about the Dead Sea Scrolls. He was appointed professor of comparative religion seven years before the scrolls were discovered (i.e. in 1940) and seems to have been enthusiastic when he understood that they could offer a connecting link between Middle Eastern religions, the Essenes and the early Christian Church. As I have tried to show in this chapter, Widengren also wanted to inform a more general Swedish audience about the origins of early Christianity and tell them that it, according to modern scholarship, was an offspring from a branch of ancient Judaism.

To make an analogy: Widengren was contemporary with the philosopher Karl Popper (1902–1994), who dealt with natural science and demanded that a scientist should seek facts and circumstances which could overthrow a theory or hypothesis. That is the criterion of a serious scientist according to Popper.⁸¹ A theory can never be proven, he argues, but by the hardest possible attacks it could be corroborated or refuted. At this time, Albert Einstein (1879–1955) and physics were important for the general discussion about serious scholarship and the science of physics was the ideal.

In my analysis, Widengren was not eager to imitate natural science in this regard. But even though he was a scholar, he was perhaps not very interested in stricter scientific methodology. He looked for the facts which confirmed his standpoints and seems for that reason to be a bit biased in his scientific work. Everything had existed “before the Bible”. He left to scholars of later generations to test and try to overthrow his theories. Many of the results of his research

80 VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 162–185.

81 Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

have been impossible to contradict so far and have in that way been corroborated. Other parts of his scholarship have been attacked and overthrown, but these diversities have one common effect: Geo Widengren and his work is still alive and will be in comparative religion in the days and years to come.

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Tor Andræ and Geo Widengren: Perspectives and Purposes of the Study of the History of Religions

Jan Hjärpe

1 Introduction

In the early 1970ies it had become rather common to start a doctoral dissertation with a chapter on “Theory and Method”. Even shorter articles and essays included a paragraph on the theoretical presuppositions and the methodology with which the empirical data were analyzed. We can see no such chapter in any of the more than thirty doctoral dissertations presented under the tutorship of Geo Widengren. This is, for example, true for my thesis, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes sur les sabéens harraniens* (Hjärpe, 1972), as well as for Anders Hultgård’s thesis, *Croyances messianiques des Test: XII Patr. Critique textuelle et commentaire des passages messianiques* (Hultgård, 1971); both supervised by Widengren and regular participants in the higher seminar led by Widengren in the 1970s. From this point of view, it can be argued that those of us who were supervised by Widengren belong so to speak to the “last generation”. However, as shown by the contributors to this volume, the legacy of Widengren is still important for the history of religions as an academic discipline, not the least in the Nordic Countries. Furthermore, if we want to understand our current situation it is also vital to have an understanding of the past.

However, in the seminars lead by Widengren in the early 1970ies, we had some discussions on methodological questions mainly on source criticism in the use of historical texts. But I cannot remember that we ever discussed epistemological problems or the ultimate reason for the study of history of religion, the very purpose of our endeavor. Still it is possible to argue that the why and how questions were of great importance for Widengren.

Of course, we can find much on methodological questions in the polemics that Widengren had with colleagues (see, for example, Gothóni and Larsson’s chapter in this volume), but can we find his view on the choice of perspective and his view on the purpose of the study of religion? My idea here is to detect his views in these respects of the scholarly work by a comparison with his, much appreciated, teacher and tutor, Tor Andræ (1885–1947). Two of

Widengren's works are here of special interest: his biography of Andræ¹ from 1947 and especially his rather radical revision and remaking (1950, 1967) of Andræ's influential and internationally renowned biography of the prophet Muhammad, from 1930.² In the first one we can look for what he finds important and valuable in Andræ's work as a historian of religions, and where his own position differs. In his revision of the biography of the prophet we can note what he has reformulated, omitted and what he has added to the text. By this procedure the aim of my chapter is to highlight both similarities as well as disruptions and breaks between the 'master' (Andræ) and the 'student' (Widengren). This comparison will also show that Widengren's approach to the history of religions is different from his Swedish predecessors, Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) and Tor Andræ. While both Söderblom and Andræ were thorough scholars, they were also influenced by their Christian beliefs. As I will argue in this chapter, for Widengren it was essential to make a sharp distinction between personal beliefs and the academic study of religions.

2 The Influence from Tor Andræ

Andræ's academic carrier started with his dissertation *Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glauben Seiner Gemeinde*.³ It had a remarkable impact on the debate on the early Islamic historiography. His research focused on the development of the Muslim concept of the personality of the Prophet. Another field for his research was the early Sufism. He also worked with the psychological phenomena of religious life. This resulted in the huge monograph *Mystikens psykologi*.⁴ Andræ was professor first in Stockholm and later in Uppsala, but he was also a renowned essayist and in this capacity, he became a member of the Swedish Academy. During his last years he was a bishop in the Church of Sweden (in the diocese of Linköping).

Widengren had Andræ as his teacher and tutor when he initiated his studies in the history of religions first at Stockholm Högskola and later at Uppsala University where Andræ was professor of *Theological praenotations and theological encyclopaedia* (which included general history of religions) from 1929

1 Geo Widengren, *Tor Andræ* (Uppsala: J.A. Lindblads förlag, 1947).

2 Tor Andræ, *Muhammed, hans liv och hans tro* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1930).

3 Tor Andræ, *Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glauben Seiner Gemeinde* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt och söner, 1918).

4 Tor Andræ, *Mystikens psykologi* (Stockholm: Verbum, 1926, 1968).

to 1936. Widengren became his successor, appointed in 1940 and remaining on this chair until his retirement in 1973. But the chair had now a different designation: History and psychology of religion. This meant a change as to its content and scope too. It became less “theological”. Previously it had included apologetics, the defense of the Christian religion, and definitely the theological reflection on the phenomenon of human religiosity as seen in the general history of religions – especially so when Nathan Söderblom, the teacher and tutor of Tor Andræ, had occupied the chair.

In his biography of Andræ, Widengren notes this trait in his attitude to the study:

It is peculiar that he – as well as the previous generation [of scholars] seemed to expect that the work in history of religion in itself should exert [quote:] ‘a profound influence on the most important [sic!] field of our spiritual culture: the present existing [i.e. Christian] religion.’⁵

It is obvious that Widengren did not agree. For Widengren, it was Andræ’s opinion that was “peculiar” and had to change. Widengren also found it odd that Andræ in his higher theological studies had not chosen the field of Old Testament exegesis (as Widengren did), but beside History of religion, the fields of Dogmatics and Ethics.⁶ However, Widengren notices, that Andræ did not follow Söderblom’s favorite ideas on the possibility to develop a “theology of Religions,” the history of religion (the human religiosity) constituting “God’s self-revelation” to humanity.⁷

While Widengren noticed that Söderblom had used the study of history of religions for apologetical purposes, Andræ made a clear distinction between his work as a historian of religion and his task as a Christian theologian.⁸ At least Widengren conceives his standpoint in that way: a distinction between the scientific work’s endeavor to reach objectivity, and the believer’s intellectual reflection on the results of the study. However, as I will show in the next section it was difficult for Andræ to uphold this division and the boundary between the academic study and his personal beliefs could be blurred. For

⁵ Widengren, *Tor*, 124.

⁶ Widengren, *Tor*, 103f.

⁷ Widengren, *Tor*, 91. Cf. Jan Hjärpe, “Theology on Religions: Nathan Söderblom and the Religious Language,” in *The Relevance of Theology: Nathan Söderblom and the Development of an Academic Discipline*. Edited by Carl R. Bräkenhielm and Gunhild Winqvist Hollman. (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2002).

⁸ Widengren, *Tor*, 262.

Widengren, this was not a unique problem for Andræ, later in his career he raised a similar critique against his close friend, Claas Jouco Bleeker (1898–1983) and the influential Dutch scholar, Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950). Both Bleeker and van der Leeuw played an important role for the establishment of the International Association for the Study of the History of Religions and the journal *NVMEN* (see Fujiwara and Jensen's chapter in this volume).

However, let me return to Widengren and his relation to Andræ. As indicated in the biography on Andræ, Widengren points out the importance of Andræ's studies in History of Literature as a young student. According to Widengren, Andræ "learned scientific method" (p. 83, 87) from his teacher, Henrik Schüek (1855–1947), who was professor in history of literature at Uppsala university. Widengren asserts that Andræ admired "his ability to combine broadmindedness in the study of ideas with a very vivid realistic comprehension of personalities and historical situations."⁹ And of course, Widengren appreciates Andræ's ability as a philologist and his historical view on the biblical texts, and his careful use and analyses of the sources.¹⁰

As an example, Widengren mentions that his interest in Gnosticism was a result of lectures given by Andræ¹¹ (on Widengren's study of Gnosticism, see Thomassen's chapter in this volume), and that Andræ was his predecessor in criticizing the evolutionistic pattern in the history of religion.¹² Widengren makes here a comment which clarifies his own position with consequences for his work. Instead of comparing things from a presupposed evolutionary pattern:

... one ought to follow the natural chronological course: First to study the oldest [written] witnesses [i. e. the texts] and then go to the later records in order to demonstrate how the ritual successively becomes a popular custom.¹³

The quotation above can here serve as an indication of how important Andræ was for Widengren and his academic study of religions. However, to illustrate that there were fundamental differences between Widengren and Andræ I now turn to the revision of Andræ's Muhammad biography.

9 Widengren, *Tor*, 84.

10 Cf., for instance, Widengren, *Tor*, 76, 88, 104 and 318.

11 Widengren, *Tor*, 147.

12 Widengren, *Tor*, 149, 264. Cf., for instance, Góthoni and Larsson's chapter in this volume.

13 Widengren, *Tor*, 326.

3 The Revision of Andræ's Muhammad Biography

Even though Widengren was influenced by Andræ, it is also possible to find substantial differences between the master and the student. One case in point is Widengren's revision of Andræ's biography of the prophet Muhammad that was published in 1930 and later translated into several languages. Widengren revised it very thoroughly for a new Swedish edition in 1950 followed by a new revision for the 1967 paperback edition. Once, in a conversation I had with Widengren during his last years he told me that he very reluctantly accepted to make these new editions as he had preferred to write an entirely new book on the prophet Muhammad, but conceded to the explicit wish expressed by Andræ's widow for a new edition of her husband's work.

The result of the revision was a very different book as compared with the original. In that way a careful comparison in detail between the two, the 1930 version and (especially) that of 1967, reveals rather strikingly Widengren's tendencies as to methods and theoretical outlook. Already an addition to the foreword is a clear declaration:

However, the scientific study of Islam has liberated itself from still clinging to Christian valuations and has seriously strived for a purely historical understanding of Islam; a totally different attitude than before has become predominant. The endeavor is nowadays not to compare and valuate but to clarify and understand.¹⁴

In the first chapter, on Arabia in the time of Muhammad, Widengren expands considerably the description of Roman, Byzantine and Iranian influences in Arabia,¹⁵ the small Arabic states in history, the war techniques, and the notices on local cults. A typical trait in these and in other additions throughout in the book is the search for the "historical background", the influences and the continuation from earlier cultures. There must be a historical link, otherwise the comparison is not relevant, argues Widengren. A clear example is when Andræ compares the cult of the "radiant queen of heaven [al-'Uzza]" and the cult of St. Mary in the Mediterranean regions,¹⁶ Widengren cuts it out.¹⁷ The reason is that Andræ saw an interesting similarity in the phenomena of popular

14 Tor Andræ and Geo Widengren, *Muhammed. Hans liv och hans tro* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1967), 7.

15 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 12ff.

16 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 29.

17 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 49f.

religion, but Widengren asks for a documented influence, a historical connection between the two.

While Widengren inserts a notice on the influence of South Arabian terminology on the vocabulary of the Qur'an,¹⁸ he takes away Andræ's reasoning on the evolution of a "higher concept of God."¹⁹ This omission is most likely explained by the fact that Andræ has here references to the evolutionary pattern which Widengren of course cannot accept. For Widengren, the supposed evolution from "primitive" forms of belief into successively higher forms could not be proved by textual evidences.

Whereas Andræ frequently makes comparisons with ideas and cults from the long history of religions including contemporary spirituality and religious experience, Widengren searches for (and demand) historical connections, influences from historical times preceding – in this case – the time of the prophet. While Andræ has the perspective of psychology of religion, Widengren stresses the aspect of historical connections. When, for instance, Andræ describes the pessimistic outlook on religion by pre-Islamic poets, Widengren wants to explain this attitude as an influence from Persian Wisdom literature.²⁰

In the second chapter (on Muhammad's childhood until his vocation) Widengren of course changes Andræ's words "Our oldest gospel"²¹ to "The gospel of Mark"²² and he takes away Andræ's comparison between the stories on Muhammad's birth and the Christian Bethlehem story and the legend of the birth of Buddha.²³ This is a case of "comparative religion", something which Widengren uses to criticize. He also takes away Andræ's rendering of the legend of the angels opening the breast of the young Muhammad, evidently because Andræ compares it with "what Australian sorcerers tell us",²⁴ and he changes Andræ's formulation "This is valid already as to primitive seers and prophets"²⁵ to: "This is valid already as to seers and prophets among the illiterate peoples."²⁶

18 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 56.

19 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 37f.

20 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 57.

21 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 44.

22 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 58.

23 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 48.

24 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 51.

25 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 59.

26 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 67. Cf. Andræ, *Muhammed*, 79, 122. See also Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 80, 107.

The difference in perspective (psychological-historical influences) can we see clearly as Widengren excludes Andræ's comparison of the corporeal symptoms of Muhammad's prophetic inspiration with similar accounts of prophetic and poetic-literary inspiration, with the corporeal symptoms in the audiences of revival preaching in the 19th century, and the relation given by Theresa (of Avila).²⁷ Likewise, he omits Andræ's comparison with the poets "Milton and Bousset"²⁸ (i.e. John Milton, 1608–1684, but which "Bousset" Andræ alludes to is obscure).²⁹ And he changes "heathen *kahin*" to "Arabic *kahin*". And of course, he takes away Andræ's comparison between Muhammad and the Old Testament prophet Amos with Martin Luther (1483–1546).³⁰ And he mitigates Andræ's *interpretatio christiana* when he points out that Muhammad had ideas which were similar to the thoughts of "Many of the greatest geniuses of belief: Paul, Luther, Calvin."³¹ This becomes in Widengren's version: "Many of the foremost religious personalities have had similar thoughts."³² Andræ mentions a "trait in his [Muhammad's] concept of God, which usually has been severely estimated negatively by the occidental critique."³³ This Widengren changes into: "... which really has been little understood by some occidental researchers with a Christian basic outlook."³⁴

A section where Andræ compare Muhammad with not only the prophets in Ancient Israel, but also with examples from Nordic and Greek religion,³⁵ Widengren takes away, but still sees Muhammad in the line of influences and continuity with the Old Testament prophets; not "comparative religion", but influences, or remaining patterns.

Widengren modifies Andræ's terminology: "Primitive ethics" to "Natural ethics", "highly developed religions" to "some higher cultures' religions", "Parsism" and "Mazdaism" to "Zoroastrianism", "pagan peoples" to "Oriental peoples", "Persian mythology" to "Iranian theologoumena", "pagan worldview" to "Oriental-Hellenistic worldview", and of course "Muhammadan" to "Muslim".

Widengren amplifies the section on the development of rituals and sanctuaries, and prayers and expressions in Islamic liturgies under Christian and

27 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 61f.

28 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 73. Cf. Andræ, *Muhammed*, 69.

29 Perhaps it is a miswriting for Bossuet, i.e. Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704).

30 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 70f.

31 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 84.

32 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 83.

33 Andræ, 87.

34 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 85.

35 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 92f.

Jewish influences,³⁶ sometimes in a chain, and points out: “Here the Syrian church has taken over formulations from the Gnostic vocabulary having a long history behind itself.”³⁷ He underlines the role of gnostic influences, “especially the Manichaean eschatology”.

He modifies with an extensive addition Andræ’s use of the (according to Widengren legendary) story of Quss ibn Saïda.³⁸ This addition rather underlines Andræ’s point: the Syrian influences behind the “homiletic patterns” in the Qur’an.

Again we can see that Widengren has added to the text of Andræ a number of notes on possible influences from Iranian religion and from Mani, the importance of the in the 1930s recovered Coptic Manichaean texts, and assumes that the Manichaeism in (the Arab kingdom of) Hira might have had influence in Mekka (on Widengren and the study of Manichaeism, see Chiara Tommasi’s chapter in this volume).³⁹

And of course, he omits Andræ’s comparison with “the theosophical preaching”⁴⁰ – a comparison not having the purpose of showing an influence and thus against Widengren’s view on the purpose of the research. This becomes very clear when we see the very long addition – fifteen pages – which Widengren makes on the narrative of Umayya bin Abi Salt, whose religious vocabulary is close to that of the Qur’an, showing the evident Jewish and Christian influences on Muhammad as well as on the “rival prophet” Maslama (Musaylima).⁴¹ In this addition we find too another favorite theme: the explanation of the term *rasul*, “apostle”, the Syrian *schelicha*. The Messenger sent by God. Widengren traces (as we could well expect) this pattern belonging to the concept of the divine kingship back to the very oldest sources in Sumeric times via ancient Iran, the Mandaean religion, the vocabulary of Gnosticism – and the Church fathers.⁴² That is: the main theme in the whole religious history of the Near East as seen by Widengren.⁴³

Even the Ascension of the Prophet (the stories built on Sura 17:1) is interpreted by help of this pattern,⁴⁴ this characteristic theme of the sacred or

36 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 96ff.

37 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 102.

38 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 105.

39 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 113ff, 116. Cf. Andræ, *Muhammed*, 124ff.

40 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 135. Cf. Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 117.

41 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 122–136.

42 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 125.

43 Cf. Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Walter de Gruyter & Co, Berlin 1969), 360–393.

44 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 130.

divine kingship which Widengren finds reflected in the whole corpus of ancient texts. These fifteen pages are thus a kind of summary of this favorite theme of his and they prepare the reader for his conclusion in the very last chapter, substituting that of Andræ.

Furthermore, Widengren omits a rather amusing story on how Umar ibn al-Khattab frightened the devil, which story Andræ renders – to show how Umar’s austere nature was seen in the popular tradition, ending in Andræ’s estimation of his noble and honest character which Widengren substitute with a note on his political competence and achievements.⁴⁵

Chapter VI (The ruler in Medina) discusses at first the robberies made by the early Muslim community on the caravans on their way to Mekka. Andræ starts with these words: “It is a little disheartening for us rather eager to show fairness to Muhammad as an ethical and religious personality, to point out that ...”.⁴⁶ However, Widengren has no interest in the moral estimation. The following words is enough: “It is not astonishing that ...”.⁴⁷ But *we* are perhaps a little astonished that Widengren retains what Andræ says on Muhammad’s acts and personality: It differs from “the idea of manliness of the Nordic race”.⁴⁸

The relation of the battle of Uhud, becomes much longer in Widengren’s text. For instance, Widengren gives many more details on military techniques and customs “following age-old Semitic warrior tradition.”⁴⁹ So, he extends the story of Banu Quraiza’s fate and the story of the siege of Taif with a note on the martial machinery used.⁵⁰ This addition could maybe be explained by Widengren’s military background (see Larsson’s chapter in this volume).

In Chapter VII, on Muhammad’s personality, Widengren takes away the ethical estimation that Andræ makes on the matrimonial affairs of the prophet: “It does not astonish us that the sexual morality was on a very low level.”⁵¹ There should be no moralizing in a scientific work, argues Widengren. And again, comparisons between entities not having historical connections – influences – are not regarded as relevant: Widengren omits Andræ’s hint on similarities between the personality of Muhammad and that of the British socialist and theosophist, Annie Besant (1847–1933).⁵² And of course, Widengren deletes Andræ’s concluding remarks and comparison between Muhammad and “the

45 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 162ff, 165. Cf. Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 150f.

46 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 176.

47 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 157.

48 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 169. Cf. Andræ, *Muhammed*, 180.

49 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 166f. Cf. Andræ, *Muhammed*, 189.

50 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 170ff, 182. Cf. Andræ, *Muhammed*, 195, 210.

51 Andræ, *Muhammed*, 236. Cf. Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 197f.

52 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 197.

unattained, sublime figure that meets us in the Gospel.” Instead Widengren adds more than a page characterizing Muhammad as “politician, military commander and above all [sic] a ruler of the usual Near Eastern type”,⁵³ founder of a world religion, and:

[T]he last great example of the sacred kingship in the Near East, a nationally distinctive representation of an age-old ideal for a ruler.⁵⁴

Continuing on this topic, Widengren stresses that Muhammad is:

Likewise, as a genuine oriental king, he performs in one person all the function as a prophet, legislator, leader of the cult, chief justice, military commander, and head of state.⁵⁵

Widengren’s profile as a historian of religion appears in this comparison with his teacher, tutor and predecessor. There is a difference between them as to what kind of reader they expect. Andræ sees his audience as more or less Christian, the very concept of religion and of ethics have Christian connotations. For Widengren, it is important to avoid moral estimations with these connotations and sees his readers, regardless of religious belonging, a more secular audience, an orientation on what he sees as important patterns, among them especially the idea of persistent pattern of a Near Eastern divine kingship.

4 Conclusions

For Andræ the ultimate purpose and reason for the study is to be of value for the contemporary living religion, i.e. the religiosity in the Christian community and the reflection on human religiosity in general. Widengren does not see this as a main purpose (even if he does not exclude the possibility) but certainly wants to promote a sense of historical awareness and of source criticism.

A peculiarity in Widengren’s attitude is to regard the understanding of the meaning of a text in explaining the “historical background” of its terminology and content: to look for the influences behind it. History of religion as looking backwards, to the past. “To clarify and understand” means: to see the influences behind. For Andræ the point is the function of the texts, their sense for

53 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 202.

54 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 201.

55 Andræ and Widengren, *Muhammed*, 202.

the first audience, in this case the prophet's companions, and in what ways all this conveys a knowledge with relevance for the general concept of human religiosity.

For us nowadays, I would say, the main purpose of our study is to focus on the contemporary function and meaning with the idea that our studies might have "prognostic value", to contribute material for decisions, even political decisions. That thought is absent in Widengren's attitude to the work, but is perhaps not so strange for Andræ's endeavor – as we can conclude from his, even if short, engagement as a politician and government minister (Andræ served a short stint as minister of Ecclesiastic (and educational) affairs in 1936). As we can see in Widengren's Andræ biography, his predecessor's political interest surprised him.⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ Widengren, *Andræ*, 21f.

Africa and America Revisited: A Critical Analysis of Widengren's Comparative Method

Daniel Andersson

1 Introduction

In his search for the origin of religion, Widengren, as is well established, proposed the idea of the high god, a pan-human pantheistic phenomena that is allegedly the foundation of other, more recent, forms of religion. He traces and comparatively describes this type of religious thoughts – together with ideas of an original pantheism, polytheistic developments, monotheism – from, a broad range of known religions including Gnostic thoughts, Pharaonic Egypt, Accadian sources, Iran, India etc. His extensive working material is also collected from Africa and America. He states that even if many societies share a belief in multiple lesser gods (polytheism) as well as in a high god there are differences within each religion.¹ Different images of the same gods can occur within one and the same religious complex. Consequently, one mystic may hold a particular view of god while his counterpart, in the same church, embraces a completely different view. This is an accurate and very evident observation made by Widengren. Monotheism and polytheism may show different faces, a non-essentialist approach.

In this chapter, I will analyse how the Widengren thesis regarding the problem of the high god is applicable on the traditional African and the pre-colonial American scene respectively. As a start, we have to observe that words, *traditional*, *ancient*, *inherited* are never properly and clearly defined by Widengren. These somewhat vague concepts – *original*, *traditional* – must also – be linked with the concepts of *pre-colonial*, *indigenous* and *cultural*. Many contemporary indigenous peoples talk about the pre-colonial past in terms of *traditional* life.² The Latin word *traditio* means something like “submitting” – referring to the heritage transferred from one generation to the

1 Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1945/1971), 23.

2 Daniel Andersson, *Ursprungsfolkens religioner* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2019), 35; Arnold Krupat (ed.), *Native American Autobiography. An Anthology* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 19.

next. Here tradition, culture and religions naturally blend. If we lack written sources from pre-colonial times or sources from the indigenous people (as in most cases regarding Africa and America) the only thing left to study is the oral traditions, that is culture seen through the lens of a colonial discourse.

2 The High God

The high god is, according to Widengren, an original (that is primary and indigenous, not tainted with any other form of cultural impact) form of religion. The idea of a high god is about a form of heavenly deity that rises above its surroundings in such a manner that it is possible to talk about a primordial pantheism or monotheism: lesser gods and entities are subsequently cleaved from this one god.³ We have to note that the belief in a high god in itself is not necessarily monotheism, although Widengren often seems to think it is, to that extent that the “Hochgottglaube” often is extended into “polytheistisch” beliefs.⁴ The high god may be worshipped under different names – for example the Highest Entity (in Swedish: *det Högsta Väsendet*),⁵ or the Great God. This high god is manifested in thunder, lightning, rain, fertility, and in periods of drought and in the overall human belief in destiny and fate. The high god is the one who awards good fate or bad fate – sickness, death, prosperity – whereby the human belief in the high god is divided into mythical ideas about good and bad gods or goddesses. The high gods meet us in ancient Egypt – Horus or Atum – as well as in Islamic Egypt – Allah.⁶ The high god is El or Baal among the Semites. He (Widengren does not explicitly states that the God is exclusively male, but he seems to presuppose that) is Mithra, Ahura Mazda, Zervan and Vayu in Indo-European societies. In ancient India the high god is represented by Varuna and Indra. Among the Greeks his name is Zeus and in Italy (what Widengren exactly means by *Italy* is not clear) the name is Jupiter.⁷ In Mandaean literature the highgod (spelled like that) is connected with the

3 See Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1969), 113.

4 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 113–114.

5 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 24. The term *Högsta väsendet* (The Highest Entity) is also used by Pater Wilhelm Schmidt, in his short lectures on religion among the indigenous peoples, see Wilhelm Schmidt, *Religionen hos urkulturens folk* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrrelsens förlag, 1936), 25–27.

6 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 24–25.

7 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 34–35.

heavenly investiture of the young god who is about to descend to Earth.⁸ The high god (spelled like that) puts his hand upon his son, crowns him, transfers his knowledge to him and “gives him two names, expressing the close connection between himself and his son”.⁹

Among the Nordic people, Odin and Tor appear as the most evident forms of the high god. The Iranian King is also a god, a god that may have been incarnated in emperors like Darius I.¹⁰ Such statements by Widengren are not always accompanied by careful exegesis and historical reading (despite the fact that he masters a variety of languages) and consequently it is often hard to follow the executions of his comparisons. As background sources he mentions texts, murals, grave art and icons. But he does not give a thorough description of how these disparate sources are compared. The particular *name* of a god may be one thing to compare and study, but the shifting functions between the gods in different texts or in oral traditions are rarely problematized. The various tribe orientated societies he superficially mentions are overall polytheistic with a multitude of gods presiding over different realms and with their functions often nature orientated. How does – in reality – the exclusive high god relate to the pantheon of other gods?

In his surveys there is a palpable tension between the proliferation of details from, for example, contemporary (not *pre-colonial* or *traditional* or *pre-historic*) African ethnographic material and a frustrating lack of theoretical discussion regarding how to interpret that material, in the search for both oral and written sources that confirm the thesis of the high god.¹¹ Widengren’s axiomatic and essentialist (in the way he sometimes seems to think that religious systems are clear cut, boxed entities that can be analysed as locked systems) reading of human history gives us lengthy descriptions of the African – and to a lesser extent the American – material. My aim here is to describe and critically discuss how Widengren made use of material from these two continents to support his idea of a high god. By doing so I will demonstrate both the advantages, problems and errors in Widengren’s comparative approach.

8 Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets årsskrift, 1950:7), 60–61.

9 Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle*, 61.

10 Geo Widengren, *Kungar, präster och harlekiner* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1961), 94.

11 For a critical discussion, see Göran Larsson, “It’s Not mana, It’s High Gods! Another Conceptual History or Another Explanation, but a Similar Problem,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 2019.

3 The African Scene and the High God

After publishing his first monographs, Widengren became inspired to synthesize the philological, historical, archaeological, and ethnological studies pertinent to the Middle East and in the Eastern parts of Afghanistan¹² using the phenomenological method – involving description, arrangement, interpretation and typology of historical data – that he applied in his *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* (1938) and the treatise *Religionens värld* (1945/1971). A German translation of this work was also published in 1969 and in 1976 the book was translated into Spanish and in 1984 a translation to Italian was published. He attempted to establish that Iranian beliefs corresponded with those of indigenous or even pre-historic African peoples in striking ways. This typological concordance allowed the conclusion that the high gods of Africa were not the result of missionary influences but represented an ancient inherited tradition. Widengren is sceptical to the overall idea that African peoples share a same original form of high god religion, because in many cases they have borrowed the language from the neighbours – and if the original language is lost, then – Widengren seems to think – the original idea of God is also lost. Here he may be partially correct, I would think, although he never explains what an “ancient” inherited tradition is.

Widengren gives us a conclusive typology this *Hauptmotiv* (main motive) of the high god: He is Heaven (the very word for God is sometimes, not always, Heaven)¹³ or the Atmosphere.¹⁴ The sun is (also, but not always) God. The Moon is God.¹⁵ Variations of different celestial phenomena – like the rainbow – can be venerated as God. The same ethnical group may venerate different Heaven Gods. Furthermore, Widengren claims that the High God is both evil and good.¹⁶ To these typologies are added more general characteristics. For example, tribes like the Liberian *Kpelle* venerates the visible heaven along with the spirits who intermediate between humans and the gods,¹⁷ while the god of destiny, *Ngai*, is venerated by the *Masai* and the *Kikuyu* in Eastern Africa. Among the *Lamba* the high god is synonymous with heaven and the same

12 See Widengren, *Kungar, präster och harlekiner*, 105–107.

13 Geo Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran. Eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung* (Uppsala/ Leipzig: Uppsala Universitets årsskrift, 1938), 70.

14 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 38.

15 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 46.

16 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, 77.

17 Ruth M. Stone, “Bringing the Extraordinary into the Ordinary: Music Performance among the Kpelle of Liberia,” in *Religion in Africa*, ed. Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek & Dennis, L. (London: James Currey, 1994), 389.

may be said for *Shilluk* and their god Jwok. God is the Architect, the Arbitrator, the Father, the Mother. God is the keeper, the shepherd, the guardian, the protector. God is gracious and white (like the snow of Kilimanjaro or Mount Kenya). He is holy, like the wind or the weather, everywhere present, according to Widengren.¹⁸ The concept of holiness is not defined when it comes to the African exegesis, but Widengren's depictions are in line with both older and more recent research. A common, albeit simplified, image of God as Creator is to see him as a creator who makes out of clay or nothing, *ex nihilo*.¹⁹ The attributes of the Supreme God can also be "he who thunders", "he who gives sun and rain", "father of the children", "he whom man leaned against not to fall".

4 The High God in the Americas

The discussion in the previous section may be broadened with an analysis of how Widengren treats the American region. I rather parenthetically mention this because in the American case we *do* have a lot of pictographic and written indigenous pre-colonial sources accompanying the material from the 16th and 17th century Spanish Chroniclers. The fact that we have a lot of written material from parts of America, is not noted or commented on by Widengren. He seems to think that the indigenous texts that derive from America belong to an *exclusive* oral tradition and, therefore, may be interpreted in the same manner as he interprets the material from Africa.

A small example will do: In a short passage in *Religionens värld*, Widengren states that among the Aztec people (supposedly before the conquest in 1519–1521) the omnipotent high god was the only *true* God.²⁰ Widengren does not provide us with a name in this case, which of course would have made it easier to control his statement. Furthermore, this omnipotent god was both Father and Mother and he showed himself as both man and woman. In the creation the deity was not present but left the action to the gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca – emanations or sons or emissaries of the true god. Widengren adds that among contemporary Indian tribes in North America the androgyne character of the creating omnipotent high god is likewise present.²¹ Among the Iroques, though, we instead find a polarity between – if we understand

18 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, 72–74.

19 J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), 39.

20 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 43.

21 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 43.

Widengren correctly – the god Haweniyo and the Devil Hanimseono. Behind these two entities dwell two ancient, older, twingods, Widengren claims.²² The god Hanimseono is impossible to find in any extant sources, so perhaps Widengren is mistaken. The emic designation some Iroquois tribes give themselves is Haudenosaunee, a word similar to the name of the god given by Widengren. Where he has collected the name Hanimseono is unclear in the written material I have at my disposal.

Suffice to say on this brief description of Widengren's thoughts on America is that we have no indigenous written (no pictographic writing) or archaeological sources to support his theory on a high god and a vague primordial monotheism from the Aztec or the Northern American regions. There is no sculpture art, no burial rituals, no monumental architecture or written source material to support the idea that Tezcatlipoca should have been an androgyne god. Contrarily, there is evidence that the religions accounted for by the first Spaniards who arrived in 1519 are described as polytheistic, dynamic, vivid and hard to grasp.²³

For example, the commander Hernando Cortés (1485–1547), as well as his writer Bernal del Castillo (1495/1496–1584), tell that in 1519, when entering Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards noted how aesthetically perfect the architecture was and how large and grand the city was. They walked the steps up to the top of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli's temple and marvelled at the views of the valley.²⁴ But when they were invited by the emperor to the upper floors of the temple, they did not know what awaited them. In a chamber at the top of the temple they met the sacrificial priests where the walls were splattered with the blood and flesh of the recently sacrificed. Here also, the statues of many gods grinned at the newcomers. Bernal Diaz del Castillo who recorded his memories of this experience several decades later provides a fairly straight forward account of this Spanish campaign under Cortez. Due to the emotional impact of being exposed to the sacrificial slaughter house one may suppose that even after forty years del Castillo likely suffered near total recall when he wrote his depiction of the temple and the multitude of gods and goddesses

22 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 43.

23 See J. Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl et Guadalupe. Eschatologie et histoire au Mexique 1521–1821* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne, 1971); M. Miller & K. Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993) and J.M.D. Pohl, *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer. An Epic of Ancient Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

24 Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*. Introducción y notas de Joaquín Ramírez Cabañas (México D F: Editorial Porrúa, 2004), 143, 175, cap. XCII.

venerated there. The fear the Spaniards likely experienced when exposed to the astonishing aftermath of the human sacrificial violence that permeated the Aztec polytheistic cult likely made the scene impossible to forget.²⁵

Here we leave Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Fact is that nothing in his writings or in the subsequent information given by writers in the Spanish colony contradicts these first descriptions of a polytheistic culture on the verge of transitioning to Catholicism. We may therefore assume that the idea of one high god was never present among the Aztec and the neighbouring tribes.

To really point out this fact, we can return to the 16th century New Spain. In the year of 1566 – some forty years after Cortés and the Spanish Allies overthrew the Aztec Empire – the bishop of the Yucatan Peninsula, Diego de Landa (1524–1579), completed the book that came to be known as the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*. The book was one of the first to document and account for the pyramids, observatories, pillar halls and ball fields that every tourist in today's Mayan area can view. It was also the first European book that, as far as is known, contained drawings of ruins and buildings as well as depictions of Mayan imagery and the polytheistic world in which the Mayan lived. Diego de Landa learned several Mayan languages and was in charge of the monastery of Izamal in the province of Ahkinchel, the centre of worship of the goddess Itzamna, whose sanctuary impressed him.²⁶ His reaction to what he saw of the ancient relics and the domestic cult caused him anger and initiated his years of wandering across the peninsula, armed with his cross, his faith, and his language skills. In Chiapas and Guatemala, in the 16th century, the Spaniards engaged in two parallel deeds: they carefully studied the various gods, rituals, myths, and beliefs of the Mayan culture, while at the same time burning shrines and destroying manuscripts and places of pilgrimage. The most famous autodafe took place in Mani – since the 15th century the home of the Mayan T'utul X'ui dynasty – in 1562, when the Landa burned a number of people, over five thousand idols and a variety of manuscripts.²⁷ The aim was to erase the indigenous *polytheism*, nothing else.

Let us now revisit *Religionens värld* and Widengren's mentioning of human sacrifice, performed in the 16th century by the Aztec in Mexico and by the *Pawnee* in the 1830:s. He states that among the *Pawnee* (who roamed in the present states of Kansas and Nebraska) a fifteen year old girl was sacrificed

25 Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 174, cap. XCII.

26 Fray Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán. Estudios preliminares cronología y revisión del texto de 1566* María Carmen León Cázeres (México D F: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994), 1–20.

27 Bodil Liljefors-Persson, *The Legacy of the Jaguar Prophet. An exploration of Yucatec Maya religion and historiography* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 2000), 62.

at a festival held the 22nd of April each year.²⁸ An elaborated and lengthy ritual that lasted several days ended with the High priest tearing out her heart and throwing it away while the rest of the body was cut into pieces and put in baskets.²⁹

This ritual has for many decades been notoriously depicted and analysed by scholars from various fields of interest. For making a long story short: Widengren ought to have had access to the field material regarding this ritual, if not his interpretation makes no sense. Surprisingly though, the ritual was not performed in the way he says, not every year and certainly not when it comes to cutting up the dead girl's body.³⁰ It was a sacrificial ritual performed only in years when Mars was the morning star. The girl was not killed in the way he writes, but was shot to death by an arrow (like a caged animal).³¹ Her body was not parted. In the case of the sacrifice in pre-colonial Mexico Widengren depicts a yearly festival at the 23rd of April when a *substitute king* was sacrificed in the honour of the androgyne god Tezcatlipoca. This ritual corresponds to and can be compared with a ritual in the honour of Dionysos, Widengren says.³² Also he outlines how, in May and December each year, a created picture of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli (Widengren has the spelling Uitzilopochtli) was devoured by the king.³³ Mentioning this is only because I want to emphasise that in this case the comparisons made between ancient Greece and the medieval Aztec empire, Widengren does not seem to have sufficient information. As the Author Ralph Linton says regarding the Pawnee sacrifice: it was such a basic feature of the religion of this particular tribe that if it was due to diffusion from Mexico, "this diffusion must have occurred at a very ancient time".³⁴

So far Widengren's account of the American scene. His statement that there is a belief in a specific high god in the indigenous, pre-colonial Aztec or Maya pantheons is simply not correct, if we are to follow what the available sources narrate.

28 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 176.

29 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 308–309.

30 See, for example, the concentrated analysis by Ralph Linton, "The Origin of the Skidi Pawnee Sacrifice to the Morning Star," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 28, Issue 3 (1926).

31 Linton, Ralph. "The Origin of the Skidi Pawnee Sacrifice to the Morning Star," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1926), 461.

32 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 177.

33 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 177.

34 Linton, "The Origin of the Skidi Pawnee," 460.

5 The Polytheism of African and American Traditional Cultures

To deviate from Widengren and try to reach some kind of empirical reality regarding Africa, we naturally have to take extreme caution when analysing lived religion on a whole continent. Like the comparative survey approach made by Widengren – as well as other scholars, like Frazer, Schmidt, Eliade – we risk presenting only superficial catalogues reducing African religious complex systems to sets of doctrines and thoughts structurally analogous to modern Western faiths and beliefs, or to Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian theologies.³⁵

At the same time, it must be possible to study African religions in the same manner we study Asian or American religions, that is by performing a thorough comparative study without ignoring local and historical differences. There is always a thin line between being too local or too global and even if Widengren in the chapter on *Schriftlose Völker in Afrika* in *Religionsphänomenologie* (1969) is depicting a multitude of local groups and tribes all over the continent, the ambition is commendable and could very well be used as a model.

It has been stated that many African myths are based on the ideas that the creation of man and woman happened after the other creation was completed. Some indigenous (pre-colonial) African religions are supposedly pluralistic, varied, and usually linked to one's ethnic identity. For instance, the Yoruba religion has historically been centered in southwestern Nigeria, the Zulu in southern Africa, the Igbo religion in south-eastern Nigeria. Rarely is the universe considered infinite and it will never cease temporarily. A circle or stylized image of a snake biting itself on the tail may illustrate this particular idea.³⁶ In this primeval thought lies an idea of a vanished paradise, an *archeotopia* where ignorance but also harmony prevailed. Through man's ability to procure offspring, however, a hope is born of being able to regain immortality, "the original immortality".³⁷ This *arhaeotopian* idea can easily be compared to Central America before the influence of Catholicism. It does not apply only to those myths and stories that tell about the creation of the world and of man (as in the ancient creation myth regionally linked to Teotihuacan in the Central valleys of Mexico) or the founding of cities (as for example the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan). Just like dreams, myths consist among other things of seemingly incoherent materials that are merged into the dream's

35 Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions. Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall: Princeton University, 1976), 14–15.

36 J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1975), 35.

37 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 79, 81.

community-creating structures. Individuals and groups may create and recreate, construct and re-construct their past and their history writing, interpret and reinterpret the present and claim a future that is then perceived on the basis of these structures.³⁸

Also African religious systems have been described as polytheistic, monotheistic and pantheistic. With time, various scholars have entered the middle road, depicting African religions as involving all these systems but on different theological levels.³⁹ In Eastern Africa we meet Mulungu (The Old), the Creator God, a name that has been used in over thirty Bible translations.⁴⁰ But we also meet local "lesser" gods connected to shifting levels of society. All of these entities appear in alternate and shifting myths, stories and legends. It is impossible in this text to give an account of the labyrinthine structure and purposes of the local myths in question (which indeed makes a specific study of a high god quite difficult to carry out).

From Botswana to Congo, variations of the name Nyambé (Nyamé (?) The Light, the Light Scatter) are often used.⁴¹ However, the Supreme Spirit, the high god (?), seems to be worshipped less rarely than local rain and natural gods. Sometimes, he has withdrawn from his creation but, in temporary actions, takes the help of his allies, the ancestors, the Gemini and the Trickster. Since he is withdrawn, he does not have any direct cult in his honour, but he can be summoned at birth, confirmation, marriage and burial. It also seems that this so-called Supreme Being (which could be translated into Widengren's high god) was established long before there was any established Christian or Muslim missions.⁴²

Many groups and larger clans appear to have believed in a Lord of Heaven, such as Nkosi Yezulu in Zulu.⁴³ The Supreme God, who is among other gods, has created everything and he (it is usually a He, although, for example, the Christian group of Ovambo in Northern Namibia and the mainly agricultural Sudanese Nuba, who are both Christians and Muslims, imagine God as a Great Mother) lives somewhere in heaven or alternatively: heaven is his manifestation.⁴⁴

38 Daniel Andersson, *Indianska religioner* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2015), 364; Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 17, 92.

39 Ray, *African Religions*, 50, 52.

40 Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1982), 19.

41 Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 19.

42 Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 13, 19.

43 Tord Olsson, "Afrika," in *Religionshistoria. Ritualer, Mytologi, Ikonografi*, ed. T. Jensen, M. Rothstein & J. Podeman Sörensen (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1996).

44 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 52.

The khoisan is called the creator Gao! Na and a common name for the one who shaped the world in Madagascar is Zanahàry. Among the Dog, Lebé is an ancestral god (the oldest man) who self-submitted to death (he was swallowed by an ancestor)⁴⁵ and was then reborn in order to give man insight. Many people have and have had a close relationship with their god and the knowledge of God is expressed – in similar terms across large areas of the continent – in songs, prayers, sayings, rites and myths, myths that are themselves told in dance, in carved wooden figures as well as in stone and in ivory. God may be seen as omnipotent (as an eye or as the sun).⁴⁶ Man has comparatively little power. God is one and God is benevolent, he provides among other things rain and he makes the grass grow. The question still arises: is this god a high god comparable to the high god Widengren has encountered in the Middle East? We have to note that few temples have been erected to the glory of the Supreme Being in Africa, while lesser deities and ancestors often have many holy places and pilgrimages, for their worship.

According to modern ethnographical surveys, the Kenyan Akamba, the Congolese Bacongo, the Nigerian Igbo (Ebo) and the Zambian Ila, all believe that God is always there for the benefit of man.⁴⁷ Whether God is loved by humans can be debated, but no sayings, myths or legends really indicate that God per sé loves man or the created world. He gives to the world what it needs to thrive, not least he assists with the life-giving rains.⁴⁸ But are the gifts really linked to a feeling of “love”? To talk of a high god belief in these cases is also futile. God created the universe. Sometimes it is believed that He still continues to create. In other myths – as mentioned above – he has left the world for good, residing somewhere in heaven.⁴⁹ Once upon a time heaven, earth and the underground were bound together at the horizon. The string that held the existence was bitten off and now the world is three-fold and man is the centre of the universe; it is only he who can speak to the different levels and the world exists for man’s sake; animals and nature have a moral and aesthetic meaning, but only for man. Like so many other people on our earth, it seems that God is associated with what is *above* the human and animal world, that is the *heaven*. The God and the gods may in this case be the same entity as the first ancestors

45 See Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 47–49, for an intricate explanation of this Dog myth about Lebé and its implication on the Dogon village architecture.

46 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 31.

47 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 36–37.

48 R.M. Fulton, “The Political Structures and Functions of Poro in Kpelle Society,” *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 74, No. 5 (1972), 1218.

49 Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 37; B.C. Ray, *African Religions*, 51.

or the tribe spirits.⁵⁰ Widengren is also clear on this: Indigenous African peoples seem to regard Heaven as the dwelling place for the god(s).⁵¹

On the other hand, the Earth is in various myths inhabited by humans and animals while other creatures – dead, inhuman – live in the underworld. There are also perceptions of an invisible this-world, a kind of intermediate state that can be reached through meditation rituals.

Among Kpelle and the Nigerian Igbira and Akan, the supreme god is called Yala, Water giver or the Rain giver. Barundi names the god, who is considered to have very great power over people, the land and ancestors, Haragakiza, there is a saviour.⁵² But in the case of the Heaven gods mentioned above: whether or not these indigenous Gods are to be interpreted as the high god, somewhat equivalent to Iranian gods, is difficult to determine.

Barundi also believes that God gives the children to the people, and that he hates children, because the children think he eats them. Magic, curses, and witchcraft are generally considered to be individual, intrinsic things, but at the same time, God can be accused of bearing the responsibility for illnesses.⁵³ Unsurprisingly, the disease state is also linked to aging and death. Creation is generally perceived as good and benevolent to man. However, creation also contains death. God's great act is to follow people through time, to follow them through history, through the land that is grown up, through the ancestors who give wisdom, through the war, the flowering of the crops, the confirmations of the individuals, the marriages and the funerals. God is with His people in time. In many places all over the world one respects the ancestors and their gods. The question is whether to worship them; many African languages lack a word for worship.⁵⁴ Some African religion have been referred to as *animistic*, but this is debatable. One can compare some traditional African religions with the many forms of Islam and Christianity. A multitude of Christians and Muslims believe in demons, djinns and the evil eye. But they are not therefore called *animistic*.

Since I am asserting that pre-colonial Central American cultures were polytheistic and devoid of one supreme high god, I will – as previously discussed regarding the Aztec pantheon – provide an example from the Totonac area in the Golf region (Totonacapan). Before the Spaniards arrived in the 16th century

50 Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 28, 31.

51 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 47–48.

52 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 43 and 45.

53 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon 1990 (1937)).

54 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 54.

there existed a belief in a Sungod (or goddess?) whose name was Chichiní (Cicini – approximately He who heats things).⁵⁵ This entity seems to also have been one of the Creator gods, present at the great auto-sacrifice of the gods at Teotihuacan.⁵⁶ One of the “aspects” of Chichini seem to have been the maize god, an equally important entity for the Totonacs and the neighbouring peoples. The rain god or storm god Tlaloc and the feathered Quetzalcoatl are also represented among the Totonacs. The wind god Huracán (hurricane) was later identified with the Aztec Tezcatlipoca. The state god Tajín as well as Huracán belong in the humid coastal areas, Tezcatlipoca more in the highlands. Also in Totonacapan – as in other parts of Pre Colonial Mexico – there existed an opposition between Heaven and Earth. Heaven was supposedly masculine and connected with fire while the earth was feminine and whose “essence” was water and cold.⁵⁷ Here we see examples of a multifaceted theological system with multiple layers of cultural loans and structures, where names and functions of gods are transformed and sometimes become new.

Bartolomé de las Casas speaks of a “wife of the sun and the sky” dedicated to particular temples in the same area. Spanish sources also tell of monk-like long-haired priests who worked in the service of the sun goddess and distanced themselves from meat.⁵⁸ The data are from colonial times, and since no other comparative data is available, they should of course be taken with a pinch of salt. But the data shows that the scene in pre-colonial America undoubtedly was polytheistic and devoid of an overall idea of a high god.

6 A Critical Assessment of the Use of African and the American Source Material

When Widengren in his overall opinion claims that the African belief in a high god did not emanate from the Christian missionaries, his idea is probably correct. But he has no sources to accompany him. No text sources, no observations

55 Alain Ichon, *La religión de los totonacas de la sierra* (México D F: INI. Consejo Nacional para las Culturas y las Artes 1990), 104–105.

56 See E. Masferrer Kan, *Los Totonacos* (México D F: PNUD, 2004), 8, and R. Williams García, “Totonac Religion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 14, ed. M. Eliade (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 576–578.

57 Lorenzo Ochoa, *Huastecos y totonacos* (México D F: Consejo nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1990), 94.

58 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Los indios de México y Nueva España*. Edición, prologo, apéndices y notas de Edmundo O’Gorman. (México D F: Editorial Porrúa, 1993), 49–50.

or interviews. No adventurer's or conqueror's chronicles, no Muslim material, no princely oracles or texts from people like David Livingstone (1813–1873). In the case of America there are both pictographic indigenous sources as well as written material from the conquistadors and others. This material, though, seems to be unknown to Widengren. He could have gotten into a dialogue with the often dubious – but still existing – written sources from ethnographers, adventurers and explorers, but he seems to lack interest in problematizing the material.

I return to Africa. An example from the analyses of the Masai high god, the omnipotent, almighty and formless N'Gai ('Ngai, Engai, En Kai, Mwiai) may shed light on what I mean.

The name Ngai is originally Bantu, from the *Kikuyu* tribe, and is the same word as is used for sky and rain, and also when one is referring to gods of other people.⁵⁹ But *Masai* is not a *Bantu* people. These changes from the Kikuyu language to the Masai are not noted by Widengren. Later he acknowledges the importance of Ngai among the Kikuyu,⁶⁰ but does not mention the language complexity. It is also noteworthy that Widengren copies a whole section from the British administrator Alfred Claud Hollis' (1874–1961) monumental book *The Masai: Their Language and Folklore*, from 1905, a section which clearly states that in the beginning there are two gods, one black and one red.⁶¹ The reader can easily follow the depictions of Hollis – who was Chief Secretary to the Administration of the East Africa Protectorate – when he carefully tells about the complex and often vague cultural, religious and spiritual traditions of the Maasai, where a multitude of gods, ancestors and elders figure. Hollis' book is a classical anthropological study crafted by someone who was familiar with the scene, the grammar of the people and the great religious fusions that did take place in these times. Widengren does not seem to acknowledge that. For him the black and the red coloured god somehow represent two sides of the same entity in a kind of psychological and mythological construct.⁶²

The conclusions tell us little about how these thoughts were “transported”, and how they were diffused, from Africa to Iran (if that is what Widengren imagined). For Widengren Iran is the mother of all cultures and the utmost

59 Tord Olsson, *Religious Documents of the Masai, Part 1: Prayers* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 1975), 21.

60 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, 38–39.

61 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, 36, and Sir Alfred Claud Hollis, *The Masai: Their Language and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Creative Media Partners, LLC, 1905), 264–265.

62 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 40; idem, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 50–51.

origin of Christian and Islamic depictions of heaven and hell.⁶³ But how the African and Iranian monotheistic scenes then are linked is never disclosed for the reader. And when it comes to America ... the links are non-existent. The subsequent chapter in his *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* deals with a totally different topic – the god Mithra. This can be seen as a clear evidence that Widengren in embracing a comparison between icons, iconography, clothing, myths, beliefs and rituals is searching for a common Indo-European past.⁶⁴

The Bambara, in West Africa (in Guinea, according to Widengren),⁶⁵ is a Mande speaking group, a branch which includes several languages. It is not known to what divergent branch the Mande languages belong. When returning to the interpretations of Widengren we meet, among the Bambara, the odd case that God is called by the Islamic name Allah, but under which the ancient pagan god of heaven is understood.⁶⁶ Tord Olsson, though, states that the Bambara in Mali have as their highest being Bemba, the creator of Everything.⁶⁷ But it is never, as far as I can discern, a question of an exclusive high god.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Africa*, Bambara means “unbeliever” or “infidel”. The group acquired this name due to the resistance of Islam that was introduced in the 1850:s.⁶⁸ These facts are not evident to Widengren. He describes Allah among the *Bambara* – which are said to belong to Oberguinea – as the cause of everything, a god with numerous characteristics and omnipotent features. Widengren also compares this Bambara god with the gods of the *Yoruba* and *Akan*, indigenous peoples living in the Bay of Guinea. How the criteria of the comparisons are set up is never disclosed, but the god who Widengren describes in these various settings is almighty, all-seeing, great and the Father, *Vater Gott*.⁶⁹ It is clear that he rather simply gathers information from a variety of African groups to prove his already fixed thesis – that the belief in the high god is an overall feature in these parts of Africa. Even if the high god is represented by Allah or if there is a pantheon of “lesser” gods, it is the same indigenous structure that we see, according to the reading by Widengren.

63 Widengren, *Kungar, präster och harlekiner*, 122.

64 Widengren, *Kungar, präster och harlekiner*, 133.

65 Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 48.

66 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, 5.

67 Olsson, “Afrika”, 488–492.

68 Anthony Appiah & Henry Louis Gates, *Encyclopedia of Africa*, Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 150.

69 Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, 6.

When it comes to the American scene, Widengren's above mentioned account of Tezcatlipoca is not accompanied by any reference at all to the source material. The descriptions are wrong. The rather cryptic story goes like this: Ometeotl was an important god for the Aztecs. He is poorly documented and mentioned most in early colonial times. He had four offspring's – four Tezcatlipoca – that summarize Aztec cosmology: the white Tezcatlipoca was associated with the West and was also called Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent. The blue and southern Tezcatlipoca was Huitzilopochtli, the ancestor of the Aztecs. The red and eastern Tezcatlipoca was also called Xipe Totec. The black and northern was only called Tezcatlipoca.

The word Tezcatlipoca means Smoking Mirror (which refers to the volcanic material obsidian). The black Tezcatlipoca was associated with the night and was seen as the creator.⁷⁰ From time to time he is attributed a Toltec origin. He was often depicted as one-legged and with light blue skin. He was active and youthful, giving power and wisdom to shamans and newly crowned kings. But he was also a god of fate and a liar. He had two aspects, the calendar and sacrificial knife god Itztl and the jaguar and earth god Tepeyotl. Other metaphorical titles he carried were The Wind of the Night, His Own Creator, We His Slaves, Lord of the Near and the Night, and Enemy. In the late Aztec era (approximately from 1470) Tezcatlipoca thus embraced every aspect of creation and only later encountered competition from Huitzilopochtli, whose importance increased at the end of the 15th century. In Tenochtitlan, the ruler of the Aztecs was sometimes called the Flute of Tezcatlipoca. His temple image was hidden by a veil, which was only to be lifted by the most consecrated.⁷¹ These fairly accurate provable facts from the pre-Colonial Aztec times are not re-narrated by Widengren. He may not have known them, but if so, it would have been better not to give the impression that his own interpretations are the only ones valid. Also he may have been more careful in comparing these Central American myths with myths from other regions.

7 Discussion

The discussion on religious syncretism, or fusion or hybridization is rarely addressed by Widengren. Nor does he write anything about migrations and

70 J.R. Acosta, (Colaborador et al) *Esplendor del México Antiguo, tomo I & II*. (México D F: Centro de Investigaciones Antropológicas de México, 1959), tomo I:175.

71 Birgitta Leander, *In xochitl in cuicatl. Flor y canto, la poesía de los aztecas* (México D F: INI, 1991 (1972)), 221–223.

their subsequent spread of ideas and concepts. Nor does he in reality differ between so called indigenous societies where texts did not exist and text-oriented religions among the elite in, for example, Iran or India. This is odd, because in reality he is, in his reading of *text based* religious themes – like the ones from ancient Israel, Iran and Egypt – both more fluid in his writing and more careful in his exegesis.⁷² Although he sometimes also tends to write in an overall manner, referring in an uncritical manner to “letters”, “judicial documents”, “inscriptions”.⁷³ Like his predecessors in the same field, he is a text researcher, not a scholar on cultures and ideas. And he is much more credible in his smaller more local studies than in his comparative attempts.

Widengren is looking for the common traits of the high god belief. This overall idea also implies that the African – and the American, I presume – belief in a defined high god did not emanate from Christian mission, but from a common human global idea of a high god. When it comes to Africa and even more so America he has no text sources to accompany him. There are – as I have pointed out – extant pictographic sources from pre-Colonial America as well as written chronicles from the conquistadors and others. This material seems to be unknown to Widengren.

Today’s research on Africa has come up with different perspectives. It is generally agreed that religion (if that word even is applicable) basically revolves around festivals, harvest, circumcision, marriage, passenger rites, veneration of sacred mountains and rivers, but also around the priest, shaman, healer, the medicine person and the coping with evil⁷⁴ and chieftain. It revolves around proverbs, prayers, music, crafts and dance.⁷⁵ This is what some sociologists would characterize as *Lived Religion*,⁷⁶ that is an everyday ritualized form of cultural behaviour. We do not meet religious founders or reformists in traditional African culture and even if there is a god – a high god – he/she is not particularly present in the daily cult. We encounter no or very little written dogma or sacred writings. Religion can in many ways be said to constitute life itself, storytelling, communication between people. *Religion in doing*.

72 Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets årsskrift, 1950:7), and Geo Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Eastern Religion* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets årsskrift, 1951:4).

73 Widengren, *Kungar, präster och harlekiner*.

74 See, for example, Walter E. A van Beek, “The Innocent Sorcerer: Coping with Evil in Two African Societies (Kapsiki & Dogon), in *Religion in Africa*, ed. Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek & Dennis, L. (London: James Currey, 1994), especially 2017–219.

75 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 12.

76 M.B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The concept of witchcraft is often mentioned when analysing African cultures of origin, but the term, along with sorcery, magic, oracles, is not precise, which already was pointed out by anthropologist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973) in the 1920:s, in the ground breaking *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1990). To illustrate what I mean, a conceptual apparatus is taken from the Wimbum of Cameroon. They distinguish, for example, between *bfiu* – an ability to do strange things – and *brii*, which is some form of obsession that can result in the person doing negative things. *Tfu yebu* is an ability to see things that no one else can see while *tfu yarr* relates to a force that can destroy property. There are also subgroups for these concepts. The anthropological term witchcraft (or sometimes *witchery* – including the terms witches, witchers, and sorcerers, sorcerers) is thus rather blunt when an outsider approaches Wimbum and other African indigenous cultures.⁷⁷ For example, Westerlund describes witchcraft as the use of intrinsic forces that can be used to bring about injustice, and sorcery as the use of techniques or medicines to harm others.⁷⁸

It should be noted that any attempt to generalize about the nature of African and American traditional (or indigenous) religions risks implying that there is homogeneity among them. In fact, Africa and America are vast continents holding both geographic variation and cultural diversity. Each of the more than fifty countries in Africa of today hold a tremendous amount of shifting cultural aspects. Every region has its own particular history, very hard to compare with others (a detail that Widengren of course must be aware of, but in a way seems to neglect). A similar critique can also be used when assessing his use of sources from pre-colonial religions in America.

Even though Widengren lists a multitude of African people in *Religionens värld* (each of the different ethnic groups gets about one sentence each, so the information is massive;⁷⁹ the problem of comparison is not at all sufficiently addressed. In his *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, Widengren lists twenty-seven groups/tribes/peoples – bantu, indigenous peoples, bushmän etc.) from all over the Continent – Cameroon, Congo, Sudan, Kenya, Rhodesia, South Africa. Still, he never explains on which basis the selection of ethnic groups did occur, nor why he has chosen not to include numerous other indigenous or contemporary peoples. In the *overview* the aim seems to be to scrutinizing the theme

77 Elias Kifon Bongmba, *African Witchcraft and Otherness. A Philosophical and Theological Critique of Intersubjective Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 171–177.

78 David Westerlund, *Afrikanska religioner* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2011), 14.

79 Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 39.

of the high god.⁸⁰ Therefore – naturally – this selection is easy to accuse of being a-historical and a-cultural.

Historical and sociological details are not seldom omitted in the analysis of Widengren. Therefore, it is virtually impossible to trace, as I have written above, which part of the African (or even more so the American) religion that was supposed to have been transferred from Iran. Or is Widengren depicting a sort of a *primary indigenous pan-human belief* prior to every other belief? He does not explain. Nevertheless, migrations, wars, trade and cultural contacts overall, forged basic commonalities, allowing for generalizations to be made about the distinguishing features of African religions that existed prior to the great expansions of Islam and Christianity. Even though there is nothing essentially “African” in Africa, it could still be fruitful, with the help of comparative methods, to try to identify similarities in worldviews and ritual processes across geographic and ethnic boundaries.

As mentioned above, many cultures hold the importance of the ancestors as mediators in this existing world. Many religions in Africa also hold that there is a God, the maker of a moving, shifting dynamic universe. Myths of various African peoples relate that, after setting the world in motion, the Supreme Being withdrew, and he remains remote from the concerns of human life. For instance, in one of the many labyrinthical myths of the Dinka of Sudan, God withdrew from the world after the first woman lifted her pestle to pound millet and struck the sky.⁸¹ A most significant aspect of Asante ritual life is the veneration of matrilineal ancestors, who are considered the guardians of the moral order. According to the relatively well known mythology of the Dogon of Mali, the Creator – and the one god – Amma brought the world into existence by mixing the primordial elements with the vibration of his spoken word, though the principal communal rites sometimes are directed to the Nommo (Nummo), first ancestors, rather than to Amma.⁸² Even though the ancestors are intermediaries between humans and Amma, the Dogon religion cannot properly be called an exclusive ancestor religion.⁸³ In Nigeria the Yoruba ethnic groups believe that the all-knowing Creator and Owner of the Sky, Olorun (Olòdùmarè), oversees a pantheon of secondary divinities, the *orisha* (*orixá*).⁸⁴ Devotion to the *orisha* is active and widespread, but Olorun has neither priests

80 See the “*überblick*” in Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran*, 70.

81 See Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 38.

82 Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 29.

83 W.E. A van Beek, “The Innocent Sorcerer,” 208.

84 Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 21.

nor cult groups around him. He is a supreme, but non-worshipped, head.⁸⁵ Among the Nuer of South Sudan as well as the Dinka, God is addressed in prayers of petition only after recourse to the secondary divinities has been exhausted.

From a very general point of view, African religions do sometimes emphasize to maintain a harmonious relationship with the divine powers, and their rituals attempt to harness cosmic powers and channel them for good. Ritual is the means by which a person negotiates responsible relationships with other members of the community, with the ancestors, with the spiritual forces of nature, and with the gods. Despite the general belief in a Supreme Being, cults to the “High god” are notably absent from many contemporary African religions; prayers of petition or sacrificial offerings may be directed toward secondary divinities, who are messengers and intermediaries between the human and sacred spheres. This is noteworthy. Why would a cultural diffusion take place if nobody worships the god in question?

8 Conclusions

All in all, Widengren has amassed a vast collection of semi-anthropological or ethnographical examples from all over Africa and America. The material in itself is a tricky and confusing historical collection that needs to be carefully scrutinised and often criticised. Widengren is, however, not a sufficiently critical reader of the source material. It is also evident that he does not have a clear-cut opinion on African cultures vis-à-vis an *indigenous* (pre-colonial or pre-European) African and American culture. He does not discuss migrations over the respective continents, nor religious shifts, syncretistic processes etc. Local religions in Africa may well have migrated from the Middle East in prehistoric times, we do not know how, to what extent and why, but it seems probable that there has occurred a great deal of cultural transitions in the past. Not every local religion is indigenous, that is *original* in time, at the very place where Widengren locates it (some of these problems are addressed in Gothóni and Larsson’s chapter in this volume).

In few cases, Widengren talks about religions and the problem of solely defining religion – a discussion applicable today.⁸⁶ In fact, even if the same

85 M. Smith Omari, “Candomblé: A Socio-Political Examination of African Religion and Art in Brazil,” in *Religion in Africa*, ed Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek & Dennis, L. (London: James Currey, 1994), 141.

86 See, for instance, Göran Larsson and Simon Sorgenfrei, *Religion* (Stockholm: Liber, 2019).

lack of written sources for precolonial Africa is palpable in recent research, scholars are today less keen in pinpointing how an *African* continental religion may look. The question is meaningless. We do not know. Even though we possess pre-Colonial pictographic texts from America, we do not know much about the pre-colonial cultures either. What Widengren *should* have done to make his effort more worthwhile was *for a start* to be more careful with the source material. How are his comparisons executed? Also, he should have differentiated between an indigenous layer of culture and the culture influenced by Islam and Christianity – not an easy task, but something that is important to at least account for.

Finally, his theories would have been clarified if he somehow could have demonstrated how the traditional (indigenous) “African” and the American theology was linked to the so-called Iranian cultural context.

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PART 5

Manichaeism and Gnosticism



Widengren, Gnosticism, and the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*

Einar Thomassen

1 Introduction

“Gnosticism” was established as an important field of research in the History of Religions around the turn of the previous century. This happened largely due to the work of the so-called “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” which in its attempts to break free from the limiting perspectives of traditional Biblical exegesis, Church history and classical philology discovered “die Gnosis” as a wide area of investigation that allowed for the integration of evidence taken from many different religious contexts and inspired bold hypotheses about inter-religious contacts and influence. Scholars such as Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920) and Richard Reitzenstein (1861–1931) were particularly prominent figures in this line of research.¹ It is therefore hardly surprising that when Geo Widengren made his contribution at the famous conference on the origins of Gnosticism in Messina in 1966,² it was precisely this tradition of scholarship he, as a self-conscious historian of religions, associated himself with and sought to defend. In particular, Widengren stood out at that conference as a strong supporter of Reitzenstein and his *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (1921), declaring his conviction that “the gnostic religion” can be traced back to Iranian sources. Widengren’s position met with limited approval at the time, and the subsequent history of scholarship has made it increasingly unfashionable. The Iranian hypothesis of Reitzenstein and Widengren is now widely regarded as a blind alley in the attempts to account for the strange historical phenomenon traditionally called “Gnosticism.”³

1 Wilhelm Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (FRLANT 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1907); R. Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (Bonn: A. Marcus & E. Weber’s Verlag, 1921).

2 Geo Widengren, “Les origines du gnosticisme et l’histoire des religions,” in *The Origins of Gnosticism: Colloquium of Messina 13–18 April 1966/Le origini dello gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13–18 aprile 1966*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (SHR 12; Leiden: Brill 1967), 28–60.

3 The death blow to that hypothesis, at least in the view of the great majority of scholars in the field, was dealt by Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und*

Notwithstanding this state of affairs, I think it may be a useful exercise to take a fresh look at Widengren's work in this field and see if something may still be learned from it – even, and perhaps not least, from the mistaken presuppositions on which it appears to have been based.

2 Phenomenology and History

If we retrace Widengren's 1966 paper on the origins of Gnosticism back to his earlier work in this field, it may come as a surprise to discover that his initial approach to this topic was made in the context of comparative religion. To be precise, the topic first appeared as a chapter in his *Religionens värld* ("The world of religion"), a work that was first published in 1945 and seems to be based on the lectures he gave during the first years following his appointment to the chair of History of Religions at Uppsala in 1940.⁴ A second edition of this work came out in 1953, and a significantly expanded German version was published in 1969 under the title *Religionsphänomenologie*.⁵ A third, abridged, Swedish edition appeared in 1971.⁶ In this work, written as an introduction to the study of religion,⁷ Gnosticism was accorded a separate chapter under the heading "Den gnostiska inställningen," in German "Die gnostische Einstellung."

Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus (FRLANT 78; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). Serious criticism of Reitzenstein's constructions was also raised about the same time by Hans-Martin Schenke, *Der Gott »Mensch« in der Gnosis: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als Leib Christi* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962), especially 20–33. Widengren wrote an extensive review of Colpe's work in *OLZ* 58:11–12 (1963) 533–48, (entitled "Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule und der iranische Erlösungsglaube"), in which he mainly concentrated on its philological shortcomings and did not address the wider issues relating to the origins of "Gnosticism" in any significant fashion. In his 1966 paper, Widengren paid almost no attention to Colpe at all ("Origines," 49). Widengren's views (like those of Reitzenstein) were largely based on assumptions that are no longer generally held about the dates of certain sources that were regarded as essential by scholars in the 1920s and -30s: Mandaean texts were seen pre-Christian, Manichaean texts about the Primal Man were thought to have re-used ancient Iranian materials, the account of the heavenly journey of the soul in *Hādōxt nask 2* was traced back to early Avestan sources, etc.

4 Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld: Religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1945).

5 Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969).

6 Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1971).

7 The first two Swedish editions carried the subtitle "Religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter" ("Studies and surveys in the phenomenology of religion"). For reasons unknown to me, the subtitle was dropped in the third and final edition.

The chapter was later translated by Birger Pearson into English and appeared as a short monograph entitled *The Gnostic Attitude*.⁸

The fact that Widengren's perception of Gnosticism was formed in the context of the phenomenology of religion (as he understood it) is important for assessing his contribution to this field. It is noteworthy that when Widengren gave an invited lecture at the University of Bonn in 1952, entitled "Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis," he more or less repeated what he had already written about *gnosis* in his phenomenology.⁹ In other words, he discussed the historical problem of the origins of Gnosticism using the same text that presented "the gnostic attitude" as a category of comparative religion.

This confluence of historical and systematic methods puts severe obstacles in the way of a precise understanding of the nature of Widengren's work. A historical argument takes the form of a singular linear narrative, as plausibly reconstructed as can be done on the basis of the available historical evidence. A systematic argument, on the other hand, such as is aimed for in a comparative study, is a matter of ordering and classifying materials into general categories. This approach is, in principle, ahistorical: the general categories are attained by means of abstraction from the historical context of the various pieces of evidence, which serve essentially as *examples* of the general category. Diachronic narratives of empirical history have no place here.¹⁰

Historical reconstructions are bottom-up, starting from the evidence. Systematic studies are top-down, starting from the general categories, which are then elaborated through descriptions of their examples.

Widengren is certainly conscious of the difference in principle between systematic and historical approaches to the study of religion. To him they constitute two distinct branches of the discipline: "Die Religionsgeschichte gibt die historische Analyse, während die Religionsphänomenologie uns die systematische Synthese liefert."¹¹ In practice, however, the boundaries are necessarily blurred, he goes on to say, because historical studies are necessary in order for us to be able to classify a phenomenon correctly, and the results obtained by means of the systematic and the historical working methods will frequently

8 Geo Widengren, *The Gnostic Attitude* (Santa Barbara: Institute of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1973).

9 Geo Widengren, "Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis," *ZRGG* 4:2 (1952) 97–114.

10 Naturally, diachronic processes may themselves be objects of comparative analysis, as is the case for example with such widely observable phenomena as routinisation, institutionalisation, canonisation, etc. In such cases, the primary target of investigation is still the general category and not the individual historical processes that serve as examples of it (and which the general category may serve to illuminate in turn).

11 Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 1.

supplement each other.¹² These remarks regarding the interdependence of historical and systematic approaches – or empirical research and theoretical endeavours in general – are no doubt valid from an epistemological point of view. However, they do not invalidate the necessity of distinguishing between them as two different modes of demonstrative discourse. At this point, Widengren's "phenomenological" presentation of his material is not without problems.¹³ Let us look at what he actually does in his chapter on "Gnosticism."¹⁴

3 Widengren's Construction of Gnosticism

In his presentation of "the Gnostic attitude," Widengren starts in Vedic India, with the *ātman* doctrine, according to which the individual *ātman* is identical to the all-encompassing great *ātman* of Brahman. This doctrine was then developed in a dualistic direction in the Upanishads, in which the multiple world of the senses came to be seen as an illusion, and the task of the individual human soul was understood to be the achievement of unity with Brahman through knowledge and a heavenly journey. According to Widengren, these ideas were further developed in Iranian religion, with the Great Spirit Vohu Manah playing the same role as Brahman in India. Furthermore, in Iran, Ahriman was introduced as an evil counterpart to the deity, the world was seen as a mixture of good and evil, and the idea of a Saviour becomes important. Widengren maintains that in the particular variety of Iranian religion called Zervanism, the Iranian dualism of good and evil was reinterpreted as a dualism of the soul and the material world. Against this background, the concept of the Saviour was developed further and came to include the motif that the Saviour himself needed salvation. This motif was connected with the idea that the Saviour, who is also the Primal Man, is a manifestation of the all-encompassing divine

12 "In der Theorie ist somit die Abgrenzung beider Wissenschaften voneinander völlig klar, in der Praxis jedoch müssen die Grenzen oft ziemlich fließend bleiben, und zwar deshalb, weil wir oft nicht imstande sind, ein Phänomen richtig zu klassifizieren, ohne gewisse historische Untersuchungen und Vergleiche anzustellen. Die Ergebnisse der systematischen und der historischen Arbeitsmethode müssen einander oft ergänzen" (ib.).

13 Immediately after the passage quoted in the previous note, Widengren goes on to conclude: "Im folgenden wird der Leser daher auf verschiedene Beobachtungen und Hinweise stoßen, die gleichermaßen für die Religionsgeschichte wie für die Religionsphänomenologie gelten" (ib.).

14 Chapter 17 in his *Religionsphänomenologie* and chapter 16 in the 1971 edition of *Religionsens värld*.

spirit, of which all the individual human spirits are parts, and in order to incorporate them all into himself and bring them back to where they came from and belong, he has to expose himself to the evil of the world in which humans are trapped. He is then first overcome by the powers of the world, but eventually defeats them and is redeemed.

In the course of this presentation, Widengren also surveys a common stock of frequently recurring motifs: the association of ignorance with sleep, the clothing that the soul assumes on its heavenly journey, the joining with one's heavenly twin, the provisions one takes on the journey, the companions and helpers, as well as the idea of the repeated descent of the saviour figure.

It is very difficult to make sense of this argument from a methodological point of view. Presented as a chapter in a phenomenology of religion, it begins top-down with a general category: the Gnostic attitude. One may therefore expect the chapter to begin with a definition of this category and its relation to other general categories previously discussed. In fact, Widengren begins by relating his theme to pantheism, which was the theme of an earlier chapter. Gnostic dualism is seen as a particular transformation of pantheism in which the continuity between the deity and the world is simultaneously broken and maintained by the idea that the world is an illusion. This is undoubtedly a theme that may be interestingly discussed from a comparative point of view across the history of religions. It appears in various modifications in Buddhism, in forms of Daoism, in Neoplatonism, in the mysticism of Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240) and in other varieties of mysticism, eastern and western. In so-called Gnosticism the theme is found as well, though it appears in varying modulations across the different Gnostic mythological systems and groups. But Widengren does not seem to be interested in comparisons of the relationship between theology and cosmology on a cross-cultural and theoretical level. His idea of comparison involves suppositions about historical dependence, "influences," "background." This is, in other words, the diffusionist variety of the comparative method: things are similar because they share a common origin.¹⁵ This perspective used to be popular in anthropology, folklore studies

15 Widengren expresses a qualified approval of the diffusionist paradigm in his booklet *Religionens ursprung: En kort framställning av de evolutionistiska religionsteorierna och kritiken mot dessa* (2nd ed. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Aldus/Bonniers, 1963), 68–69, while warning against excesses in its application. For a recent perspective on diffusionism as a way of doing comparative religion, see Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), esp. 26, 67–68, who mentions Reitzenstein and Widengren as proponents of this approach (p. 26).

and historical linguistics, but is considered rather outdated now, after the various structuralist turns we have experienced since the 1950s.

The diffusionist method sits awkwardly between historical narrative and comparative category formation. As far as “the Gnostic attitude” is concerned, we are left in uncertainty whether it refers to a specific historical phenomenon that is the result of a singular process of development – from ancient India via Iran to Western Late Hellenism – or whether it is a type of religious attitude that can be exemplified generally across cultures in “the world of religion” (the title of Widengren’s book). The choice of the word “attitude” suggests the latter, referring to a mentality that can be realised in a diversity of historical contexts; yet the qualifier “Gnostic” on the contrary seems to point to something more historically specific.

As a hybrid form of thinking situated between the historical and the comparative, the diffusionist approach is top-down, but in a peculiar manner that begins with a specific set of historical materials, in this case located in ancient India. The Gnostic attitude is derived from this set of materials by means of a procedure that takes the double form of a logical deduction as well as a historical explanation. In consequence, a general concept of the Gnostic attitude is constructed, based on an Indo-Iranian macrocosmos-microcosmos model in which the individual soul is part of an all-encompassing deity, but has been lost in matter and a world that is evil. The soul must be redeemed by a Saviour figure conceived as a Primal Man, who incorporates all human beings and who himself needs to be redeemed. The general concept of the Gnostic attitude here runs the risk of becoming a function of the model that is supposed to explain it, relying on a circular argument, instead of having been derived from the actual sources that can provide us with an understanding of the historical phenomenon of Gnosticism through an inductive, bottom-up investigation. Widengren does, indeed, refer to sources, with apparent attention to philological precision, but his use of sources is quite selective and essentially serves to confirm his pre-conceived construction of Gnosticism as a variety of Indo-Iranian religious speculation.

In fact, Widengren’s favourite sources for Gnosticism are Manichaean texts, especially the Middle Iranian ones. In addition, he places great emphasis on the so-called *Song of the Pearl* from the *Acts of Thomas* and makes extensive use of Mandaean texts, all of which he considers to be essentially pre-Christian. He never engages seriously with the reports of the Christian heresiologists – Irenaeus (130–202) and the others – who created the concept of *gnosis* as the name for a religious movement in the first place, whose reports are for the most part chronologically prior to Manichaeism, as well as probably

to Mandaeanism as we know it,¹⁶ and who never mention the *Song of the Pearl*. If we are to speak about *gnosis*, or “Gnosticism,” at all, this is clearly where one should start. Contemporary scholarship, however, has increasingly come to realise that those concepts form a heresiological construction that tends to become synonymous with “heresy” in general, and that by adopting those concepts as the basis for a general category, modern scholars risk making the same mistake as the heresiologists by indiscriminately lumping together a number of rather distinct historical phenomena and claiming that they are all the same sort of thing. Moreover, this generalisation has often been accompanied by an essentialising gesture: the assumption that all these phenomena belong together as manifestations of a single, shared essence.¹⁷

Today we know that what scholars used to call “gnosis” was based on a rather arbitrary combination of several ideas: the idea that the material world is bad and we need to be saved from it; the distinction between a supreme, good god and a not so good world creator; the idea of consubstantiality between the supreme god and an inner essence in the human; and the notion that redemption is attained by a special type of knowledge. Each of these ideas can be found across the history of religions without necessarily being combined with any of the others and may form interesting points of departure for comparative studies of religious ideas. However, the combination of those ideas in certain religious contexts during the time of the Roman Empire is a historical contingency and does not add up to an essence which is greater than its constituent parts. “Gnosis” as such is therefore hardly a viable category in the comparative study of religions,¹⁸ but may be used, with circumspection, to refer to specific historical phenomena in the later part of Antiquity.

16 For a succinct update on the current state of research regarding the origins of Mandaeanism and Mandaean literature, see Charles G. Häberl, “Mandaeanism in Antiquity and the Antiquity of Mandaeanism,” *Religion Compass* 6, 5 (2012): 262–76.

17 See, in particular, Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: The Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Einar Thomassen, “There is No Such Thing as Gnosticism: But What Have We Got Instead?,” in *Nag Hammadi à 70 ans: Qu’avons-nous appris?/Nag Hammadi at 70: What Have We Learned?* Edited by Eric Crégheur, Louis Painchaud and Tuomas Rasimus (Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi, Section « Études » 10; Leuven-Paris-Bristol CT, 2019), 3–15; id. *The Coherence of “Gnosticism”* (Hans-Lietzmann-Vorlesungen 18; Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

18 How attempts to use “Gnosis,” “Gnosticism,” and “Gnostic” as general categories in the history of religions lead into a shoreless ocean of indeterminacy may be observed in, e.g., *The Gnostic World*. Edited by Gary W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston

I have now reached the end of the destructive part of my presentation, and shall switch into a more constructive mode for the part that remains.

4 Alternative Perspectives on Widengren's Model

Some of the themes that Widengren highlights in his presentation of Gnosticism do, in fact, deserve closer attention than contemporary scholarship is usually prepared to allow. This is particularly true of such ideas as macrocosmos and microcosmos, Primal Man, and the Saved Saviour. These themes were part of the heritage from the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which Widengren adopted and developed, but they have largely lost favour in the more recent, post-Nag Hammadi studies in this field. This is undeserved, because these themes do in fact appear not only in Manichaeism, but also at the core of the source materials representing what the heresiologists referred to as the Gnostic heresy. Their presence there requires an explanation. Do they perhaps indicate that Widengren's ideas are of some relevance after all?

Since we no longer may, or must, speak about Gnosticism in general, and also due to the limitations of this chapter, I shall here restrict myself to discussing two sets of evidence: Irenaeus' testimony on what he explicitly names "the so-called Gnostic group" (*gnostikē haïresis*)¹⁹ in his *Against the Heresies* book 1, chapters 29–31; and the systems of the Valentinians, who Irenaeus claims were directly inspired by this group when they developed their "pretended *gnosis*," against which Irenaeus primarily wrote his work. To these two sets of materials we may add the *Apocryphon of John*, which is directly dependent on the source used by Irenaeus in chapter 29 and uses much the same materials as his source in chapter 30.

In Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30, we have a theogony in which the supreme deity is called the First Man. After him there is a Second Man, who is also called the Son of Man and who is the Thought of the First Man. Then comes the First Woman. Apparently, the generation of these beings takes place through an emanation of light, because we are told that the First Woman was unable to contain all the light that was streaming down upon her from the two male figures above. The part of the light she was able to retain produced Christ; the rest, however,

(London-New York: Routledge, 2019). I hasten to add that the volume nonetheless contains many fine individual contributions and is also of interest because it documents the widespread use of those categories.

19 The word *haïresis* is here to be understood as designating a particular line of thought represented by a variety of individual groups.

spilled over and became Sophia Prounikos.²⁰ She dropped downwards and gave birth to the monstrous Yaldabaoth, who created the world and sought to become master over that portion of the divine light that had gone astray. We do not need to go into all the details of this system; the important point to be made here is that there is a First Man, a *Primus Homo*, at the beginning, and that a part of this Primordial Human Being was lost and needed to be retrieved.

In the *Apocryphon of John* there is also a First Human in the divine sphere. This is the figure of Barbelo, who is the Thought and image of the ultimate deity, the Invisible Spirit.²¹ Barbelo receives the light of the Invisible Spirit and gives birth to Christ, like the First Woman in Irenaeus 1.30. In the *Apocryphon*, however, the figure of Sophia enters the story only at a much later stage. Several aeonic emanations and successive levels are interposed between Barbelo and the unfortunate Sophia. Those levels can all be seen, however, as replicas of the figure of the First Human: they include the level of Adam, the Perfect Human, and that of his son Seth. The author of this system was apparently concerned to widen the distance between the ultimate deity's manifestation as the First Human and the deficiency introduced by Sophia; however, the underlying concept is nevertheless still that of a primordial human figure emanating as light-substance from the deity, part of which was lost and had to be restored.²²

The same pattern is found in the Valentinian systems. At the head of these systems, there is, basically, a transcendent Father who manifests himself in a Son, who then enables the generation of a Pleroma of aeons. The *Tripartite Tractate* from Nag Hammadi explains that the Son is the Father's Thought, the mental activity by which the Father thinks himself (56–57). Moreover, "... he alone is truly the Father's first human being" (66:10–12). He is the manifest image of the hidden Father, and he stretches himself out in order to become many, giving birth to the Totality of aeons. Other Valentinian systems do not explicitly refer to the Son as the First Man. It is nevertheless clear that when the main Valentinian system reported by Irenaeus, for example, says that

20 The exact meaning of *πρωόνικος* is difficult to pin down. The word is basically a name for porters, i.e. servants who move things. Motility seems to be an important semantic component of the term, but the texts give us no clues as to what kind of motility may be intended. There is no foundation for the statement in Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, s.v.: "name of aeon representing sexual knowledge."

21 Nag Hammadi Codex III, 7:23–8:5, and parallel versions; cf. Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 With BG 8502* (NHMS 33; Leiden: Brill 1995), 34–35.

22 The *Apocryphon of John* is no doubt the product of a complicated process of transmission. It constitutes a rewriting of the materials contained in the Gnostic treatise known to Irenaeus in *Haer.* 1.29, which itself shows signs of previous redactional activity. I intend to discuss these issues in a different context.

the spiritual seed was emitted after the image and the likeness of the Saviour's angels, that idea is presupposed.²³ The Saviour who was sent out, surrounded by angels, by the Pleroma in order to rescue Sophia, constitute in fact an outward representation of the Pleroma, replicating the unity-in-multiplicity of the Son and the aeons. In response to this manifestation, Sophia gave birth to the spiritual seed that would later be deposited in cosmic humans. Thus, the spiritual component in humans is an image of the angels, who are manifestations of the aeons, who are, in turn, individual representations of the Son spread out into multiplicity. In other words, the Son is a primordial macro-anthropos that forms the ultimate model of the spiritual human being. Correspondingly, redemption is conceived of as a unification of humans with their angelic models (a unification referred to as "the bridal chamber"), and ultimately as integration into the Pleroma, which is co-extensive with the Son himself.

Here, we see the outlines of a pattern that bears considerable structural resemblance to Widengren's model of an *Urmensch*-like deity who becomes fragmented and needs to be reassembled. Moreover, the idea of a Saved Saviour is also to be found in this material: certain Valentinian texts explain that the reason for the Saviour's baptism at the beginning of his mission was that he himself needed to be saved after having descended into the world of matter.²⁴ This idea is a logical implication of the model: the Saviour is a manifestation of the Primordial Human sent out to redeem the lost parts of himself.

But do we need Mahātman and Vohu Manah, Puruṣa and Gayōmart in order to find a historical explanation for this structural similarity? Should it not give us pause for thought that a connection with those Indian and Iranian ideas is not attested either by means of shared terminology or by other types of textual evidence? The Middle Iranian Manichaean texts provide evidence of this kind, of course, but that evidence is better seen as an instance of the familiar Manichaean habit of culturally translating its mythology into existing local idioms. (The same phenomenon appears in the Chinese Manichaean texts, translated in a Buddhist environment.)

Can we, on the other hand, imagine this structure as having originated independently of such Indo-Iranian parallels? The current scholarly trend is to search for Gnostic origins in Biblical exegesis, and, in fact, the intertextual references found in the Gnostic sources generally are to the Jewish scriptures:

23 "They teach that she gave birth to offspring after the image, a spiritual offspring that came into being after the likeness of the Saviour's attendants" (*Haer.* 1.4.5 end). The choice of words (εἰκῶν, ὁμοίωσις) obviously alludes to Gen 1:26.

24 Clem. Alex. *Exc.* 22:6–7; *Tripartite Tractate*, 124–25.

the human being as an image of God, the spirit upon the waters, the figure of Wisdom, Adam and Seth. (On the other hand, the origins of such names as Barbelo and Yaldabaoth remain enigmatic.) However, the structure into which these Biblical notions and names are incorporated seems not to have been derived from the Bible; the ideas of a Primordial Human as a corporate entity that mediates a consubstantial relationship between humanity and the divine, and of the fragmentation of this entity and its ultimate reassembly, are not easy to find in the Biblical texts. The impulses for such ideas must have come from somewhere else.

In the Greco-Roman world there seems to exist one mythological complex that displays the same type of structure. This is the so-called Orphic myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans, according to which humans, in their state of corporeal individuation, were born from the ashes of the Titans, who, after having devoured the child Dionysus, were struck by the thunderbolt of Zeus. As a result, humans are partly material and titanic, and partly immaterial and Dionysiac. Thanks to their Dionysiac component, humans may overcome corporeal fragmentation and be assimilated into the unity of the reborn and reassembled Dionysus. At least later Neoplatonists seem to have interpreted the myth in this way.²⁵ In the present context, it is of interest to note that the late 3rd or early 4th century Neoplatonist philosopher Alexander of Lycopolis says that the Manichaeans referred to the myth of Dionysus, “as told in the mysteries” (Orphic-Bacchic initiations?) in order to explain their own doctrine: the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans demonstrates how, according to the doctrine of Mani, the divine *dynamis* is dispersed in matter.²⁶ In other words, these Manichaeans perceived a structural resemblance between Dionysus and the Primal Man of their own mythology.

It may be added that this passage in Alexander of Lycopolis already indicates the influence of a Platonist interpretation of Dionysus as the world soul, whereby the dismemberment of the god is understood in the light of the

25 The key text is Olympiodorus, *In Phaed.* 1.3; cf. 8.7. For a relatively recent discussion of this much-debated text and the myth it presents, see Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts of the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (London-New York: Routledge 2007), 66–93 (by Johnston).

26 ἐκ μὲν τῶν τελετῶν τὸν κατατεμνόμενον Διόνυσον τῷ λόγῳ ἐπιφημιζόντες ὑπὸ τῶν Τιτάνων, καθάπερ λέγουσιν αὐτοὶ τὴν θεῖαν δύναμιν μερίζεσθαι εἰς τὴν ὕλην, Alex. Lyc. *Man.* 5 (p. 8 Brinkmann); “[t]hey quote the mysteries, comparing the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans to the dividing up, in their own teachings, of the divine power over matter,” P.W. van der Horst and J. Mansfeld, *An Alexandrian Platonist Against Dualism: Alexander of Lycopolis’ Treatise ‘Critique of the Doctrines of Manichaeus’* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 57. See also the translation and commentary in André Villey, *Alexandre de Lycopolis, Contre la doctrine de Mani* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf 1985), 61–62, 190–91.

division of the soul caused by its contact with corporeality, as described by Plato in the *Timaeus* (35a).²⁷ Thus, the Greek philosophical tradition as well offers ideas about the relationship between the universal soul and embodied individual souls that display the same general structure as the myths discussed above.

This topic deserves a more thorough treatment than is possible here, and I must content myself with throwing out some questions for discussion: if a commonality of structure such as this exists between a Greek myth (at least in its philosophical interpretation), and the “Gnostic” Manichaean one, how can it be explained? Should we assume that Iranian mythology during the Parthian period influenced the development of the myth of Dionysus – even if there is no historical evidence that makes that kind of influence transparent? Or should we rather postulate that the common structure is of such a general nature that it may have arisen independently in different cultural contexts? Or perhaps the structure represents a mode of thought that constitutes a common Indo-European intellectual heritage that reappears within this vast cultural area without necessarily having been caused by specific events of intercultural contact?

5 Final Remarks on the Origins of the Gnostic Myth

I leave the myth of Dionysus there, as a more or less loose end. In the final part of my contribution, I wish to offer some suggestions regarding the most likely scenario for the origins of the Gnostic (in the restricted sense mentioned above) and the Valentinian myths. In recent years, the strong presence of Biblical terms and themes in these myths has led many scholars to look for some kind of Jewish background for them. A fairly common narrative is that the myths were first created in some unidentified Jewish, or para-Jewish, circles, and were then later, and superficially, Christianised.²⁸ However, one

27 τῆς ... περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένης μεριστῆς. It is often assumed that this interpretation is not attested before Proclus in the fifth century (Luc Brisson, “La figure du Kronos orphique chez Proclus. De l’orphisme au néoplatonisme, sur l’origine de l’être humain,” *RHR* 219 [2002]: 435–58; Velvet Yates, “The Titanic Origins of Humans: The Melian Nymphs and Zagreus,” *GRBS* 44 [2004]: 183–98. I think that such texts as Clem. Alex. *Exc.* 36 and *Tri. Trac.* 94:23–95:16, 116:5–117:3 show that already the Valentinians applied this Platonic theme in their thinking about the descent of the Saviour as a composite being who exposed himself to corporeal divisibility.

28 For a survey of the various suggestions along these lines, see Garry W Trompf, “The Jewish Background of ‘Gnosticism’: A Guide for the Perplexed,” in *The Gnostic World*. Edited by

should not take lightly the fact that the figure of Christ is an essential feature of these systems from their very beginning. In the systems of Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.29 and the *Apocryphon of John*, for example, the process of divine manifestation starts with the generation of Barbelo, who then turns towards the Father, is illuminated by him, and gives birth to Christ, the anointed one.

The general pattern of the narrative told in these systems is that the unknowable and infinite deity begins to reveal himself by thinking himself in the form of a Primordial Human Being. The movement from divine indeterminability to determination furthermore also implies a spreading out from oneness to plurality. The logical and metaphysical problem involved in this originary act of divine manifestation is personified by Sophia, who, as a singular aeon, is unable to contain the infinity of the deity. This inability leads to a split, whereby plurality ends in division and fragmentation. Similarly, the system of Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30 recounts, as mentioned above, that the First Female was unable to contain all the light that was streaming onto her from the First Man and his Son. Some of it spilled over, became Sophia Prounikos, and was temporarily lost, while the rest was salvaged in the form of Christ. This notion of a split between Sophia and Christ in the process of emanation is also found in some Valentinian texts.²⁹ The interpretation I would offer of this theme is that the story of the passion of Sophia was originally closely associated with that of Christ, and that Christ's passion – his descent into the world of matter, his crucifixion, and his eventual separation from his body on the Cross – was interpreted as an image, and an inevitable consequence, of the initial process of divine self-manifestation, in which the ultimate deity himself "suffers" by extending himself into multiplicity.

This means that the first Gnostic systems originated in a philosophical interpretation of the passion of Christ constructed in accordance with a proto-Neoplatonist model of divine extension, division, withdrawal and reunification. The systems were worked out in the form of treatises, showing little concern for the texts of the later New Testament; thus, they seem to represent an early form of Christ religion that took form before those texts acquired the canonical status that made them the defining sources of "Christianity." This form of Christ religion must have been devised by someone who was deeply affected by the death of Jesus Christ, but who was also familiar with

Gary W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston (London-New York: Routledge, 2019), 79–89.

29 Clem. Alex. *Exc.* 23, 32–33; Iren. *Haer.* 1.11.1; *Val. Exp.* 33:36–37; cf. *Tri. Trac.* 77:11–78:22.

contemporary philosophy and allegorical mythology, and who used this knowledge to make philosophical sense of the sufferings of the Saviour.³⁰

The aim of the “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” espoused by Geo Widengren, was above all to find extrabiblical, and especially “Oriental,” sources for ideas in the Bible and in early Christianity. “Gnosis” was one of the catchwords used in this endeavour. Gnosticism was conceived as a mighty pre-Christian, Oriental movement whose myth of the Redeemer decisively influenced early Christianity. To me it seems rather to have been the other way around. The Gnostic myth originated in the West (comparatively speaking), as an early, pre-canonical variety of Christ religion conceived in the idiom of contemporary Platonism; from there it eventually migrated eastwards and in the shape of Manichaeism assimilated into its Christ mythology structurally homologous themes found in Iranian mythology. In other words, “das iranische Erlösungsmysterium” originated in Christianity.³¹

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30 I have discussed these questions in somewhat more detail in Thomassen, *Coherence*.

31 “Christianity” is, strictly speaking, an anachronism here. We have to imagine a religion that presupposes Jesus of Nazareth as Christos and Saviour, but which is not defined by the New Testament canon. – I thank my colleague Michael Stausberg for valuable comments on this article.

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Geo Widengren and Manichaeism

Chiara O. Tommasi

1 Introduction

In accordance with his unsurpassed mastery of virtually all the religious and literary traditions of the ancient Near and Middle East, in particular ancient Iran, which let his academic expertise to encompass an area extending from Asia Minor to Iran and Central Asia over the course of a millennium, Geo Widengren was also interested in Mani and Manichaeism. Although less known than his studies on older Iranian religious traditions, his research on Manichaeism is nonetheless worth being discussed. In Widengren's perspective, if we consider the area in which the Manichaean tradition originated, before its universalistic spread towards the East and West, this religion might, in fact, be perceived as one of the last outcomes of the Persian tradition. It is precisely in this guise that Widengren investigated it, namely, assuming a pan-Iranian model of historical diffusion.¹

2 Manichaean Studies in Widengren's Times

As a preliminary remark, it should be pointed out that Manichaean studies in the twentieth century could greatly benefit from the outstanding discoveries of Manichaean original texts in different languages, among which are Coptic, various Iranian languages, and Chinese, thereby allowing scholars to read from direct sources instead of the anti-Manichaean confutations known until that point, written either by the Greek or Latin Fathers of the Church as well as by

1 For a comprehensive portrait profile see Eugen Ciurtin, "Widengren, Geo," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, Second Edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thompson, 2005), 9732–9734; Anders Hultgård, "Widengren, Geo," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/widengren-geo> (retrieved March 2021); among the obituaries, see the particularly sympathetic profiles written by Gherardo Gnoli, "Geo Widengren: 1907–1996," *East and West* 46 (1996): 494–497, and Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "Geo Widengren (1907–1996)," *Studia Iranica* 25/2 (1996): 263–272. These contributions are now to be supplemented with some chapters of the present book.

Islamic authors.² These instances of textual evidence in some cases led scholars to interpret Manichaeism as a Christian heresy, as, for example, was the famous case of Isaac de Beausobre in the 18th century, the Huguenot scholar who showed a sympathetic attitude towards Manichaeism, most probably not exempt from personal concerns.³

As already stated in some reviews, Widengren's special contribution is based on his knowledge of the various languages involved in the transmission of Manichaean literature, his skill in historical linguistic analysis, and his use of linguistic details for historical purposes. This philological specialization and the consequent critical appraisals of both Syriac and Iranian textual sources intertwine with his lifelong familiarity with ancient and early medieval Iranian cultures. Especially in the notes, he provides fairly detailed arguments with regard to various aspects of Manichaean tradition and their treatment by previous authors.

It goes without saying that Widengren's approach to Manichaeism is influenced by direct teachers or colleagues, especially in Uppsala, such as Tor Andræ (himself the author of an important book on Muhammad), Henrik Samuel Nyberg (a specialist in Iranian literature and language, mainly Pahlavi, but also in Manichaeism)⁴ and Stig Wikander,⁵ whose names recur at greater

2 The website of the International Association for Manichaean Studies (IAMS, www.manichaeism.de) provides useful information on the state of recent research on Manichaeism and access to texts. A comprehensive bibliographic survey is provided by Gunner B. Mikkelsen, *Bibliographia Manichaica. A comprehensive Bibliography of Manichaeism through 1996* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), while a lively account of Manichaean scholarship in the Eighties may be found in Giovanni Casadio, "Manicheismo e storia delle religioni in Germania," *SMSR* 56 (1990): 393–402. A useful collection of Manichaean scriptures with an excellent commentary is provided by Gherardo Gnoli *et alii* (eds.), *Il Manicheismo*, 3 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 2003–2008).

3 See his *Histoire critique de Maniché et du Manichéisme*, published at Amsterdam between 1734 and 1739. For a critical assessment see Guy G. Stroumsa, "Isaac de Beausobre Revisited: The Birth of Manichaean Studies," in *Studia Manichaica. IV. Internationaler Kongress zum Manichäismus, Berlin, 14.–18. Juli 1997*, ed. Ronald E. Emmerick, Werner Sundermann, and P. Zieme (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000): 601–612; Johannes Van Oort, "On the Huguenot Isaac de Beausobre (1659–1738), Founding Father of Manichaean Studies: A Würdigung," in *Mani and Augustine. Collected Essays on Mani, Manichaeism and Augustine* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2019): 122–131 (originally published in *Studia Manichaica. IV. Internationaler Kongress zum Manichäismus, Berlin, 14.–18. Juli 1997*, ed. Ronald E. Emmerick, Werner Sundermann, and Peter Zieme (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 658–666).

4 See Geo Widengren, "Henrik Samuel Nyberg and Iranian Studies in the Light of Personal Reminiscences," in *Monumentum H.S. Nyberg*, vol. 2 (Leiden-Téhéran-Liège: E.J. Brill, 1975): 419–456, and Carlo Giovanni Cereti, "H.S. Nyberg," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nyberg-henrik-samuel> (retrieved March 2021).

5 See Bo Utas/Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "Wikander, Oscar Stig," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/wikander-oscar-stig> (retrieved March 2021).

length in his doxographies, not to mention Carl Martin Edsman, who, despite having edited some works with Widengren, adopted quite different a methodology.⁶ A key influence also derives from the German philologist and historian of religions, Richard Reitzenstein, who had dedicated an important (although controversial) study to Iranian lore in Greco-Roman religions and early Christianity as well as authoring with Hans Heinrich Schaeder a book on Iranian syncretisms.⁷ Likewise, Wilhelm Bousset, the main coryphaeus of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in Göttingen had underlined the pre-Christian origins of Gnosticism from an Iranian background, a view that Widengren unreservedly endorsed and maintained, in spite of the fundamental reservations that this theory was met with since the Fifties (cf. Einar Thomassen's chapter in this volume).⁸

As is well known, the themes Widengren deals with originate in reflections and methodological assumptions very frequently assumed by historians of religions in the interwar period, especially those discussed by the German *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, namely cosmology, astronomical symbolism, eschatology, apocalypticism, the destiny of the soul after death, primordial figures and symbolism, such as the king-saviour, the tree of life, the heavenly

6 Carl-Martin Edsman, "Ein halbes Jahrhundert Uppsala-Schule," in *Kontinuität und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Anders Hultgård*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Olof Sundqvist (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001): 194–209.

7 Richard Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (Bonn: Marcus et Weber, 1921); Id., Hans Heinrich Schaeder, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland* (Leipzig-Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1926; repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965). Wolfgang Fauth, "Richard Reitzenstein, Professor der Klassischen Philologie 1914–1928," in *Die klassische Altertumswissenschaft an der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen*, ed. Carl-Joachim Classen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989): 178–196; Suzanne L. Marchand, "From liberalism to neoromanticism: Albrecht Dieterich, Richard Reitzenstein, and the religious turn in fin-de-siècle German classical studies," in *Out of Arcadia: classics and politics in Germany in the age of Burckhardt, Nietzsche and Wilamowitz*, ed. Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Ruehl (London: University of London Press, 2003): 129–160 provide a general reconstruction of Reitzenstein's scientific legacy. A thorough portrait of Schaeder is now offered by Werner Sundermann, "Schaeder, Hans Heinrich," in *Encycloaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/schaeder-hans-heinrich> (retrieved March 2021).

8 See Johann Michael Schmidt, "Bousset, Wilhelm," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 7 (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1981): 97–101; Gerd Lüdemann (ed.), *Die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Facetten eines theologischen Umbruchs* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996). As is well known, the thesis of a pre-Christian Gnosticism was dismantled by Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961) (this book received quite a critical review by Widengren himself in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 58 [1–6]: 267–274); however, see also Richard N. Frye, "Reitzenstein and Qumrân Revisited by an Iranian," *HTHR* 55/4 (1962): 261–268, and, most of all, Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism. A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale Press, 1973).

ascension, the sacred kingship, and, most of all, the persistence of characteristic Mesopotamian and Iranian motifs in classical and late antique Mediterranean religions;⁹ closely related to these themes are the question whether shamanic patterns may be detected in Zoroastrianism,¹⁰ and, most of all, the belief in a supreme god (*Hochgottglaube*).¹¹

3 Widengren's Own Contribution

Widengren's research on Manichaeism includes at least four books, two of which belonging to the earlier phase of his career:

- *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God: Studies in Iran and Manichaean Religion* (Uppsala-Leipzig: A.B. Lundequistaka Bokhandeln, 1945).
- *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism (King and Saviour II)* (Uppsala-Leipzig: A.B. Lundequistaka Bokhandeln, 1946).
- *Mani und der Manichäismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961).¹²
- the anthological collection, *Der Manichäismus*, published as volume 168 of the *Wege der Forschung* series (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977²).

To these books must be added some shorter contributions, such as “La sagesse dans le manichéisme” in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974): 501–515,¹³

9 Michael Stausberg, “On the State and Prospects of the Study of Zoroastrianism,” *Numen* 55/5 (2008): 561–600, esp. 564f.

10 This idea was firstly envisaged by Hendrik Samuel Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1938) and was met with sharp criticism: see e.g. Walter Bruno Henning, *Zoroaster, Politician or Witch-doctor? (Ratanbai Katrak Lecture, 1949)* (London: Cumberlege, 1951); for a more moderate and modern perspective, in addition to Mircea Eliade, “Symbolisme du Vol magique,” *Numen* 3/1 (1956): 1–13, see Philippe Gignoux, “Shamanism,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shamanism> (retrieved March 2021); Andrea Piras, “Dialettiche dell'estasi. Sciamanesimo iranico e zoroastrismo,” in *Le origini sciamaniche della cultura europea* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2014): 155–181.

11 Geo Widengren, *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran: eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung* (Uppsala-Leipzig: A.B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln-Harrassowitz, 1938). On this subject see Göran Larsson, “It's Not Mana, It's High Gods! Another Conceptual History or Another Explanation, but a Similar Problem,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 31/4–5 (2019): 1–10.

12 The book was translated into English and Italian (English translation by Charles Kessler, London: Weidenfeld, 1965; New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1966; Italian translation by Quirino Maffi and Enrichetta Luppis, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1964).

13 In this paper Widengren deals not only with the idea of wisdom in Manichaeism, but outlines some patterns in Mani's prophetic addresses as well. Appreciative comments

and “Der Manichäismus. Kurzgefasste Geschichte der Problemforschung”, in *Gnosis. Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. B. Aland et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978): 278–315; and a monographic essay dedicated to the investigations of the relationship between Islamic and Iranian beliefs, namely *Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and His Ascension (King and Saviour V)* (Uppsala-Wiesbaden: A.B. Lundequistaka Bokhandeln, 1955), which had been preceded by *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala-Leipzig: A.B. Lundequistaka Bokhandeln, 1950). Widengren’s last contribution on the subject is a comprehensive survey, “Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3(2): *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: CUP, 1983): 965–990. Mention should also be made of some of the entries he wrote for the *Encyclopedia Iranica* dealing with anti-Manichaean polemicists, “Alexander of Lycopolis” (1985) and “Augustine” (1987).

The first two books deal with specific issues, whereas Widengren subsequently adopted a more synthetic attitude towards the impressive mass of philological, historical, archaeological, and ethnographical data pertinent to the Near and Middle East. This parallels an increasing penchant towards his own – very peculiar – phenomenological approach. Indeed, one cannot but admire the great learning displayed in these books, especially in the first two, which often shift from a tiny detail to the reconstruction of a more general or universal typology.

Such is the case of the figure of the “apostle”, that is, a person sent by god as his envoy and endowed with special powers. Widengren retraces the roots of the Islamic *rasūl* (“messenger”) in Manichaeism, Mandaism and Syriac Christianity, dealing in particular with Mani’s encounter with his heavenly Twin and Zoroaster’s with Vohu Manah.¹⁴ As a corollary, many other elements are discussed in the volume, such the ascensional pattern and its cognate gestures (the garment, the revelation, the meal consumed in God’s presence, the delivery of some tablets in which a message is written, and so on); these elements are characteristically connected to an enthronement ritual.¹⁵

on this article are put forward in John Kevin Coyle, *Manichaeism and Its Legacy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009): 180 f.

- 14 The question whether Vohu Manah / Wahman (the intellect as guide of the soul) can be identified with the figure of Manohmed rōšn “the luminous intellect” is discussed by Werner Sundermann, “Iranische Personennamen der Manichäer,” *Die Sprache* 36 (1994): 244–70, repr. in Sundermann, *Manichaica*, 485–514: whereas an etymological continuity was supposed by Widengren and other scholars, Sundermann denies this possibility, all while accepting an overlapping of the two figures in terms of contents and functions.
- 15 At the best of our knowledge, Widengren’s book on the “Apostle of God” has received largely favourable feedback in the successive scholarship: see e.g. James R. Porter, “Muhammad’s Journey to Heaven,” *Numen* 21/1 (1974): 64–80; Eshan Yarshater, “The

4 Mani and Manichaeism

The 1961 comprehensive monograph, a short but wide-ranging survey, represented a novelty in the scholarly field of Manichaeism and in some respects can be paralleled to Henri-Charles Puech's, *Le manichéisme* (1949), another fundamental book to which Widengren frequently refers.¹⁶ After a discussion of Mani's life and cultural background in the first chapter, Widengren turns to Manichaean script and literature, as well as the ecclesiastic organization and cult, Manichaean art, as well as the spread of Manichaeism and its subsequent decline, concluding with an investigation of "Mani as personality" – a chapter that in all evidence was considered by the author as representative of his general views, since he decided to include it in the aforementioned collection of Manichaean studies. In this summary, Widengren rejects Mani's 'rationalistic' interpretation (followed *e.g.* by Schaeder), preferring to stress that he was not a dialectical philosopher, but an eclectic-syncretistic theosophist, this being testified to by the choice of mythical imagery as a natural method of expressing his views.

A fresh reading of the book more than fifty years after its publication enables us to highlight some characteristic elements in it. Although conceived of as a synthetic rather than specialistic survey, the book represents a summa and a recapitulation of the most important acquisitions about Mani's life and achievements and Manichaean tenets and practice, often furnished with original excerpts of Mani's own writings. Among various remarkable suggestions, it is worth mentioning that Widengren stresses the importance and the novelty of Manichaean art, the purposes of which clearly fit in with Mani's missionary and universalistic agenda. The use of images is a peculiar characteristic of Manichaean book production, to say nothing of the fact that Mani often portrayed himself as a painter, and points to an early Gnostic background of

Persian Presence in the Islamic World," in *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian, George Sabagh (Cambridge: CUP, 1998): 4–125; Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn Ibn 'Abbas Ascension Discourse* (Albany: Suny Press, 2008); Wesley Williams, "A Body Unlike Bodies: Transcendent Anthropomorphism in Ancient Semitic Tradition and Early Islam," *JAOS* 129/1 (2009): 19–44. The theme of the divine heralds is analysed by John C. Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm. Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). For some links between Islam and Manichaeism see now John C. Reeves, *Prolegomena to a history of Islamicate Manichaeism* (Sheffield & Oakville: Equinox, 2011).

¹⁶ Among the earlier scholars of Manichaeism mention should be made of Franz Cumont as well, whose seminal inquiries have been recently re-edited with a lengthy critical foreword by Michel Tardieu, himself a specialist of Manichaeism: Franz Cumont, *Manichéisme*, edited by D. Praet and M. Tardieu, in collaboration with A. Lannoy and A. Di Rienzo (Rome-Turnhout: Nino Aragno Editore-Brepols, 2017).

symbolic visualizations full of didactic implications, as recent research by the Italian scholar Andrea Piras has demonstrated, reconstructing a pattern of religious images used for therapeutic effects.¹⁷

The compendious nature of the book, moreover, did not prevent Widengren from citing some less known sources, such as the Arabic account of Manichaean persecutions, or giving some interesting details about the ‘mysterious’ sect of the Quqites, according to whom humans share strength, movement and thought with God, in whose image they are created, although it is for the same reason they revolt against him and wage war.¹⁸ This myth has some resemblances with that of Gnostic “temptation of the Archons”.¹⁹ Other notable outcomes concern the contacts between Buddhism and certain particular aspects of Manichaeism such as the *bema*, which is regarded as the ‘voided’ flesh, and which Antonino Forte also detected in Chinese Manichaean texts.²⁰

5 Manichaeism, Gnosticism and the Question of Syncretism

Widengren’s central thesis is that the core of Manichaeism preserves an Iranian (more specifically, Zurvanite) tradition,²¹ although the multiple influences

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- 17 Andrea Piras, *Verba Lucis. Scrittura, immagine e libro nel manicheismo* (Milan: Mimesis, 2012). See precedently Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982); Zsuzsanna Gulácsi, *Mani’s Pictures: The didactic images of the Manichaeans from Sasanian Mesopotamia to Uygur Central Asia and Tang-Ming China* (Leiden-Boston: E.J. Brill, 2015).
- 18 Cfr. the subsequent in-depth research by Hendrik Jan Wilhelm Drijvers, “Quq and the Quqites: An Unknown Sect in Edessa in the 2nd century AD,” *Numen* 14/2 (1967): 104–129.
- 19 See for example the Gnostic exegesis of the Genesis provided in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NH C II,4), with the modern commentaries of Bentley Layton, “The Hypostasis of the Archons,” *HThR* 67 (1974): 351–425; Id., “The Hypostasis of the Archons (Conclusion),” *HThR* 69 (1976): 31–101; Michel Roberge and Bernard Barc (eds.), *L’Hypostase des archontes. Traité gnostique sur l’origine de l’homme, du monde et des archontes (NH II,4), suivi de Noréa (NH IX,27,11–29,5)* (Laval-Louvain: Presses de l’Université Laval-Peeters, 1980); Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *The Nature of the Archons: A Study in the Soteriology of a Gnostic Treatise from Nag Hammadi (CGII, 4)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1985).
- 20 Antonino Forte, “Deux études sur le manichéisme chinois,” *T’oung Pao* 59 (1972): 220–253, esp. 238.
- 21 On Zurvanism, as well as classical studies (such as those by Zaehner and Boyce), see more recently Kianoosh Rezania, *Die zoroastrische Zeitvorstellung. Eine Untersuchung über Zeit- und Ewigkeitskonzepte und die Frage des Zurvanismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), and Albert F. De Jong, “Zurvanism,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zurvanism>, who adopts a ‘deconstructionist’ perspective. The complex question of the setting of Zurvanism into Iranian dualism is also approached by Gherardo Gnoli, “L’évolution du dualisme iranien et le problème zurvanite,” *RHR* 201/2 (1984): 115–138. In accordance with a sort of contemporary *Zeitgeist*, shared by Nyberg,

of Mandaeism, Buddhism, Mithraism, and Christianity on Mani's life and thought are not denied. Yet, although in his view the basic elements of Mani's religious system are Iranian (as was his lineage), important qualifications are added, when Widengren, noting the presence of conspicuous Christian elements, points out that Mani employed imagery derived from Mesopotamian Gnostics with a Christian background, *i.e.* the Mandaeans. Widengren, in fact, states that Mandaeism, as it was practiced around the third century AD, belongs to the Iranian type of Gnosticism. For him, therefore, Mani adopted the language of the Syrian church with its inherent, predominant Gnostic element.²² This is, for example, shown in the insistence on purification rituals.²³ It might be added that in the same period Hans Jonas also described Manichaeism as a particular type of Iranian Gnosticism²⁴ and that in some

Die Religionen, Widengren tended to the idea that Zurvanism was originally a Median or a Parthian tradition, which had been incorporated into Zoroastrianism subsequently: cf. Widengren, *Hochgottglaube*. For a criticism of this view see for example Richard Nelson Frye, "Zurvanism again," *HTHR* 52 (1959): 63–73.

- 22 The view that Manichaeism is basically a Christian Gnostic 'heresy' and that Mani's Christ is at one time a splendid saviour and a guiltless sufferer is discussed by Eugen Rose, *Die Manichäische Christologie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979), a work which originates in a 1941 dissertation that was thoroughly revised in the light of the discovery of the *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*. My attention was firstly attracted to this work thanks to Wolfgang Lentz, review of H.-Ch. Puech, *Le Manichéisme, Oriens* 5 (1952): 142–143.
- 23 This idea instead pertains to an Elkesaite milieu: cf. Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, "Tools and Tasks: Elchasaite and Manichaean Purification Rituals," *The Journal of Religion* 66/4 (1986): 399–411; Gerard A.M. Rouwhorst, "Das manichäische Bemaifest und das Passaifest der syrischen Christen," *VC* 35/4 (1981): 397–411.
- 24 Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); Id., *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist 1. Die mythologische Gnosis. Mit einer Einleitung zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) distinguished different types of Gnosticism, according to their characteristics and milieus: the Iranian, the Syrian-Egyptian, the Alexandrian-ecclesiastical, and the Neoplatonic. In his view (at that time still influenced by the *Religionsgeschichtliche* approach in the wake of his mentor Rudolf Bultmann), Mani fully adopted the Iranian version of dualism, as is shown by the radical dualism of a good and an evil principle, in contrast to the approach taken in the Syrian-Alexandrian tradition which considered evil as the result of a divine tragedy originating within the godhead. Relying on the sources at his disposal (mainly the disputations of the Church Fathers and the documents discovered at Turfan) and considering parallel texts such as the "Hymn of the Pearl" in the *Acts of Thomas*, or the *Odes of Solomon*, Jonas provided a still invaluable synopsis, which highlights how Mandaeism expresses an archaic model of gnostic thinking and pity, and how Manichaeism can be counted as the most important product of Gnosticism, for it is the only gnostic system which had a historically widespread universal force. Analyzing the different sources underlying Manichaean doctrine,

respects his conclusions come close to those expressed by Widengren, who was dominated by the conception of an Iranian Gnosticism.²⁵

In the same vein, an interesting case is, in my opinion, the assimilation between Mani and Marcion, whose growth in a strongly Iranianized environment might contribute to explaining the radical dualism (or ditheism) that inspires their systems. Thus, Mani can be regarded as the heir to Marcion and Bardesanes, the former being born inside the boundaries of the old Iranian kingdom of Pontus, and the latter belonging to an Edessan milieu.²⁶ Although highly speculative (and as such treated with due skepticism), this observation is very interesting, especially in the light of a deeper knowledge of the degree of Iranianization and persistence of local elements in this area.²⁷ Whereas Marcionism survived in the East up until the fifth century, it might be worth noticing that many of the alleged anti-Marcionitic writings (either in Greek and Syriac and even in Latin, such as the anonymous *Carmen aduersus Marcionitas*,

Jonas supposed that the cosmogony essentially derived from Zoroastrianism, the eschatology was influenced by Christianity, and the ethics reflected Buddhist tenets.

25 See Geo Widengren, "Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 4 (1952): 27–114; see also Gherardo Gnoli, "La Gnosi Iranica: Per una impostazione nuova del problema," in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo. Colloquio di Messina 13–18 Aprile 1966*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), 281–290, who, basically, equates 'Iranian Gnosticism' and Manichaeism, outlining the differences between the Zoroastrian and the Manichaean *Weltanschauung*.

26 On Marcion: Hendrik Jan Wilhelm Drijvers, "Marcionism in Syria: Principles, Problems, Polemics," *The Second Century* 6 (1987–1988): 153–172 discusses the question as well, and inclines to reject such a hypothesis; see also Carsten Colpe, *Iranier – Aramäer – Hebräer – Hellenen. Iranische Religionen und ihre Westbeziehungen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 697–703; Nils Arne Pedersen, "Some Comments on the Relationship between Marcionism and Manichaeism," in *Apocryphon Severini presented to Søren Giversen*, ed. Per Bilde, Helge Kjær Nielsen and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (Aarhus: University Press, 1993), 166–177. On Bardesanes and Mani: Hendrik Jan Wilhelm Drijvers, "Mani and Bardaisan," in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974): 459–469; Barbara Ehlers, "Bardesanes von Edessa – ein syrischer Gnostiker," *ZKG* 81 (1970): 334–351, repr. in *Was ist Gnosis. Studien zum frühen Christentum, zu Marcion und zur kaiserzeitlichen Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 355–374; Ead., "Mani und Bardesanes. Zur Entstehung des manichäischen Systems," in *Synkretismus im syrischpersischen Kulturgebiet. Bericht über ein Symposium in Reinhausen bei Göttingen in der Zeit vom 4. bis 8. Oktober 1971*, ed. Albert Dietrich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975): 122–143 (repr. in *Was ist Gnosis*: 375–395); Alberto Camplani, "Rivisitando Bardesane. Note sulle fonti siriane del bardesanismismo e sulla sua collocazione storico-religiosa," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 19 (1998): 586–595.

27 Cfr. e.g. James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

of the 5th cent.) indeed refer to Manichaeism as polemical target.²⁸ It might be also added that influences of Iranian dualism have been postulated for another important figure of the second century, the Greek philosopher Numenius, who came from Apamea on the Orontes, in the province of Syria.²⁹

In this respect, it is worth outlining two important elements, the first of which is the notion of syncretism. Like Gnosticism, whose parasitic attitude towards earlier traditions has long since been acknowledged,³⁰ Manichaeism also appears to have drawn on different sources. Mani's Jewish-Christian background, that of an Elkesaite baptist sect in Mesopotamia, allowed him to familiarize with heterodox Christian doctrines,³¹ whereas a sojourn in the

28 Quite interestingly Alain Le Boulluec, "Mani déguisé en monophysite," in *Gnose et manichéisme. Entre les oasis d'Égypte et la Route de la Soie: Hommage à Jean-Daniel Dubois*, ed. Anna van den Kerchove and Luciana G. Soares Santoprete (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 333–348, shows how the name of Mani functioned as a portmanteau of Monophysism in controversial literature.

29 John Dillon, *The Middelplatonists* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 206; and especially Christopher Elsas, "Iranische und griechische Verständnismöglichkeiten der Fragmente des Numenius von Apameia und der Chaldaeischen Orakel," in *Hierarchie und Ritual. Zur philosophischen Spiritualität in der Spätantike*, ed. Chiara O. Tommasi, Luciana G. Soares Santoprete, and Helmut Seng (Heidelberg: Winter, 2018), 225–250.

30 Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987): 55 and 286, who relies on Ugo Bianchi, *Probleme der Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964). It ought to be noted, however, that, far from being a magmatic or indistinct container of diverse traditions, as suggested by some recent scholars, such an attitude of incorporating elements from Jewish, Iranian, Greek or Christian doctrines is functional to a precise *Weltanschauung*. See also Karen L. King, "The Politics of Syncretism and the Problem of Defining Gnosticism," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 27/3 (2001): 461–479.

31 While some research (e.g. Marie-Louise Chaumont, *La christianisation de l'empire iranien, des origines aux grandes persécutions du IVème siècle* (Leuven: Peeters, 1988); Rika Gyselen (ed.), *Chrétiens en terre d'Iran I. Implantation et acculturation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006) has focused on the Christian minority in the Sasanian empire, the links between Mani and Elchasaï were first investigated by Albert Henrichs "Mani and the Babylonian Baptists: A Historical Confrontation," *HSCPh* 77 (1973): 23–59, who confirms, in the light of the Cologne Codex, the statement that the Elkesaites were 'pre-Manichaean Manichees'. See also Kurt Rudolph, "Die Bedeutung des Kölner Mani-Codex für die Manichäismusforschung," in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 471–486. Many elements in Manichaeism can be explained as the continuation or adaptation of Elkesaite ritual or theology, although there are some important differences as well (especially in terms of purity and asceticism). These conclusions partly contradict Widengren's assumption that Mani's baptists were to be identified with the Mandaean. More in general, much ink has been spilt on Mani's attitude towards Judaism, namely whether his neglect is the result of an anti-Judaic milieu like the Mandaean one or, conversely, whether he was acquainted with Jewish texts and doctrines: see Jacob Neusner, "How Much Iranian in

Indus valley region during his maturity partially introduced him to Buddhism or Jainism;³² but he spent most of his life within the deeply Zoroastrian-dominated atmosphere of the Sasanian Empire, in which, as we shall discuss later on, Manichaeism represented both a religious and a political challenge. Furthermore, its undoubtedly universalistic and proselytizing character is reflected in the Manichaean capability to adapt to the different environments the missionaries and devotees entered in contact with, resulting in texts that present a deep degree of assimilation: for example, it has been highlighted that the Coptic Manichaica contain more Christian elements than the other Manichaean texts; likewise, Chinese writings share Daoist and Buddhist terminology, and the same impression is gained from the description of Manichaeism by the Arabic authors.³³

Jewish Babylonia?," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95/2 (1985): 184–190. Further light can be shed on this topic by considering the Cologne Codex and, most of all, the *Book of Giants*: John C. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony. Studies in the Book of Giants Traditions* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992), who provides a thorough and extensive study of this text, shows the many Jewish influences of this work, and, in the light of his conclusion, estimates that Mani's Iranian background is to be considered as overrated. See also Werner Sundermann, "Mani's Book of the Giants and the Jewish Book of Enoch. A Case of Terminological Difference and what It Implies," in *Irano-Judaica III*, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994), 40–48, reprinted in Werner Sundermann, *Manichaica Iranica. Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Christiane Reck, Dieter Weber, Claudia Leurini and Antonio Panaino (Rome: ISIAO, 2001), according to whom Mani's literary source was a version of the Jewish Enoch books kept in the community of the Elkesaites, which he supplemented with his gnosticized reading of some Jewish legends learnt in the same community. Simon Mimouni, "Les origines ethnico-religieuses de Mani," in *Pensée grecque et sagesse d'Orient. Hommage à Michel Tardieu*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir Moezzi, Jean-Daniel Dubois, Christelle Jullien and Florence Jullien (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 399–410 suggests that Mani might have been of Jewish origin and that this assumption does not necessarily conflict with the strong rejection of Judaism that informs his doctrine; conversely, this could explain Mani's later doctrinal developments.

- 32 On this subject see Werner Sundermann, "Mani, India and the Manichaean Religion," *South Asian Studies* 2 (1986): 11–19, repr. in Sundermann, *Manichaica*, 199–216; Id., "Manichaeism Meets Buddhism: The Problem of Buddhist Influences on Manichaeism," in *Bauddhavidyāsudhākaraḥ. Studies in Honour of Heinz Bechert on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Petra Kieffer-Pülz and Jens-Uwe Hartmann (Swisttal-Odendorf: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 1997), 647–656, repr. in Sundermann, *Manichaica*, 545–556. Sunderman supposes that the Manichaean idea of greed and concupiscence might be influenced by Buddhism (Widengren had supposed an Iranian background, namely the Avestan figure of Az); conversely, he denies that Buddhism might have inspired the Manichaean doctrine of metempsychosis.
- 33 L.J.R. Ort, "Mani, Manichaeism, 'Religionswissenschaft,'" *Numen* 15/3 (1968): 191–207, esp. 194. An interesting perspective on the same syncretistic attitude is provided by Paul C. Dille, "Intercrossing in Late Antique Eurasia: Loss, Corruption, and Canon

Widengren therefore seems to be prone to discuss Manichaeism in keeping with his general assumption that it represents an instance of undoubtable religious syncretism. Moreover, it is a deliberate syncretistic product for the very particular and historical reason that its founder, Mani (according to a common pattern in founded religions), believed that within him lay the summation of all previous religious wisdom:

In talking about religious syncretism by referring to Manichaeism, Widengren is simply giving one more illustration of the characteristic methodological tendency. He does not proceed by fitting instances to types, nor is his ultimate intention the correlation of types. Instead, the interpretive categories are created in order to treat very specific phenomena. Manichaeism is deliberate religious syncretism. To call it that is to acknowledge its own understanding of itself, and this is to refer it to the frame of reference within which it can be treated.³⁴

In this respect, as Kurt Rudolph already remarked in his review, rather than emphasizing every element of Manichaeism and attributing it to a general Zoroastrian/Iranian influence, it would perhaps be better to speak of multiple

Formation,” *Journal of World History* 24/1 (2013): 25–70, who, however, questions the “religious-historical” approach. Dilley relies on the insights of the *Histoire Croisée* school and its engagement with questions of transnationalism and transculturation which take into account both local developments and processes of exchanges. In his view, Mani is a paradigmatic representative of the mechanism of cultural and religious intercrossing in Late Antique Eurasia.

- 34 Walter H. Capps, “Geo Widengren on Syncretism: On Parsing Uppsala Methodological Tendencies,” *Numen* 20/2 (1973): 163–185, esp. 183; the article begins with a quotation of Widengren himself, “I do not think that I ever ran the risk of being classified as a specialist in syncretism, but it has been of great interest to me to see how far my work could be said to be useful to the study of syncretism”. Jonas’ comment on Mani’s syncretistic tendencies falls in the same province: “it must not be supposed because of Mani’s syncretistic method that his system itself was a syncretistic one. It was on the contrary the most monumental single embodiment of the gnostic religious principle for whose doctrinal and mythological representation the elements of older religions were consciously employed.” See, Jonas, *The Gnostic*, 208. Widengren expressed his views in an article specifically dedicated to this subject: see Geo Widengren, “Synkretismus in der syrischen Christenheit,” in *Synkretismus im syrischpersischen Kulturgebiet. Bericht über ein Symposium in Reinhausen bei Göttingen in der Zeit vom 4. bis 8. Oktober 1971*, ed. Albert Dietrich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 38–64. Manfred Hutter, *Mani und die Sasaniden. Der iranisch-gnostische Synkretismus einer Weltreligion* (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1988), 5–15 provides a useful synthesis on the notion of syncretism applied to Manichaeism.

sources, some of which are clearly of Hellenistic origin.³⁵ A remarkable example is Widengren's treatment of the technical term *metaggismos* (used to describe the transmigration of the souls): he connects it to an Indo-Iranian and even Ossetian background, suggesting the idea of melting or fabrication (*Umschmelzen*, *Umschmieden*), whereas the more evident Greek etymology (attested to also by its exact Syriac equivalent *tashpikā*), which relates the word to the notion of pouring a liquid into a different vessel, is completely neglected.³⁶

6 Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism

Likewise, the same observations can be made for the question of Mesopotamian elements. Widengren's thesis is not so straightforward as the title of his 1946 book would suggest, and the author is of course aware of the fact that

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- 35 Kurt Rudolph, "Review of G. Widengren, *Mani und der Manichaeismus*," *TLZ* 87/12 (1962): 913–917. For such sources see Alexander Böhlig, "Denkformen hellenistischer Philosophie im Manichäismus," *Perspektiven der Philosophie, Neues Jahrbuch* 12 (1986): 11–39, and Wolfgang Fauth, "Syzygos und Eikon. Manis himmlischer Doppelgänger vor dem Hintergrund der platonischen Urbild-Abbild Theorie," *ibid.*: 41–68. Recently Jason BeDuhn, "Secrets of Heaven: Manichaeism in its Late Antique Context," in *Gnose et manichéisme. Entre les oasis d'Égypte et la Route de la Soie: Hommage à Jean-Daniel Dubois*, ed. Anna van den Kerchove and Luciana G. Soares Santoprete (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 195–214 stresses some Greek elements in Manichaeism, which he links to late antique syncretistic atmosphere; Frantz Grenet, "Démons iraniens et divinités grecques dans le manichéisme: à propos de quelques passages de textes sogdiens de Turfan," in *Pensée grecque et sagesse d'Orient. Hommage à Michel Tardieu*, ed. Mohammed Ali Amir Moezzi, Jean-Daniel Dubois, Christelle Jullien, and Florence Jullien (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 283–292 shows how Greek elements are at work in iconography as well.
- 36 This was already noted by Colpe in his 1968 review, now published in Id., *Iranier*: 139–144, esp. 142. On this term see also Henri-Charles Puech, "La conception manichéenne du salut," in *Sur le Manichéisme et autres essais* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 5–101, esp. 22 f.; Giovanni Casadio, "The Manichaeism Metempsychosis: Typology and historical Roots," in *Studia Manichaica. Internationaler Kongress zum Manichäismus, Bonn 6–10 August 1989*, ed. Gernot Wiessner and Hans Joachim Klimkeit (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 105–130; Werner Sundermann, "Manichaeism i. General Survey," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/manichaeism-i-general-survey> (retrieved March 2021), who cites the rendering in Persian languages: Middle Persian: *wardišn*, "turning"; Parthian: *zādmurd*, Sogdian *zādmurδ*, both meaning "birth-death". Gábor Kósa, "The Sea of Fire as a Chinese Manichaeism Metaphor: Source Materials for Mapping an Unnoticed Image," *Asia Major* 24/2 (2011): 1–52, discusses the cognate Chinese expressions 生死煩惱海 *shengsifannaohai* or 生死苦海 *shengsikuhai*, "life and death ocean of afflictions". Williams Jackson and Abraham Valentine, "The Doctrine of Metempsychosis in Manichaeism," *JAOS* 45 (1925): 246–268, is a pioneer inquiry into this subject.

postulating a single origin or source will result in an oversimplification, precisely because of the syncretistic character of Manichaeism. He demonstrates, in fact, that some Manichaean terms already occur in Mandaean and Christian writings, and even go back to pagan texts and mythology. In the same way, Widengren, who had already worked on the Mandaeans for his *Diplomarbeit*, and would later edit the collective volume in the *Wege der Forschung* series in 1982,³⁷ retraces Christian influences in Manichaean tenets or rituals, as in the case of baptism or in the images of the ship, the physician, the messenger, the tree of life, or of the bridal chamber, by means of interlinking argumentation that involves, for example, Bardesanes, Mandaean literature, and Ephrem the Syrian or the *Acts of Thomas*. Although some ideas were questionable and thus criticized (mainly by Carsten Colpe), such as positing that the Manichaean myth of the suffering Saviour or Great Man ultimately derives from an Iranian interpretation of the Mesopotamian motif of the Tammuz-Dumuzi story, the general assumption can be retained, namely that the basic thoughts in Mani's religious system are Iranian, mediated by Mesopotamian Gnostic communities with Christian sympathies. Widengren argues for a common background of shared language and imagery, which, however, acquires a different significance according to the different contexts it is used in. In particular, he stresses the idea that such a twofold root (Iranian and Mesopotamian) is the outcome of a political approach adopted by Mani mirroring that of the Sasanian empire whose rule extended over these two territories.³⁸

In addition, the strong ties between Manichaeism and Mandaeism are to be read as the result of a lively interest for Mandaeism among Scandinavian scholars after the Second World War, such as Waldemar Sundberg, Eric Segelberg and Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, who aimed at demonstrating that Manichaeism borrowed from Mandaeism.³⁹ The same instance of syncretistic elements,

37 Geo Widengren (ed.), *Der Mandäismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982).

38 Cf. Colpe, *Iranier*: 140. See already Sidney Smith, "Review of G. Widengren, Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1948): 69–72. Scholarship now inclines to favour Böhlig's suggestion, namely that this is a deliberate subversion of the Christian idea of Jesus' self-sacrifice: cf. Alexander Böhlig, "The New Testament and the Concept of the Manichean Myth," in *The New Testament and Gnosis. Essays in honour of Robert McL. Wilson*, ed. Alastair H.B. Logan, Alexander J.M. Wedderburn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 90–104. A reassessment of the question is provided by Antonio Panaino, "Strategies of Manichaean Religious Propaganda." In *Turfan Revisited. The First Century of Research into the Arts and Cultures of the Silk Road* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2004), 249–255, who outlines Mani's propagandistic agenda.

39 This sketch is to be now supplemented by Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Charles G. Häberl, "Dissimulation or

according to Widengren, is detectable in Mandaean literature and religion, where he identifies multiple stratifications, starting from an original kernel of Jewish elements. Further, some Accadian loanwords testify to late Babylonian material, not to mention a series of motifs and rites that point to a specific type of Babylonian religion, whose patterns of redemption are highlighted by means of water purification and exorcisms and, in the last analysis, highlight a straight line from the ancient royal ritual of Mesopotamia to Mandaean baptism. A third element is to be recognized in the Iranian (or more precisely Parthian) impact, transmitted by means of Median magicians. Iranian features include ritual elements and myths or teaching such as the crucial pattern of the *saluator saluandus*, whereas earlier influences lie in cultic institution and language.⁴⁰ To maintain this hypothesis Widengren relies on the *Haran-Gauaita*, where the legendary settlement of the Mandaeans in Media and then in Babylonia under king Adban II are presented, and on Theodor bar Konai, who stresses the connection of Mandaean circles to Adiabene.⁴¹ At the same time Widengren also suggests a probable connection between Mandaeism and Islam, highlighting both the term *sabi'iun* as a designation of the early Muslims and their cultic purification rituals.⁴² Its doctrinal development is therefore

Assimilation? The Case of the Mandaeans," *Numen* 60/5–6 (2013): 586–615.

- 40 See for instance also Geo Widengren, "Baptism and Enthronement in some Jewish-Christian Documents," in *The Saviour God. Comparative Studies in the Concept of Salvation presented to E.O. James*, ed. Samuel G.F. Brandon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963), 205–217; Id., "Bardesanes von Edessa und der syrisch-mesopotamische Gnostizismus," in *The Many and the One. Essays on Religion in the Graeco-Roman World, presented to H. Ludin Jansen*, ed. Peder Borgen (Trondheim: TAPIR, 1985), 153–181.
- 41 See recently Häberl, "Dissimulation": 589 f., who also takes into account the semi-Zoroastrian character of Mandaeism, which was favoured in the first phase of Mandaean scholarship, being conversely neglected especially during the Sixties and Seventies of the past century. A reassessment of the whole question is provided by Kurt Rudolph, "Mandaeans iii. Interaction with Iranian Religion," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mandaeans-iii> (retrieved March 2021), who prudently notes how "the subject, however, requires further investigations"; nevertheless, he acknowledges that, as it was already understood by Widengren, a considerable stock of Middle Iranian (Parthian) loanwords is attested to in Mandaean literature. Furthermore, among demonstrable Persian traces in Mandaeanism one can count ritual and practice elements rather than mythologemata or theologumena, although these still preserve a basic dualistic orientation.
- 42 For this summary see Kurt Rudolph, "Problems of a History of the Development of the Mandaean Religion," *History of Religions* 8/3 (1969): 210–235, who concludes: "without going into particulars, the ideas and views of Widengren [with reference to his *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism* and to a short entry on the Mandaeans in the *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, published in 1961] regarding the three strata and the age of Mandaean tradition and its carriers are fundamentally acceptable. Widengren understood how to relate certain neglected concerns of Brandt (and also of Kessler!) to the views

the natural result of the long period over which Mandaean literature extends. This seems demonstrated by the unquestionable presence of some Gnostic elements, such as the fall of the soul into this sublunar sphere, the reign of darkness, whose liberation can be achieved through the help of a revealer or mediator of salvation, who redeems and escorts the souls in their way back.⁴³ Together with these patterns, which are, in some respects attenuated, for example the allowance of marriage and procreation (probably because of Jewish influences),⁴⁴ the idea of Persian or even Manichaean lore had already been maintained by Wilhelm Brandt,⁴⁵ and more recent research, such as the one by Edwin Yamauchi,⁴⁶ is in agreement with the idea that Mandaeanism might have been influenced by Iranian doctrines and beliefs.

Even though such a pan-Iranian perspective was strongly criticized from the 1960s onwards (along, however, with a fair and appreciative acknowledgement of his expertise and erudition), Widengren insisted on the importance of Iranian influence throughout his career, basing his judgement also on ancient sources that closely connect Manichaeism with Persia.⁴⁷ I think that this was certainly due to his scholarly background and personal inclination, but was also partly the result of the *Zeitgeist*.

of Lidzbarski and Reitzenstein. In this connection, W. Baumgartner worked in advance of him" (218 f.). Carsten Colpe, "Die Thomaspsalmen als chronologischer Fixpunkt in der Geschichte der orientalischen Gnosis," *JAC* 7 (1964): 77–93 deals with some passages of the *Manichaean Psalms of Thomas* demonstrating their dependence on Mandaean literature.

43 See also the comprehensive survey of Geo Widengren, "Salvation in Iranian Religion," in *Man and his salvation. Studies in memory of S.G.F. Brandon*, ed. Eric J. Sharpe and John R. Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), 315–326, which also takes into account Zoroastrianism.

44 This hypothesis was suggested by Rudolph, "Problems," 231. As is well known, Rudolph argued for the prevalence of a 'Western' (i.e. Semitic) background of Mandaeanism. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Jacob Neusner, "Jews and Judaism under Iranian Rule: Bibliographical Reflections," *History of Religions* 8/2 (1968), 159–177, esp. 167, appreciates Widengren's erudition and treatment of Jewish sources.

45 Wilhelm Brandt, *Elchasaï ein Religionsstifter und sein Werk. Beiträge zur jüdischen christlichen und allgemeinen Religionsgeschichte* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1912).

46 Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970). The question is now discussed by Ionuț Daniel Băncilă, *Die mandäische Religion und der aramäische Hintergrund des Manichäismus: Forschungsgeschichte, Textvergleiche, historisch-geographische Verortung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018).

47 He recalls, for example, Diocletian's edict against the Manichees, where the Persian origin is openly mentioned (*veluti nova et inopinata prodigia in hunc mundum de Persica adversaria nobis gente progressa vel orta ... scaevas leges Persarum*, *Coll. Mos. Rom.* 15.3), or Augustine (*contra Secundinum* 2). On Diocletian's passage see Umberto Roberto, "Beatissimum saeculum: Diocleziano, la Persia e la persecuzione dei manichei," in *Tolleranza religiosa in età tardoantica*, ed. Arnaldo Marcone, Umberto Roberto, and Ignazio Tantillo (Cassino: Edizioni Università di Cassino, 2014), 179–214.

7 Challenging Widengren's Approach

An interesting example of this attitude is shown by the treatment of the Cologne Mani Codex, the discovery and publication of which took place when Widengren had already published almost all his Manichaean studies.⁴⁸ As is well known, the Cologne Codex challenged many *idées reçues* about Mani, in particular by providing further evidence of his Elkesaite background.⁴⁹ Widengren never addressed the question, except for a passage in his 1983 synthesis, where he deals with the question of the Elkesaite milieu in which Mani grew up, maintaining a somewhat sceptical attitude. Always speaking in general and rather dismissive terms of a "Greek papyrus", Widengren describes the codex as

... a composite text, partly a collection of Mani's autobiographical sayings, transmitted by some pupils, partly a series of biographical notices narrated in the third person, and partly secondary enlargements concerned with the bringers of revelation before Mani. The chronological arrangement is obviously the work of the compiler or editor. Full of legendary traits, the biography is seemingly written more with the intention of emphasizing certain aspects of Manichaeism than relating the events in Mani's life. The manner of exposition is much more abstract than in the fragments of the prophet's autobiography found elsewhere, e.g. in the Fihrist, in the Coptic Homilies or in the Turfan texts. From these scattered fragments we are able to reconstruct at least some periods of Mani's life.⁵⁰

48 The text was published by A. Henrichs and L. Koenen in different issues of the *ZPE* journal (19 [1975]; 32 [1978]; 44 [1981] and 48 [1982]) and was later collected in a single volume: Ludwig Koenen and Cornelia Römer (eds.), *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex. Der Kölner Mani-Kodex. Abbildungen und diplomatischer Text* (Bonn: R. Habelt, 1985); *Id.*, *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex. Über das Werden seines Leibes. Kritische Edition* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1988). See also Albert Henrichs, "The Cologne Mani Codex Reconsidered," *HSCP* 83 (1979): 339–367, and the collective volumes edited by Luigi Cirillo and Amneris Roselli, *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis. Atti del Simposio Internazionale (Rende – Amantea, 3–7 settembre 1984)* (Cosenza: Marra, 1986); *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis. Atti del Secondo simposio internazionale (Cosenza 27–28 maggio 1988)* (Cosenza: Marra, 1990); a useful summary is to be read in Werner Sundermann "Cologne Mani Codex," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cologne-mani-codex-parchment> (retrieved March 2021).

49 On this sect see the reconstructions by Luigi Cirillo, *Elchasai e gli Elchasaïti. Un contributo alla storia delle comunità giudeo-cristiane* (Cosenza: Marra, 1984) and Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasai* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985).

50 Geo Widengren, "Manichaeism and its Iranian Background," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3(2): *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge:

As far as the Elkesaite question is concerned, Widengren notes how some traits of this little known sect run counter to the essential doctrines of Manichaeism, whereas other points are in agreement with its teachings (the practise of vegetarianism, but also some criticism against the Mosaic law and the alleged interpolations of the New Testament), to conclude that:

... probably the truth is that there was merged into Mandaeism a group of baptists with at least partly Elkesaite doctrines. This is demonstrated by a passage in the Mandaean liturgies, where the seven witnesses required at baptism are in exact agreement with the number in Elkesaism.⁵¹

As far as Manichaeism is concerned (and Gnosticism as well), the majority of scholars nowadays favour the hypothesis of a (Jewish-)Christian background.⁵² Yet, a total denial of these Iranian roots runs the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. And it is also true that some prominent scholars of Parthian and Sasanian literature, such as Gherardo Gnoli, still maintain this view. According to Gnoli, in dealing with the dualistic development of the doctrine of the devil as 'prince of this world';

il est difficile de ne pas penser qu'un lien quelconque ait uni le dualisme manichéen au dualisme zoroastrien. Il est a priori peu vraisemblable que les deux prophètes suprêmes du dualisme, Zoroastre et Mani – ce dernier par surcroît fondateur d'une nouvelle religion universelle, qui présente une forme fortement iranienne ou iranisée d'une Gnose (je partage l'interprétation iranistique du manichéisme, qui a eu de nombreux et illustres défenseurs, comme F.C. Baur, R. Reitzenstein, H.S. Nyberg; interprétation qui a récemment été magistralement illustrée par G. Widengren dans l'introduction au volume 168 des *Wege der Forschung*, consacré au manichéisme) –, ne soient pas reliés de quelque façon, même si, jusqu'à présent, nous nous sommes surtout arrêtés sur

CUP, 1983): 965–990, esp. 966 f. The same attitude is shown in his Introduction to the collective volume *Der Manichäismus* (1977²).

51 That the Elkesaites were merged into a Mandaean group is maintained also by Kurt Rudolph, "Gnosticism," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gnosticism> (retrieved March 2021).

52 Exemplary of this attitude, initially and primarily pursued by Alexander Böhlig, is the general survey of Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992); see also Kurt Rudolph, "Mani und der Iran," in *Manichaica selecta. Studies presented to Professor Julien Ries on the occasion of his seventieth birthday*, ed. Alois van Tongerloo and Søren Giversen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 307–321.

les différences qui caractérisent la pensée zoroastrienne par rapport à la pensée manichéenne.... C'est dans cette direction – il me semble – que l'étude des rapports entre la religion iranienne préislamique et non seulement le gnosticisme et le manichéisme, mais aussi le judaïsme postexilique et le christianisme primitif, doit être poursuivie ou, mieux encore, reprise. C'est la voie tracée par l'œuvre magistrale de W. Bousset et par les travaux de la 'religionsgeschichtliche Schule'.⁵³

There is definitely evidence for a notable impact of Zoroastrian, and more precisely Zurvanite, as maintained by Widengren, ideas on Manichean cosmology and cosmogony, especially as far as its radical ethical and ontological dualism is concerned, without neglecting, however, some fundamental differences between the two systems, which somehow stem from a Gnostic background, especially with the insistence on pessimistic features (the world as a prison; the nature of matter, etc.):⁵⁴ according to Kurt Rudolph, for example, the Gnostic dualism that informs Manichaeism cannot be explained without implying a Zoroastrian legacy.

Moreover, recent scholarship seems to have reconsidered the adaptation or development of some undeniable Iranian/Zoroastrian elements in Manichaean terminology, mythology or ritual, sometimes in polemical terms, among which the *Lichtsymbolik* or the *Himmelsreise der Seele* (and probably the doctrine of the three ages).⁵⁵ In some respects, we are faced with the same question, namely whether Zoroastrianism made an impact on Judaism or early Christianity, in particular as far as apocalypticism is concerned.⁵⁶

53 Gnoli, "L'évolution," 128 and 137. See also Id., *De Zoroastre à Mani. Quatre leçons au Collège de France* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1985), 74 ff. The latter work presupposes a sort of continuity from Zoroaster to Mani, as the two being part of a religious *lignée*.

54 These traits are clearly outlined by Ugo Bianchi, "Sur le dualisme de Mani," in *Manichaica selecta. Studies presented to Professor Julien Ries on the occasion of his seventieth birthday*, ed. Alois van Tongerloo and Søren Giversen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 9–17; Giovanni Casadio, "Abenteuer des Dualismus auf der Seidenstraße," in *Studia Manichaica. IV. Internationaler Kongreß zum Manichäismus, Berlin, 14.–18. Juli 1997*, ed. Ronald E. Emmerick, Werner Sundermann, and Peter Zieme (Berlin: AkademieVerlag, 2000), 55–82, who compares some Manichaean concepts with the Gnostic text of the *Paraphrase of Shem* (NHG VIII 1); Concetta Giuffrè Scibona, "How Monotheistic Is Mani's Dualism? Once More on Monotheism and Dualism in Manichaean Gnosis," *Numen* 48/4 (2001): 444–467.

55 Rudolph, "Mani": 318, with reference to Widengren's afterword in Wilhelm Brandt, *Das Schicksal der Seele nach dem Tode*, mit einem Nachwort zum Neudruck von Geo Widengren (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).

56 The question of Iranian apocalypticism and its links with Jewish apocalypses has received different interpretations according to the perspective of each scholar who investigated it. Scholars such as Mary Boyce, "On the antiquity of Zoroastrian apocalyptic,"

8 Iranian Elements in Manichaeism: A New Perspective

In order to evaluate Widengren's attitude towards Manichaeism, we might however address the issue from a different perspective, namely to regard Manichaeism as a 'reaction' to Zoroastrianism: as an emerging minority in Iran, this newly established movement had to deal with the long-since established and state-supported Zoroastrian faith of that region, so that it became almost imperative to elaborate convincing responses to Zoroastrianism.

BSOAS 47 (1984): 57–75; Gherardo Gnoli, "Asavan. Contributo allo studio del Libro di Arda Viraz," in *Iranica*, ed. Gherardo Gnoli and Adriano Valerio Rossi (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1979), 387–452; Anders Hultgård, "Forms and Origins of Iranian Apocalypticism," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, ed. D. Hellholm (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 387–411; and Widengren himself (Geo Widengren, "Iran and Israel in Parthian Times with Special Regard to the Ethiopic Book of Enoch," *Temenos* 2 (1966): 138–177; Id., "Révélation et prédiction dans les Gāthās," in *Iranica*, ed. Gherardo Gnoli and Adriano Vincenzo Rossi (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1979), 339–364), suggested that the original setting of apocalyptic genre is to be found in Persian culture and religion – a view opposed, although unsuccessfully, by Philippe Gignoux, "Nouveaux regards sur l'apocalyptique iranienne," *CRAI* 130 (1986): 334–346; Id., "Sur l'inexistence d'un Bahman Yasht avestique," *Journal of the Asian and African Studies* 32 (1986): 53–64; Id., "Apocalypses et voyages extra-terrestres dans l'Iran mazdéen," in *Apocalypses et voyages dans l'au-delà*, ed. C. Kappler (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 351–374; and earlier by David Flusser, "Hystaspes and John of Patmos," in *Irano-Judaica: Studies relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 2–75; see Frantz Grenet, "Y a-t-il une composante iranienne dans l'apocalyptique judéo-chrétienne? Nouveaux regards sur un vieux problème," *Archaeus* 11–12 (2007–2008): 15–36. In the same line it is also possible to mention recent research, such as Geo, Widengren, Anders Hultgård, and Marc Philonenko, *Apocalyptique iranienne et dualisme qoumrânien* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1995); Andrea Piras, "Presenza e attesa del Rinnovatore nello zoroastrismo," in *Il Salvatore del mondo. Prospettive messianiche e di salvezza nell'Oriente antico*, ed. B. Melasecchi (Rome: ISIAO, 2003), 1–28; Marco Frenschkowski, "Parthica apocalyptica. Mythologie und Militärwesen iranischer Völker in ihrer Rezeption durch die Johannesoffenbarung," *JAC* 47 (2004): 16–57. The recent study by Domenico Agostini, "Popular Apocalyphtics in Pahlavi Literature Context: the Jāmāsp-Nāmag revisited," *Studia Iranica* 42 (2013): 43–56 is centered on original narrative patterns, which seem to have originated in different milieus. Similarly, Carlo Giovanni Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse* (Rome: ISMEO, 1995) presents a balance between the opposite views of Boyce and Widengren on one hand and Gignoux on the other. Ludwig Koenen, "Manichaean Apocalypticism, at the Crossroads of Iranian, Egyptian, Jewish and Christian Thought," in *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis. Atti del Simposio Internazionale (Rende – Amantea, 3–7 settembre 1984)*, edited by L. Cirillo and A. Roselli (Cosenza: Marra, 1986), 285–332, offers a comparative analysis of different late antique apocalyptic texts. Ithamar Gruenwald, "Manichaeism and Judaism in Light of the Cologne Mani Codex," *ZPE* 50 (1983): 29–45, provides an important analysis of the apocalyptic motif in the Codex with its references to Jewish, Christian and Iranian lore.

“Manichaeism presents the interesting spectacle of doctrinal consistency and coherence coupled with extremely flexible presentation of it. In a doctrinal sense the arising of Manichaeism cut right across Zoroastrianism, so that we can talk about a religious schism in Iran”.⁵⁷ According to an interesting analysis by D.A. Scott, from which the previous citation is taken, the Manichaean views on the actual Zoroastrian hierarchy and Church that they encountered in Sasanian Iran can be paralleled to Christian attitudes towards Judaism and the subsequent refusal of this legacy.

In Scott's wake, the analysis of Manichaean use of Zoroastrian literature is a threefold one, which starts from an awareness and acknowledgement of its existence on the part of the Manichees; this assumption is followed by an employment of what seemed an acceptable Zoroastrian doctrinal formulation in Manichaean directions. Finally, Manichees specifically rejected and verbally denounced any more particular Zoroastrian doctrines and symbolism which they perceived as erroneous. Such is the case of Mani's self-proclamation as 'apostle' of God, after Zarathustra, Buddha or Jesus, which falls in the province of a traditional pattern, that of the prophetic *lignée*, with its alleged universality as making his message more complete and, so to say, superior. Moreover, Manichaean literature provides an afresh reading of Zarathustra as a teacher, dealing with some central tenets, such as the dualistic division between Light and Darkness, whose blending throughout the cosmos leads to the formation of humankind, subject to death, and to the entrapping of the soul in a state of numbness and ignorance. In order to provide a legitimization of the new religious system, Zarathustra is therefore portrayed as a bringer of truth and a worthy and revered forerunner of Mani. At the same time, however, according to the aforementioned pattern, Manichaean literature stresses that his original teaching either had not been handed down correctly or is only propaedeutic to Mani's full revelation. More in general, the incorporation of Zoroastrian symbols on the Manichaean part fulfils the purpose of making the new religion familiar among Iranian devotees, by employing an array of images already rooted in a previous tradition. At the same time, in this way Manichaeism became able to point to the superiority of his prophet own teachings. In

57 David A. Scott, “Manichaean Responses to Zoroastrianism (Politico-Religious Controversies in Iran, Past to Present),” *Religious Studies* 25/4 (1989): 435–457, esp. 456, who also adds that “in a theological sense Manichaeism represented a schism and reformulation on different principles of Iranian dualism that had developed in the shape of Zoroastrianism”. The following paragraphs are indebted to Scott's notable treatment of the topic. See also Hutter, *Mani*: 54–58; Antonio Panaino, “Strategies of Manichaean Religious Propaganda,” in *Turfan Revisited. The First Century of Research into the Arts and Cultures of the Silk Road* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2004), 249–255.

accordance to its syncretistic attitude, therefore, Manichaeism employed a thematic structure which led to consider diverse divine figures of the different contexts in which the new religion spread being considered as emanations of the Father of Greatness. Furthermore, an interesting development in this Manichaean usage of Zoroastrian figures was that Parthian usage differed on some points concerning the thematic identifications to be made, thus allowing a certain degree of flexibility.⁵⁸

The polemical interactions between both religions often rely on the employment of identical mythological figures or concepts; likewise, Manichaean literature bears intertextual traces of both sacred and narrative Zoroastrian texts (*e.g.* *Yasna* 60,5; Darius' or Kartir's celebrative inscriptions; the idea of the *daēna-*), whose meaning has been totally reversed.⁵⁹ It is even possible to

58 Thus, it is possible to put forward an equivalence between the Father of Light and Zurvan; the Primordial Man and Ahura Mazda; his five sons and the Amesha Spenta; the Living Spirit and Mithra; the Third Messenger and Nairyosanha; the Perfect Man and Vohu Manah – Sraosha; such an equivalence is sometimes not entirely consistent, for example in some Parthian texts (*e.g.* *M7*) the Father of Greatness is paralleled to Sraosha, rather than Zurvan (probably because of a weaker Zurvanite influence among Parthian Zoroastrian circles); in *M67 R II* Mithra is identified with the Third messenger; in *M221* Vohu Manah is encapsulated into the hierarchy of the *Electi*. Relying on previous scholarship, Scott also suggests that Zurvanism had quite a negative attitude towards physical matter and sexuality – which made it much closer to Manichaean perspectives. Notwithstanding this strand, Manichaean authors show a clear distinction between their doctrines and what they regard as erroneous Zurvanite ideas, as is shown in the Middle Persian text *M281*, or as in the *Khvastvanift* confessional text, mainly transmitted in a Uyghur recension. On this adaptation see also Werner Sundermann, “Namen von Göttern, Dämonen und Menschen in iranischen Versionen des manichäischen Mythos,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 6 (1979): 95–133, repr. in Sunderman, *Manichaica*: 121–164.

59 If Hans Heinrich Schaeder, *Urform und Fortbildungen des manichäischen Systems* (Leipzig-Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1927) recognized that most of the terms were simply mechanical reuses of originally Iranian formulas, devoid of any further significance, more recent attempts have been made at evaluating the ‘intertextual’ Iranian loans in Manichaeism. In addition to the numerous studies by Werner Sundermann (*e.g.* “Iranische Personennamen der Manichäer,” *Die Sprache* 36 (1994): 244–270, repr. in Id., *Manichaica*: 485–514; “Manichaean Polemics against the Zoroastrian Doctrine of Ohrmezd the Creator,” in *Tafazzoli Memorial Volume*, ed. Ali A. Sadeghi (Tehran: Sokhan, 2001), 71–77; “Zoroastrian motifs in non-Zoroastrian traditions,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18 (2008): 155–165), see *e.g.* Iris Colditz, *Zur Sozialterminologie der iranischen Manichäer: Eine semantische Analyse im Vergleich zu den nichtmanichäischen iranischen Quellen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000); Jason BeDuhn, “Parallels between Coptic and Iranian Kephalaia: Goundesh and the King of Touran,” in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings: Studies on the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex*, ed. Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn, Paul Dilley (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2015), 52–74; Id., “Iranian Epic in the Chester Beatty Kephalaia,” *ibidem*: 136–158; Prods Oktor Skjærø notes some of these parallels and partly employs them in service of his idea about the ‘invention’ of Zarathustra: cfr his “Iranian Elements in Manicheism:

surmise that the polemic between Manichees and Zoroastrians helped reshaping some concepts in Late Antique Zoroastrianism.⁶⁰

The different positions, namely the one that favours an Iranian background and the other that, conversely, seeks the origins of Manichaeism in a Jewish-Christian milieu, might be thus reconciled by adopting a more balanced attitude, which is also confirmed by the discovery and closer examination of Coptic and Greek texts, and takes into account the undisputable syncretistic nature of Manichaeism. On the one hand, the pan-Iranian thesis might be justified when considering that the majority of Iranian and Eastern Manichean texts largely draw on the Iranian tradition; on the other, it is undoubtedly true that, although essential, Zoroastrianism alone cannot explain the complex and syncretistic nature of Manichaeism, as stated, for example, by Kurt Rudolph or Werner Sundermann.⁶¹ According to Sundermann, Manichaeism is a Gnostic religion with Christian (or more precisely, Gnostic) roots and additional Zoroastrian components, which gives rise, therefore, to an original tradition, irreconcilable with any precise or single milieu. Therefore, it would be premature to deduce from the otherwise indisputable similarities with Gnostic literature, such as the *Paraphrase of Shem* or ps.-Hippolytus' account of the Sethians, that there was no direct, immediate Zoroastrian influence at all on Manichaean dualism. Zoroastrianism, however, represents an accretion to the original shaping of Manicheanism, which is informed by a Gnostic subversion,

A Comparative Contrastive Approach. Irano-Manichaica I," in *Au carrefour des religions. Hommages à Philippe Gignoux*, ed. Rika Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'Etude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1995), 263–284; Id., "Iranian epic and the Manichean *Book of Giants*. Irano-Manichaica III," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 48/1–2 (1995): 187–223; Id., "Counter-Manichean elements in Kerdīr's inscriptions. Irano-Manichaica II," in *Atti del Terzo Congresso Internazionale di Studi "Manicheismo e Oriente Cristiano Antico" Arcavacata di Rende-Amantea 31 agosto-5 settembre 1993*, ed. Luigi Cirill and Alois van Tongerloo (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 313–342; Id., "Zarathustra in the Avesta and in Manichaeism. Irano-Manichaica IV," in *La Persia e l'Asia centrale da Alessandro al X secolo* (Roma: Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1997): 597–628; Id., "Reflexes of Iranian Oral Traditions in Manichean Literature," in *Literarische Stoffe und ihre Gestaltung in mittelliranischer Zeit. Ehrencolloquium anlässlich des 70. Geburtstages von Prof. Dr. Werner Sundermann 30./31. März 2006* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2009): 269–286.

60 Jason BeDuhn, "The Co-formation of the Manichaean and Zoroastrian Religions in Third-Century Iran," *Entangled Religions* 11/2 (2020), <https://er.ceres.rub.de/index.php/ER/article/view/8414> (retrieved March 2021).

61 See also a balanced reconstruction of the *status quaestionis* in Albert F. De Jong, "A quodam Persa exstiterunt: Re-Orienting Manichaean Origins," in *Empsychoi Logoi. Religious Innovations in Antiquity. Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst*, eds. Alberdina Houtman, Albert F. De Jong, and Magda Misset-van de Weg (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), 81–106.

in docetic terms, of the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice, who was killed at the instigation of the Prince of this world. Similarly, Rudolph highlights the similarities between some peculiar traits of the Gnostic systems of the second century (in particular those from the Nag Hammadi corpus), without denying the 'local' Persian element: Mani's doctrine can be considered either a Gnostic religion on Iranian soil, or a peculiarly Iranian religion with a Gnostic foundation.⁶² It might be useful to conclude by resuming the sound reading provided by Gnoli, when he declares that focusing on the 'ethnic' origins of Manichaeism is partly an idle question which does not provide a religio-historical explanation of a phenomenon that, on the contrary, might be illuminated only by looking at its universalistic tendency which resulted in the incorporation of different elements, viz. Zoroastrian, Gnostic, Christian, Mesopotamian, Hellenic, Buddhist ones.⁶³

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- 62 Werner Sundermann, "How Zoroastrian is Mani's Dualism?," in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi "Manicheismo e Oriente Cristiano Antico" Arcavacata di Rende-Amantea 31 agosto–5 settembre 1993*, ed. Luigi Cirillo, Alois von Tongerlo (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 343–360 (repr. in Sunderman, *Manichaica*, 39–58); and his compendious summary in "Manicheism i. General Survey," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/manicheism-i-general-survey> (retrieved March 2021): among the massive Zoroastrian influences, he outlines that almost all deities, demons, and mythological persons bear names familiar from the religion of Zoroaster; moreover, the Manichean accommodation to Zoroastrian terms and concepts went so far as to induce the designation of the Manichean church as the *dēn māzdēs* "the Mazdayasnian Religion" (*M*543).
- 63 Gnoli, *Il Manicheismo*, xliii. The present writer wishes to thank Elizabeth MacDonald for her careful revision of the English text; as well as Chiara Barbati, Giovanni Casadio, Mihaela Timuș, and Andrea Piras for useful hints and suggestions.

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PART 6

Postscript



Geo Widengren as Researcher and Public Intellectual: A Meta-Reflection

Göran Larsson

1 Introduction

Leaving aside the philosophical response to the rhetorical question of whether we can learn anything from the past, I suggest that Geo Widengren can be used as an example showing how the study of religions as a discipline has evolved and changed over time. Widengren can therefore serve as a prism casting light on changes within the History of Religions as an academic discipline in Sweden and internationally, but his academic career took place at a time when Sweden, like the rest of Europe, was undergoing tremendous changes. For instance, his life spans the time before the Second World War up until the social, economic and cultural transformations that took place in Swedish society from the end of the 1960s and his death in 1996. During this period, Sweden and most parts of Western Europe underwent fundamental changes. For instance, higher education in Sweden was basically transformed from providing elite training for a selected few to education for the masses that was intended to serve the wider society.¹ For the two theological faculties in Uppsala and Lund, the number of students grew from 402 (1950) to 800 (1960) to 1373 (1970) before falling back a little to 914 (1976).² New faculties emerged and the social sciences became more prominent, including in the study of the religions, with the development of sub-disciplines like psychology of religion and sociology of religion, while the more traditional faculties of humanities and theology (often including the History of Religions) were regularly reduced to defenders of *Bildung* or classical knowledge. These transformations are present in several of the evaluations, government enquiries and reforms that have been conducted in higher education in Sweden since the 1960s.³

1 See, for instance, Tore Frängsmyr, *Svensk idéhistoria. Bildning och vetenskap under tusen år. Del II, 1809–2000* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2000), 309–312.

2 Gunnar Richardson, *Svensk utbildningshistoria* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1998), 157.

3 See, for instance, Oloph Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten vid Uppsala universitet 1916–2000. Historiska studier* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2021) and David Thurffjell, “The dissolution of the history of religions: Contemporary challenges of a humanities discipline in Sweden,”

As Oloph Bexell has stated, the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala, as well as the study of religions in general, was subjected to questioning by a number of actors in Sweden from the end of the 1960s.⁴ For instance, the growing demand that the study of religions should be of greater relevance to society was noted. To meet this requirement, it was felt necessary to place more focus on contemporary issues and to distinguish more clearly between confessional belief and the scientific study of religions. This last demand was most likely not a problem for Widengren, who also stressed that religion should be studied as a non-confessional subject (see Jan Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). However, the transformations that the Swedish school system underwent, especially regarding subjects like history and classical languages, most likely became a serious problem for him. From the end of the 1960s fewer school hours were most likely allocated to the study of languages within the Swedish school system, especially Greek and Latin. This development left students less prepared for higher studies in subjects like Biblical exegesis and comparative historical studies. Due to this development, the University had to change its requirements for those students who wanted to study the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in their original vernaculars, Greek and Hebrew. This development Widengren strongly lamented, according to my understanding.

The Ministry of Education also demanded that students should be given an assigned or fixed course of study (*studiegång* in Swedish). For the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala, this reform put an end to much of the freedom its professors had enjoyed, as from now they were given less room for individual decisions in the design of courses and seminars. Prior to this change, professors had been entrusted with designing their own seminars and deciding the content of their lectures themselves: indeed, the 1950s have been labelled a period of "the reign of the professors" (in Swedish *professorsväldet*).⁵ For the students, this structure meant that they took classes that were more or less focused on

Temenos: The Finnish Society for the Study of Religions, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2015): 161–175. Cf., Karin Kittelmann-Flensner and Göran Larsson, "Swedish Religious Education at the End of the 1960s: Classroom Observations, Early Video Ethnography and the National Curriculum of 1962," *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 36, Issue 2, (2014): 202–217.

4 Besides the new demands articulated by the state, the study of religions (especially theology as a discipline) also came under heavy attack from the philosopher Ingemar Hedenius (1908–1982), who argued that theology as an academic discipline should be removed from the university since it is not a science. On Hedenius, see, Svante Nordin. *Ingemar Hedenius: en filosof och hans tid* (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2004).

5 Frängsmyr, *Svensk idéhistoria*, 312.

what the professor was interested in and what he was doing research on at that moment (see Larsson's introduction to this volume).

In 1969 the goal and organisation of religious studies education also became a focus for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslerämbetet). Without going into any details, this inquiry led to a new way of organising the Faculty of Theology, with from now on less focus on the historical and theological aspects of the study of religions. Instead the emphasis was henceforward to be on the needs of society and so-called life issues (*livsfrågor* in Swedish). Even though approximately 90 percent of all students who took a BA in theology around 1970 ended up working in churches and congregations, the primary "customer" for this education was no longer to be restricted to the Church of Sweden: new career paths should be opened up as well, for instance, in the media, hospitals, or service overseas. In 1973 the requirement for priests in the service of the Church of Sweden to study both Hebrew and Greek were dropped. This development led to a new situation, and from now on students in the Faculty of Theology who aspired to become priests were expected to study just one classical language (i.e. Hebrew or Greek) as compared to the earlier requirement to study both.⁶

Given his position as Dean of the Faculty of Theology in 1944–1945, 1950–1951 and 1965–1971, Widengren was far from being a passive bystander of these reforms. He often lamented these developments in both his personal correspondence⁷ and in interviews with journalists.⁸ Even prior to the great transformations described above, he complained about what he felt was his difficult work situation in an interview with the Swedish daily paper *Svenska Dagbladet* on 15 November 1962.

The government cannot afford – or desire – to leave me with even half an assistant. With the number of students at about a hundred each year, it is obvious that I am involved in a rather uneven struggle when it comes to managing research, teaching, administration, textbook writing and popularization!⁹

6 On this development, see, for instance, Bertil Albrektson, "Hebreiskans plats i teologutbildningen," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 71 (2006), 21–22. Cf. Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten*, 50–67, especially 57.

7 See, for instance, Letter from Geo Widengren to Tönnes Kleberg, Uppsala 9 May 1967 (Tönnes Klebergs samling, Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek).

8 See, for instance, "Fakultet i brytningstid," *Ergo*, Nr. 11, Årg. 40 (1963), 6.

9 *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 15, 1962, my translation.

Leaving aside the fact that Widengren sounds quite modern in the quotation above – i.e. besides research and teaching, he also includes administration, the writing of textbooks and “popularization” in his activities – it was not just the Faculty’s parlous budget that was a challenge for him: it can also be plausibly argued that his rather conservative world view was being challenged by the students. Although the Faculty of Theology could still be presented a bastion of conservative theologians, the world had moved on. For instance, the riding trousers he wore while teaching and the “horsewhip” he liked to carry around with him (see Larsson’s introduction to this volume) were lamentably out of fashion, especially after the rise of the flower-power generation, the ‘68-revolution’ and the women’s liberation movement. But it was not only the world that had changed: the discipline had done so as well, and many of the theories and theoreticians cherished by Widengren were either being challenged or rejected altogether.¹⁰

2 Old Paradigms, New Frontiers

Instead of writing up large comparative works with the intention of finding patterns or uncovering the Ur-religion of the past,¹¹ from the late 1960s many young scholars in Sweden became more eager to go out into the world to meet actual individuals performing actual rituals and practicing their religious beliefs as part of their lives. This turn was exemplified by Swedish historians of religions like Åke Hultkrantz (1920–2006), Olof Petterson (1920–1986), Peter Schalk (b. 1944) and Tord Olsson (1942–2013), who conducted fieldwork in America, Sri Lanka and East Africa, as well as introducing theoretical perspectives challenging the positions of scholars like Widengren. This brought new perspectives to the study of religions and provided stronger links to other scientific fields, such as anthropology and sociology. Even the students in Uppsala gave expression to this change when they sang the following song at one post-seminar event in 1975, just two years after Widengren’s retirement:

10 Michael Stausberg provides an overview of some of the disciplinary changes that took place within the study of religions after the Second World War; see Stausberg, “The Study of religion(s) in Western Europe (II): Institutional developments after World War II,” *Religion*, 38, 4 (2008): 305–318.

11 See, for instance, Göran Larsson, “It’s not *mana*! It’s High Gods! Another Conceptual History, or Another Explanation, but a Similar Problem,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31 (2019): 447–456.

Widenschalk, Widenschalk
 brother Geo and Peter
 scoop out of each lime
 strong identities:
 One as a high god and the other in the field
 One in the library and one in a tent.
 Widenschalk: knowledge bar (kunskapsbalk in Swedish)
 Two such prophets (sung to the melody of Edelweiss).¹²

At his retirement in 1973, the two main theories, or rather theoretical approaches, that Widengren had praised, namely the phenomenology of religions and the British myth and ritual school, were already coming under severe pressure and criticism. Both Émile Durkheim's notion of primitive religion and James G. Frazer's endless search for patterns had received heavy criticism from philosophers, classicists, anthropologists and even scholars of Near Eastern Religions.¹³ But it was not only the search for patterns that was criticised: the very notion of a specific belief in a high god, one of Widengren's favourite topics, was questioned by, for instance, Henri Frankfort (1897–1954), who wrote:

One may be prepared to admit that the evidence indicates a general human inclination to look to the heavens as a seat of superhuman power; but generalizations about a "Hochgott" vitiate one's understanding from the very start.¹⁴

Even though Widengren is not mentioned in Frankfort's *The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, his criticism here is clearly applicable to Widengren's research as well:

12 The original text reads: "Widenschalk, Widenschalk, bröder Geo och Peter, öser ur varsin kalk, starka identiteter. En som höggud och en i fält. En på UB och en i tält. Widenschalk-kunskapsbalk, tvenne såta profeter." I'm grateful to Professor Britt-Marie for making me aware of this song, but the translation is mine.

13 See, for instance, Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, INC, 1991), 191–194.

14 Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 356, n. 13.

Differences are, as merely specific, subordinated to similarities. The similarities, on the other hand, are given undue weight, as reflections of an original unity. Yet they may be merely superficial or may altogether disappear if studied in the context. In short, the belief that differences are specific and similarities generic vitiates one's very approach to the evidence.¹⁵

The patterns or schemata promoted by the myth and ritual school created the risk that scholars could easily adopt a preconceived understanding of the past. In following this procedure, they often found what they were looking for, despite often having little if any substantial evidence. Moreover, according to Frankfort, any findings or interpretations that questioned or contradicted the pattern or schemata promoted by the myth and ritual school were often dismissed by its followers (i.e. by Widengren and his Uppsala colleague, the biblical scholar Ivan Engnell, 1906–1964;¹⁶ for similar criticism, see Gothóni and Larsson's chapter in this volume).¹⁷

Moreover, the comparative or typological type of phenomenology promoted by Widengren, which was partly built on the theories and studies of Gerardus van der Leeuw and E.O. James, had also started to receive criticism. However, before we summarise some of the objections to it, it is important to stress first, that it is an open question what should be included in the term “religious phenomenology”, and secondly, that phenomenology is used in several contradictory ways by scholars of religion.¹⁸ For instance, in *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (1997), Russell T. McCutcheon argues that the phenomenological approach that was advocated by a diverse range of scholars of religion and theologians, like Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920), van der Leeuw, Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), Rudolph Otto (1869–1937) and William Brede Kristensen (1867–1953), contributed significantly to the manufacture of an academic discourse about “something” we now call “religion”. In McCutcheon's critique, “religion”, the *sacred* and the transcendent, were generally seen as *sui*

15 Henri Frankfort, *The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near Eastern Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 6.

16 On Engnell, see Sten Hidal, *Ivan Engnell. En bibelforskarens bana* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, 2019).

17 Frankfort, *The problem*, 6–9.

18 The diversity ascribed to the term “phenomenology of religions”, especially by those who see themselves as “phenomenologists” is clearly documented in Satoko Fujiwara, David Thurfjell and Steven Engler (eds.), *Global Phenomenologies of Religion: An Oral History in Interviews* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2021).

generis objects that exist a priori, and consequently that there is no scientific way of testing whether this/these “object/s” exist(s) in their own right. Another criticism is that the notion of the sacred or the object that is called “religion” is often close to scholars’ own faiths and beliefs. By adopting preconceived notions about the religious, the holy or the sacred, whether explicitly or implicitly, the scholar becomes less objective and less distanced from the object he or she is studying.¹⁹ A scholar like Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who was a friend of Widengren, had also been accused of being a so-called “religionist”, that is, claiming that all religions stem from the same root. Even though criticism of religious phenomenology only gained momentum after Widengren retired in 1973, this is an indication that the theoretical positions of himself and some of his peers had come under great pressure.

Contrary to Widengren, who was a generalist and comparativist, the period after the Second World War saw the beginning of growing specialisation and division within the study of religions.²⁰ To Widengren’s dismay, for instance, the conference organised by the IAHR in Stockholm in 1970 could not attract all the scholars who had worked on topics that had frequently been associated with the discipline of the History of Religions (on this organisation, see Fujiwara and Jensen’s chapter in this volume). For instance, scholars who worked with Islamic and Arabic materials were more likely to attend a conference organised by Arabists or Orientalists than historians of religions according to Widengren.²¹ Furthermore, new chairs were established in both the psychology and sociology of religions in Sweden and elsewhere from the 1960s onwards. For instance, in Uppsala, Widengren’s friend and colleague Hjalmar Sundén (1908–1993) was finally installed as Professor in the Psychology of Religions in 1967. Even though Widengren had little time for or interest in the psychology of religions, the latter was actually included in the title of his professorship. Although Sundén’s hiring as Professor in the Psychology of Religions is a sign of increasing specialisation, at time of his retirement Widengren painted a rather gloomy picture of the future for the next generation of scholars in the History of Religions.

19 A good summary of modern criticism of phenomenology can be found in Thomas Ryba, “Phenomenology of Religion,” in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, Vol. 3. Edited by Robert A. Segal & Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2015), 40–48, especially 44–47.

20 Cf., for instance, Armin W. Geertz and Russel T. McCutcheon, “The Role of Method and Theory in the IAHR,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12 (2000): 3–37.

21 Geo Widengren, “The opening address,” in *Proceedings of the XIth International Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, eds. Jouco G. Bleeker; Geo Widengren and Eric J. Sharpe (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 18.

The future prospects for young academics who, through a doctoral degree, are taking the first arduous steps on their climb up the career ladder seem anything but bright.²²

I can only wonder what my own supervisor, Professor Gudmar Aneer, might have thought about the words quoted above. Since Aneer had defended his thesis, *Akbar the Great Mogul and his religious thought*, in 1973, he might have been one of the doctorands who were promoted on the occasion when Widengren made this speech.

Leaving behind the rather gloomy atmosphere that prevailed in Uppsala in 1973, it is time to turn to the future and conclude this epilogue by discussing whether there is anything we can learn from these developments in the History of Religions by looking through the prism of Widengren's work and career.

3 Back to the Future

As aptly summarised by Jan Hjärpe in this volume, Widengren and his Swedish and international peers were seldom if ever interested in methodological questions. Theoretical starting points were generally addressed, at least implicitly, but the selection process and the methods used to analyse the collected materials were often vague.²³ This makes it very hard to assess the quality of Widengren's research, and as several contributors to this volume indicate, the published research results have seldom fared well (see, for instance, Albert de Jong's chapter in this volume). This is most likely one of the main reasons why Widengren's studies are seldom included in the contemporary canon of the History of Religions. For instance, his monumental textbook *Religionens värld*, which was translated into German, Italian and Spanish, is no longer used in general introductory courses in Sweden. Unfortunately, and to the best of my knowledge, there are few if any courses that specifically focus on the history of the discipline, that is, on how the History of Religions emerged as a discipline in its own right.

22 Geo Widengren, "Teologiska fakulteten," in *Inbjudningar till promotionsfesten i Uppsala 1973* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Skrifter rörande Uppsala universitet B. Inbjudningar 45, 1973), 9, my translation.

23 That said, it should be stressed that there were several discussions about theory and method at most IAHR conferences and in the associated journals and publications, which Widengren took part in. However, there were rarely any explicit discussions about theory or method, and most starting points were therefore implicit. Cf. Geerts and McCutcheon, "The Role".

This is a great pity because, if we had paid more attention to Widengren as one of the founding fathers of an academic discipline, we would have noticed his emphasis on and hard work in separating the study of religions from the normative and confessional approach that predominated (and too some extent still predominates) among many theologians, as well as some historians of religions (see, for instance, Clemens Cavallin's chapter in this volume). Compared to his predecessors in Uppsala, Nathan Söderblom and Tor Andræ, Widengren never expressed personal beliefs or moral judgements about a specific religious tradition. All religious traditions – that is, what people have written about something that they call “religion” – should be viewed as a potential source for the academic study of religions. Consequently, Christianity should be viewed as one among many religious traditions, and Christians could therefore not claim any advantage or moral superiority over other religions or believers. In other words, in my understanding of Widengren's position, there was no need to differentiate so-called “good” or “right” religions, and to do so was not part of the scientific work that Historians of Religions should carry out.

From this point of view, Widengren's appointment to a professorship in 1940 represented a clear break with the theologically tainted study of the History of Religions that had predominated under the guidance of both Söderblom and Andræ (see, for instance, Jan Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). However, this agnostic approach to the study of religions should not be taken for granted, as it is easy to forget how important Widengren was in establishing the non-confessional study of religions in Sweden. As pointed out by academics like, for instance, Bruce Lincoln,²⁴ Russell T. McCutcheon,²⁵ Donald Wiebe²⁶ or Leonardo Ambasciano,²⁷ there is always a great risk of confessional beliefs distorting and obscuring the critical study of religions. To introduce a parable at this point, confessional or value-laden belief resembles a pike lurking in the darkest and murkiest waters ready to attack. So, in seeking to maintain a clear separation between personal beliefs and empirically driven research, I suggest we can learn a lot from Widengren's approach to the study of religions.

24 Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 8, 3 (1996): 225–227.

25 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics not caretakers: Redescrining the public study of religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

26 See, for instance, Donald Wiebe, “The failure of nerve in the academic study of religion,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 13, 4 (1984): 401–422.

27 Leonardo Ambasciano, “Memoirs of an Academic Rönin: Religious Studies and Mentorship in the Age of Post-Truth,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 33 (2021): 1–20.

However, following the growing specialisation from the 1960s and onwards, most scholars refrained from making bold hypotheses and theories like those proposed by Widengren. Even though most of his grand theories have received heavy criticism, as pointed out in several contributions to this volume, there is still a great need to provide explanations and theories that can help students, researchers and the general public to understand complex traditions and historical time periods.²⁸ As shown by Christer Hedin in this volume (see also my introduction), Widengren was a frequent commentator in the Swedish media, writing several essays over the years targeting more general audiences. Despite all the risks associated with making grand theories and syntheses of complex periods, I believe that Widengren was able to show the relevance and importance of the study of religions for understanding both the past and the present. Even though most contemporary students in the field of religious studies are better trained in both theoretical and methodological questions than Widengren and many of his colleagues, I believe that we can still learn something from his attempts to explain and summarise the past. Even though most of his international academic publications are complex and difficult to read, he was also a scholar with an astonishing ability to write essays suitable for publication in daily newspapers or broadcast as lectures on Swedish Radio.²⁹ This talent is rare today, when most academics in the field of religious studies are mainly if not only focused on publishing peer-reviewed studies in international journals with a high impact factor. This is, of course, important, but the expectation that one should be able to explain complex phenomena, vague textual sources or times in the past is too important not the least for the taxpayers who fund universities in Sweden and elsewhere. For good or ill, the need to provide general explanations and summarise theories is something that we often forget today, at least in Sweden.

That said, it is evident that neither Widengren nor his colleagues in Uppsala (e.g. the Biblical scholar Ivan Engnell³⁰) were free from biases and cherished ideas that had a negative effect on their studies. To fall in love in one explanation

28 When addressing the need for explanations in the study of religions (or in science in general), it is necessary to stress that “explanation” can connote many different things and that consequently we must be careful in arguing that something is “explained”. On this problem, see, for instance, Jeppe Sinding Jensen, “Epistemology,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*. Edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 40–53.

29 That said, it should also be stressed that academics, not least humanists, were given more space in daily media when Widengren was an active professor in Sweden. See, for instance, Johan Östling, “Folkbildaren som försvann,” *Anekdot* (no year, online edition).

30 On Engnell, see, Hidal, *Ivan*, especially p. 128.

or a specific theoretical perspective is, of course, not unique to Widengren; it is common to ourselves as Homo Sapiens that we suffer from confirmation bias.³¹ In order to control the urge to consider only evidence or voices that support our own world views and dismiss alternative or contradictory explanations and hypotheses, we need scientific methods that help us raise open and critical questions and listen more carefully to our critics. In other words, we need to accept the empirical data as it stands, no matter what it tells us. We also need to accept that intellectual scrutiny can destroy our most cherished hypotheses, theories or hopes for society.³² Since we all suffer from confirmation bias, a rigorous peer-review system is badly needed.

Compared to Widengren's times, academia has clearly undergone massive structural changes when it comes the organization of higher education (especially the development of the mass university), and to do research today is quite different from what it entailed during his lifetime. Today there are more possibilities in Sweden to study and pursue a doctorate in religious studies. The monopoly, and maybe also the power, of Uppsala and Lund, which was more or less inviolable during Widengren's time, has today been challenged, even broken, by the rise of a large number of new universities that have been opened in Sweden. This development has provided more opportunities for employment as a professor, lecturer or PhD candidate outside the former monopoly enjoyed by Uppsala and Lund. The number of positions in the study of religions (or the History of Religions) has grown over the years, a development has most likely opened up spaces for alternative interpretations, new theories and novel methods of exploring the history of religions. Even though many scholars in the humanities still complain, the financial situation and the opportunities for doing research have actually grown over the years. However, it is not only structural changes that explain the new situation. As David Thurfjell has pointed out, the study of religions has taken a turn toward the social sciences,³³ making the historical and philological studies conducted by Widengren generally out of fashion today. This is, of course, something that we as scholars of religions may wish to reconsider and possibly even change in order not to forget our responsibility to cover the past of our subject as well as its present. As compared

31 On the problem of confirmation bias, see, for instance, Jeppe Sinding Jensen, "Cloning Minds: Religion between Individuals and Collectives," in *Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present. Proceedings of the XXI World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Erfurt, August 23–29, 2015*. Edited by Christoph Boehinger and Jörg Rüpke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 211–229, especially p. 222.

32 See, for instance, Roy D'Andrade, "Moral models in anthropology," *Current Anthropology*, 36, 3 (1995): 399–408.

33 Thurfjell, "The dissolution."

to Widengren's time, the university, like higher education more generally, has become a battleground for political visions, and several scholars today want to change society. Some of these developments were, of course, also present during Widengren's own time. Some scholars took up pro- or anti-German positions during the Second World War, while others were severely affected by the rise of the 1968 movement (see my introduction to this volume). This is an important reminder that higher education and research are seldom if ever neutral, let alone objective. Still, it is likely that the changes that were initiated by the end of the 1960s transformed higher education in fundamental ways. With the rise of new theoretical perspectives like post-structuralism, the linguistic turn, critiques of colonialism and orientalism, and post-modernity, several of the presuppositions held by Widengren were severely criticised. These are some of the major reasons why Widengren is no longer an authority that many researchers in the study of religions and adjacent fields make reference to or even pay attention to.

However, I do not have enough data to judge whether Widengren would have accepted my outline of how the university has changed or would have agreed with my understanding of how research should be carried out, namely that we have to pay attention to theoretical and methodological questions, as well as to the ethics and philosophy of science, when we approach either the past or the present.³⁴ Even though my depiction might be unfair or even biased, I do think that Widengren ultimately failed to establish an academic milieu that was welcoming and accepting of those who held different, even critical views of his search for patterns and phenomenological typologies or who were critical of the myth and ritual school in the UK. To be among the chosen ones, that is, those who sat at the professor's table, it was most likely necessary to accept the ideas and hypotheses he suggested, otherwise it would be easy to be labelled a "traitor" or an enemy, which could have a negative effect on one's future academic career. It is also important to keep this critical gaze in mind when we evaluate the past, and we should be careful before

34 Some of my ideas of how the study of religions should be carried out are presented in Göran Larsson, "History strikes back! Scientific and pedagogical implications of the critical study of early Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23:4 (2012): 531–537; Idem, "Disharmony is my business, and business is good – a typical day at the office of a historian of religions: Reading and pondering upon Aaron W. Hughes' *Muslim Identities: An Introduction to Islam*," *Culture and Religion – An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2017): 1–14; Idem, "Disputed, Sensitive and Indispensable Topics: The Study of Islam and Apostasy," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 30, Issue 3 (2018): 1–26.

we dismiss this attitude as simply reminiscing about the past. Destructive and even anti-intellectual milieus may still flourish in universities today.³⁵ From this point of view, it is necessary to learn from the past in order to ensure the creation of a robust academic milieu that can support its members and guarantee them enough room to pursue the scientific study of religions critically in relation to both the past and the present.

4 Conclusions

Using one scholar as a prism to shed light on the foundation, development and internal variations of a specific discipline is truly a micro-history approach. While macro-histories can be too general, micro-histories obviously run the risk of being too particular. In other words, how does Widengren's example shed light on the History of Religions as a discipline, both in Sweden and internationally? This is a general problem for all scholars who are interested in the past, and writing up a history is very much a question of which scale to use. Bearing in mind the potential shortcomings of the micro-historical approach, such as the problem of representativeness, the lack of sources and the greater risk of bias, I believe that Widengren is an important intellectual who deserves to be studied. His publications are numerous, they span several important topics, and he used several languages to present his results. He was also one of the founding fathers of IASHR/IAHR and its journal *NVMEN*, still today the two flagships of the academic subject that is the History of Religions. He was also the holder of the prestigious chair in the History and Psychology of Religions at Uppsala University for more than four decades. As a teacher, he introduced a vast number of students to the field of History of Religions, and many of his doctoral students became leading scholars in both Sweden and internationally (see Göran Larsson's introduction to this volume, which includes a short discussion of Widengren's genealogical heritage). However, in order to fully grasp his legacy, it would be necessary to conduct a much more thorough genealogical investigation and study those who were among his closest peers both in Sweden and internationally. To put it in the words of the Dutch scholar, Willem Hofstee:

35 See, for instance, Ambasciano, "Memoirs."

The history of the science of religion is to a considerable extent the history of groups. What I refer to is groups of friends, discussion partners, close-knit circles that in some respects seem to have the characteristics of social movements.³⁶

In all of its complexity, this volume consists of chapters that provide insights into the both the history, memory and narrative of Geo Widengren and the intellectual and academic contexts of which he was a part. However, in order to differentiate between these accounts, as Daniel Little reminds us, history, memory and narrative should not be seen as synonyms – on the contrary:

We might put these concepts into a crude map by saying that “history” is an organized and evidence-based presentation of the processes, actions, and events that have occurred for a people over an extended period of time; “memory” is the personal recollections and representations of individuals who lived through a series of events and processes; and “narratives” are the stories that ordinary people and historians weave together to make sense of the events and happenings through which a people and a person have lived.³⁷

With the aid of archival sources (letters, documents, etc.) and printed texts (especially those produced by Widengren), the “processes, actions and events” that Widengren was part of have been patched together as carefully as possible and then analysed and presented in a coherent order, that is, from the defence of his thesis in 1936 (see Göran Eidevall’s chapter in this volume) until his death in 1996. However, this “history” is, of course, selective and biased, like all reproductions of history. The “memories” of past times have also been covered with the aid of printed sources and personal anecdotes (including Widengren’s own reflections on his own time studying at Stockholm’s Högskola and the University of Uppsala).³⁸ Several themes in this volume are also based on the

36 Willem Hofstee, “Phenomenology of Religion versus Anthropology of Religion? The ‘Groningen School’ 1920–1990.” In *Man, Meaning and Mystery: 100 Years of History of Religions in Norway: The Heritage of W. Brede Kristensen*. Edited by Sigurd Hjelde (Leiden: Brill), 176.

37 Daniel Little, “Philosophy of History,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta (winter 2020 edition). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/>, accessed 5 May 2021.

38 As several contributors to this volume have argued, Widengren’s book on his supervisor and mentor, Tor Andrae, is also of special importance in writing the life of Widengren himself. See Geo Widengren, *Tor Andrae* (Uppsala: Lindblad, 1947).

personal memories of some of Widengren's former students. However, these data are obviously also biased. To remedy this potential problem, the volume includes counter-narratives like critical discussions of Widengren's legacy, and several chapters analysing how his academic texts were received (i.e. how they were reviewed and quoted). The final product, that is, the volume you are reading now, could therefore be seen as a systematic narrative aimed at weaving together the tapestry that constitutes Widengren's complex life as a Historian of Religions.

As the editor of this volume, while I hope that the collected chapters will provide some information and new insights concerning the past, it is also my hope and ambition that they will stimulate even more discussions about the future. In other words, what can we learn from how the History of Religions as a discipline developed during Widengren's time? While many of Widengren's research results are clearly obsolete and out of fashion today, he remains a great scholar whom we should investigate and learn from. That said, he is not automatically a role model for how academic study in the History of Religions should evolve and develop in the future. Even though contemporary historians of religions are generally more attentive to questions of theory and methodology than Widengren and his peers were, we might find ourselves suffering from other gaps, such as the lack of sufficient philological training and the knowledge about past periods that would help us to see the larger picture.

Before I end this chapter and volume, I would like to stress the great need that exists for more research into the history of the History of Religions as a discipline. Several aspects of Widengren's time remain to be studied, analysed and written. For instance, we do not have enough data to measure Widengren's impact (i.e. to produce a bibliometric analysis), and several more archives remain to be consulted, not the least in the Netherlands, the UK, America and even Iran. One question concerns Widengren's relationship with the Iranian government, especially during his visits to Iran in the 1970s, and how those students (i.e. teachers and priests) who did not continue on to doctoral studies viewed Widengren? Other uncertainty surrounds the situation for female students and PhDs at the University of Uppsala from the 1940s until his retirement in 1973. Without speculating, it is evident that the study of the History of Religions is very different today compared to Widengren's time. These developments and changes have both strengths and weaknesses, but I believe the past is a good starting point in any endeavour to make the future as bright as possible. Even though it is a cliché, I am still tempted to say that, without knowing the past, we will be less likely to understand the future.

A final warning is an appropriate conclusion for a volume that is dedicated to a great scholar. While it is fairly easy to find errors, gaps and flaws in the past,

it is often harder to see the mistakes, shortcomings and biases in our own studies. Even though several contributors to this volume have rightly voiced criticisms and doubts about some of Widengren's main theories and conclusions, it is not likely that our own research will prove any better in the future. With time, our own futile attempts to study and understand the history of religions will most likely be discarded. Compared to Widengren's published works, it is not even very likely that we will be remembered or read, let alone criticized, in the future. To be the target of heavy criticism is therefore very often proof of a researcher's importance. From this point of view, despite all our attempts to distance ourselves from Widengren, he remains a truly great scholar in its most classical meaning.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Michael Stausberg, Professor David Thurffjell and Professor Catharina Raudvere, who have read and commented on earlier versions of this chapter. I hope that I have done justice to some of their suggestions, but in any case all errors and omissions are solely mine. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Associate Professor Tobias Hägerland for providing information on the history and status of the Hebrew and Greek languages within Swedish higher education.

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Letters between Raffaele Pettazzoni and Geo Widengren (1948–1959)

1 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Upsal le 10 septembre 1948

Monsieur et cher collègue

Je m'excuse d'être en retard avec une réponse à votre aimable lettre mais cette lettre touchait à des sujets si importants qu'il m'a paru nécessaire de donner une réponse positive. Or j'ai passé la plus grande partie de l'été à Londres et à Paris et pour cette raison c'est seulement pendant les derniers jours que j'ai été capable à entreprendre des négociations inévitables. Dans votre lettre vous avez parlé de la crise actuelle de l'histoire de religion. Certes, il y a une telle crise assez grave, chose regrettable dont laquelle on ne saurait nier l'existence. À Paris quand j'ai pris part au congrès des orientalistes quelques collègues ont discuté avec moi de cette crise et les moyens de la guérir. En effet les historiens de religion sont très mal organisés. Nous sommes d'avis qu'il faut absolument créer une institution internationale comme un point de ralliement pour nos collègues. Actuellement on a proposé qu'il faudra organiser une union internationale des historiens de religion pour éditer un journal international dans le but de publier des articles surtout phénoménologiques, de dresser une bibliographie et d'organiser des congrès un peu plus fréquents qu'ils n'ont été auparavant. On a pensé que cette union serait établie et dirigée en collaboration et avec le support d'*Unesco*. De ma part j'ai promis à mes collègues parisiens de prendre contact avec mon gouvernement pour m'assurer la subvention financière si nécessaire. Maintenant je suis en état de vous communiquer que notre gouvernement suédois par le secrétaire d'État de département culturel m'a promis une attitude tout à fait bienveillante envers notre projet. La somme discutée par nous comme la contribution suédoise a été 4500 couronnes suédoises pour une revue et pour des frais de secrétariat (spécialement pour faire la bibliographie). L'affaire est cependant pressante parce que ma pétition sera présentée dans le courant d'octobre. Pour cette raison je propose que nous organisons cette Union aussitôt que possible. Les noms discutés par nous comme fondateurs ont été comme suit : l'Italie : M. Pettazzoni, La France : M. Dumézil et M. Puech, La Grande Bretagne : M.E.O. James, Les Pays Bas : M. van der Leeuw, Suède : M. Widengren. Pour les États Unis et l'Allemagne on n'a pas encore discuté des noms mais dans une lettre à

Paris j'ai proposé tels noms comme : pour les États Unis ou M. Nock ou M. Goodenough ou M. Kraeling (de la part duquel je crois que tout le projet a émané) et pour l'Allemagne ou M.J. Kroll ou M. Weinreich. Comme chargé à faire la bibliographie je voudrais proposer M. Eliade qui dispose son temps pour une tâche comme ça et qui est certainement très apte pour une telle entreprise. Le siège sera Paris – ça va de soi – et Mr. Puech me semble aussi par cette raison mais à plus d'un titre l'homme le plus propre à fonctionner comme le secrétaire. MM. James et van der Leeuw parmi des noms discutés ne sont pas encore avertis de notre sujet – à ce que je crois.

J'espère maintenant que vous êtes d'accord avec nous et j'attends votre réponse positive. En effet nous avons compté spécialement avec vous pour cette entreprise.

Dans votre lettre vous avez parlé sur le futur congrès des historiens de religion mais en des termes qui m'ont paru un peu pessimistes. C'était peut-être une fausse impression de ma part mais pour être préparé à des éventualités possible j'ai obtenu de la part de mon gouvernement une garantie absolue que nous pouvons arranger un congrès à Stockholm pendant 1949, si l'Italie ne veut pas arranger le congrès pour l'année prochaine ; comme j'espère qu'elle veut, parce que je voudrais très bien visiter l'Italie ! Une réponse dans ce cas n'est pas si pressante mais si nous aurons le congrès en Suède il faut commencer à temps. – J'avais espéré d'être capable de vous envoyer un petit livre que j'ai achevé mais l'impression est un peu en retard. Mon ouvrage traite la question du rôle de tradition orale et littéraire parmi les peuples sémitiques de l'ouest. –

En attendant votre réponse précieuse et en vous remerciant que vous avez touché ces problèmes graves

Je suis votre très dévoué
Geo Widengren

ps. Est-ce que vous croyez qu'il sera possible d'obtenir une subvention italienne correspondante ?

2 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Roma, Via Crescenzo <63>
14 septembre 1948.

Mon cher Collègue,

votre lettre du 1 septembre est parvenue hier. Elle me fait regretter davantage d'avoir manqué l'occasion de vous rencontrer à l'étranger pendant l'été. J'ai fini par renoncer à mon voyage, et j'ai passé mes vacances dans un petit endroit des Alpes.

Je suis heureux d'apprendre que l'idée d'une Association internationale des historiens des religions est déjà entrée dans sa phase de réalisation qui va être sanctionnée par son affiliation à l'UNESCO. L'appui si promptement accordé, grâce à vos soins, par le Gouvernement Suédois est déjà un succès. Si les autres Pays en suivront l'exemple, la publication de la Revue sera assurée. Je suppose que ce sera une Revue de large synthèse, d'orientation générale et de renseignements bibliographiques. Dans cela Mr. M. Eliade, que j'estime beaucoup, pourra rendre d'excellents services. Le choix de Mr. Puech comme secrétaire est recommandable à tous égards. Mr. van der Leeuw m'écrivait en juin dernier en se déclarant d'accord sur les avantages d'une collaboration entre les historiens des religions ; je ne doute pas qu'il va donner son adhésion et son appui. Pour l'Amérique l'on pourrait suggérer, entre autres, le nom de Mr. R.H. Lowie, un des membres du Comité international des congrès d'histoire des religions nommé à Bruxelles en 1935.

Quant à l'Italie, il vaudra mieux, à mon avis, que la Association soit définitivement constituée avant de s'adresser officiellement au Gouvernement. Je ne me cache pas, en effet, le danger qui pourrait se présenter par rapport à quelques difficultés particulières d'ordre confessionnel. Je crois pourtant qu'il sera possible de les surmonter dans le cadre international de l'Association.

Ce sont des considérations de même ordre qui me rendent, comme vous l'avez bien compris, hésitant vis-à-vis de l'organisation et de la réunion du VII^e Congrès international des religions en Italie. Je vous demande donc, pour le moment, de bien vouloir me permettre de réfléchir encore sur ce point, avant de donner mon avis définitif. En attendant je n'ai que à me réjouir de la heureuse solution qui se dessine dès maintenant de notre déclaration envisageant la possibilité

Raffaele Pettazzoni

3 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Roma, 20 novembre 1948

Mon cher Collègue,

en faisant suite à ma lettre du 14 septembre, je tiens à vous confirmer qu'en ayant réfléchi encore sur le prochain Congrès d'histoire des religions, je me suis persuadé qu'il vaut mieux renoncer définitivement à l'idée de le réunir en Italie.

Je n'ai pas de nouvelles de Mr. van der Leeuw, ce n'est qu'indirectement que j'ai appris qu'il y avait un projet hollandais pour réunir le Congrès à Amsterdam en 1950. Avez-vous des renseignements plus précis sur ce sujet ?

Quant à l'Association Internationale des historiens des religions, j'attends toujours des renseignements. Je supposais qu'on allait constituer tout de suite le Comité fondateur, et qu'il prendrait les accords nécessaires pour procéder d'une façon uniforme à l'organisation de l'Association dans les différents Pays. Je n'attends que les indications nécessaires pour entreprendre ce travail en Italie.

Veillez agréer, mon cher Collègue, l'expression de ma vive et amicale sympathie.

Mr. G. Widengren,

U P P S A L A

Raffaele Pettazzoni

4 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Upsal le 28 janvier 1949

Cher collègue,

J'ai été malade depuis cinq semaines et pour cette raison j'ai dû me mettre au lit. C'est regrettable que vous ayez été sans une réponse de ma part pendant un temps si considérable, mais il est si difficile de tenir sa correspondance au courant dans ces circonstances (douleur au dos, ancien héritage militaire). Je suppose cependant que vous avez maintenant depuis longtemps reçu l'invitation à un congrès à Amsterdam en 1950. Pour ma part j'ai répondu provisoirement que je trouve ce propos excellent parce que ce projet résout les difficultés que nous avons discutées. Quant à la date pour le congrès qu'est que vous pensez sur la fin du mois août ou le commencement du septembre ? Pour nos Scandinaves une telle date serait préférable. Avez-vous examiné les noms du comité proposé ? Il me semble que les Français sont terriblement sous-représentés et j'ai fait une remarque dans cette direction à M. Bleeker que je connais en personne. Il m'a cependant répliqué qu'on a été empêché par des considérations pour le comité déjà existant, mais qu'on pourrait faire suppléer le comité à l'occasion. Pour ma part je crois qu'il faut avoir égard aux Français qui sont maintenant absolument les personnages les plus influents – 24 chaires pour l'histoire de religions à Paris !

À plusieurs reprises j'ai mentionné notre projet d'une union {internation} internationale dans des lettres à M. Dumézil avec qui – parmi{s} des autres collègues – j'avais discuté à Paris ce projet, mais j'ai appris rien du tout. J'avais donc la conviction que UNESCO avait décliné une assistance mais en écrivant cette lettre je reçois de la part de M. Eliade la communication bienvenue que le contraire soit vrai. Evidemment il faut donc avancer à un établissement provisoire. Votre opinion sur ce point me serait très bienvenue. Si vous êtes de même avis je crois que des mesures à prendre seraient que

nous prendrions des contacts avec MM. James, v. d. Leeuw, Lowie et Weinreich ainsi comme avec MM. Puech et Dumézil pour leur proposer un établissement provisoire d'une telle union. Il me semble très inutile de perdre plus de temps et dans ce cas il faut être un peu disposé à l'initiative individuelle.

J'espère que votre santé est meilleure que la mienne et vous envoie mes salutations les plus sincères.

En toute sympathie
Geo Widengren

5 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Roma, 9 février 1949.

Mon cher Collègue,

je tiens d'abord à vous remercier bien cordialement de vos souhaits pour la nouvelle année, que vous avez bien voulu ajouter à l'aimable cadeau de votre nouveau livre sur les Prophètes d'Israël ; je me propose de le lire et de l'étudier aussitôt possible. Votre envoi m'est parvenu pendant que j'étais au lit à cause de la grippe qui a fait ravage ici, heureusement dans une forme pas dangereuse, mais très ennuyeuse et insistante. Maintenant je suis assez bien, et je vous souhaite à mon tour le plus prompt rétablissement en pleine santé.

J'ai bien reçu l'invitation pour le Congrès d'Amsterdam, et j'ai accepté. Je suis d'accord que les Français méritent un<e> place prépondérante. D'autre part je trouve que le Comité est déjà un peu trop nombreux dans son ensemble.

Je suis heureux d'apprendre que l'UNESCO serait bien disposée à l'égard de notre Association internationale. Je suis cependant toujours d'avis qu'il nous convient de nous organiser sans délai en dehors des cadres de l'UNESCO (j'ai pour cela des raisons et des expériences personnelles). Voilà donc ce qu'il faudrait faire tout d'abord, à mon avis: 1°) constituer le comité provisoire exactement dans les personnes indiquées dans votre lettre ; 2°) remettre au Comité de formuler les instructions nécessaires pour l'organisation uniforme dans les différents pays et d'étudier le projet de publication de la Revue. Je serais heureux si vous voudrez bien me donner votre opinion sur ces points.

À la suite d'une invitation de l'Université j'irai à Bruxelles en avril prochain (mon séjour est prévu pour la semaine de 3 à 10 avril). Je compte prendre l'occasion pour m'arrêter à Paris. Cela me permettra de voir les Collègues Français, et de discuter avec eux les différentes questions qui nous intéressent.

Je vous prie de croire, Mr. le Professeur, à mes sentiments de amicale sympathie.

Dans la liste du Comité pour le Congrès d'Amsterdam je trouve le nom de J.E. Holmberg, Göteborg. Uno Holmberg-Harva, Åbo, figura parmi les membres de l'ancien Comité élu à Bruxelles en 1935. Je voudrais bien avoir quelques éclaircissements sur ces deux noms, et je vous serai très obligé d'un petit mot à ce sujet.

Le nouveau 'Volume' (xxi) des 'Studi e Materiali', que vous allez recevoir très prochainement, contient un article (un peu trop sévère, à mon goût) de notre éthiopiste Conti Rossini sur le livre de Tor Ingram. Le volume contient aussi plusieurs compte-rendus des excellents travaux de l'école suédoise d'histoire des religions.

Raffaele Pettazzoni

6 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Upsal 13/12/50

Cher collègue,

La mort inattendue de van der Leeuw met{te} entre les mains de vous – comme le vice-président le plus aîné – la tâche de diriger notre association.

Quant à nôtre revue, je n'ai parlé en termes si formels comme vous mais au fonds je partage vos opinions. Si nous avons l'embarras du choix je voudrais préférer une revue à une bibliographie qu'on pourrait remettre comme un plan d'avenir. Mais à présent il existe un besoin pressant d'une revue de synthèse, sur ce point je suis parfaitement d'accord avec vous. Je ne crois que la RHR à Paris – quelque excellente que soit – sera capable de couvrir de tels besoins.

En toute sympathie

Votre

Geo Widengren

7 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 15 décembre 1950.

Mon cher Collègue,

je vous remercie bien cordialement de l'envoi de la III partie de votre ouvrage KING AND SAVIOUR. Voilà un ouvrage, je me suis dit, qui devrait être l'objet d'une analyse

des plus attentives dans notre projeté Périodique, s'il ne sera pas forcé de se restreindre à une Bibliographie, ce à quoi je ne saurais me résigner qu'à très grand regret.

La mort de notre cher Professeur van der Leeuw m'a touché profondément. C'est une perte irréparable pour notre science et pour l'organisation de nos études. Je vous suis très reconnaissant, de même qu'aux autres Collègues, de {bien} avoir bien voulu me proposer de le remplacer dans ses fonctions de président de la I.A.S.H.R. Si je me suis décidé à accepter une tâche pareille, c'est surtout parce que je suis sûr de pouvoir compter sur la collaboration précieuse et amicale des autres membres du Comité exécutif, et notamment sur la vôtre.

Il me semble que pour le moment il n'y a qu'à attendre les décisions de l'U.N.E.S.C.O. à l'égard de l'admission de la I.A.S.H.R. et à la subvention qui nous a été promise. M. Bleeker, comme vous savez, prendra part à la prochaine réunion du Comité permanent du Conseil International de la Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines à Paris, en représentant de la I.A.S.H.R., investi de pleins pouvoirs. M. Bleeker vient de m'écrire qu'il compte vous voir en février prochain.

Je me rappelle que m'annonciez en septembre 1948 que le Gouvernement Suédois avait décidé d'accorder une subvention de 4500 couronnes pour l'organisation internationale de nos études. Croyez-vous qu'on pourrait faire appel aujourd'hui à ces bonnes dispositions de votre Gouvernement ? La chose serait très souhaitable, d'autant plus qu'elle se donnerait *ipso facto* en exemple aux Gouvernements des autres Pays intéressés. Il est vrai, d'autre part, que la situation générale aujourd'hui n'est pas la même !

Veillez agréer, cher Monsieur le Professeur Widengren, mes cordial<es> souvenirs de notre rencontre à Amsterdam, de même que mes souhaits sincères pour la nouvelle année.

Raffaele Pettazzoni

8 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

[September 1951 : Gandini]

Grand merci pour votre hospitalité à Rome

Geo Widengren

9 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Upsal 24/10 1951

Cher collègue,

Depuis mon retour en Suède j'ai été malade, la cause en étant la grande différence en température entre la Turquie et la Suède.

Tout d'abord je voudrais bien remercier vous et Mme Pettazzoni pour ce que vous avez fait pour moi pendant mon séjour à Rome. J'éprouve encore quelques remords en pensant comme je vous ai entraîné dans les souterrains des Mitrées ! En me trouvant de nouveau à Upsal – et au surplus à un Upsal assez froid, bien que très beau avec les couleurs d'automne – je désire de revoir l'Italie pour y rester un beaucoup plus longtemps et pour y faire des études plus attentives et plus profondes sur le domaine des cultes orientales et spécialement du mithriacisme. Mais cela est encore seulement un beau rêve !

Le séjour en Turquie fort intéressant qu'il ait été n'a pas pu être le rival de Rome du point de vue de "se trouver bien". En effet je me suis repenti un peu d'avoir abandonné les études latines pour le mirage oriental.

Comme j'ai déjà écrit à M. Bleeker je vais me rendre à Amsterdam pendant la semaine 10/11–17/11 et je me réjouis de vous revoir dans ce milieu agréable.

Quant à mes efforts pour obtenir un support financier pour notre association je dois confesser que je n'ai pas eu de la veine car voici la troisième fois que nous avons changé le ministère de l'instruction publique. Parce que l'attitude change avec chaque nouveau ministre on a beaucoup de travail pour créer une atmosphère de sympathie envers nos projets. C'est surtout la contribution à notre revue qui me cause des difficultés tout à fait inattendues, mais dues à cette nouvelle réorganisation du gouvernement{s}. Si nécessaire je vais procurer de l'argent additionnel par des moyens privés qui sont à ma disposition, bien que je trouve qu'il soit le devoir du gouvernement de contribuer avec une bonne somme à notre association. Ce qui reste un grand obstacle c'est que la Suède contribue chaque année un million couronnes suédoises à UNESCO sans en obtenir rien en échange. Or, quand l'ex secrétaire m'a donné la promesse d'une grande contribution suédoise la Suède n'était pas encore un membre de l'UNESCO. C'est là la différence. Mais moyens privés ou subvention partielle de l'État je vous donne pour sûr que la contribution suédoise sera pour du moins trois ans 3000 couronnes suédoises. Avec la contribution dont nous ainsi disposons il me semble parfaitement sûr que l'avenir de notre revue est garanti. Mais la bibliographie reste pour le présent un souhait. Et le secrétariat doit se contenter avec des moyens assez réduits. Pour ma part je trouve cependant que la revue soit la chose la plus nécessaire si nous

voulons gagner notre but essential, faire la propagande et attirer l'attention sur notre science à la même fois que nous essayons de créer un sentiment – pour ainsi dire – “d'esprit de corps” entre les historiens de l'histoire des religions qui sont à présent trop fractionnés et dispersés. Je crois donc que la rédaction de notre revue sera une chose extrêmement importante et difficile. Revenant sur la question de l'éditeur je trouve qu'il sera absolument nécessaire pour vous d'assumer cette tâche ingrate. Après avoir étudié un peu <de> plus près les dernières publications de notre ami Eliade je le trouve un peu trop aventureux pour occuper plus que la position purement technique d'un secrétaire de rédaction. Vous comprenez certainement ce que j'ai en vue et je me rappelle que nous avons été parfaitement d'accord sur ce point. Si vous me permettez je vais donc proposer la solution que nous avons esquissée à Rome : vous serez l'éditeur en chef avec un secrétaire de rédaction et un comité à votre disposition. Mais il faut aussitôt que possible faire des préparations et rassembler les articles....

En toute sympathie pour vous et M. me Pettazzoni.

Geo Widengren

10 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 5 novembre 1951.

Cher Collègue,

je regrette beaucoup que vous avez été malade. Le climat du sud exige des précautions que vous n'étiez pas trop disposé à observer d'une façon assez rigoureuse (du moins à Rome, à ce que je me rappelle).

Nous voilà à la veille de notre réunion à Amsterdam. J'arriverai là, je crois, le 14 nov. J'ai écrit en septembre à M. Puech en lui exposant notre projet de faire paraître une Revue internationale à Paris. Il m'a assuré qu'il a trouvé des dispositions favorables à cela chez les directeurs des “Presses Universitaires”. Il ajoutait dans sa lettre : “Il faudra également trouver ici un savant qui veuille bien accepter de remplir les lourdes fonctions de secrétaire de la rédaction. Je vais pressentir certains collègues, mais je redoute que ce soit en vain”.

Quant à moi, il y a bien des raisons qui me rendent hésitant à accepter votre proposition. Il dépendra beaucoup de l'échange de vues que nous allons avoir à ce sujet dans notre réunion prochaine.

Vos efforts concernant une subvention Suédoise méritent notre complète reconnaissance. Malheureusement la question de l'argent n'est pas encore arrangée, à ce

moment. Les décisions de nos Collègues américains à ce sujet sont pour le moment encore vagues.

Au revoir donc bientôt, cher Collègue. En attendant veuillez agréer mes cordialités sincères avec mes hommages à M.me Widengren.

11 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Upsal, le 7.12.51

Cher collègue,

Excusez-moi que je vous demande si vous pouvez trouver le temps de m'écrire vos impressions du livre de M. Abrahamson sur les mythes Africains de l'origine de la mort («The Origin of Death»). J'éprouve des grandes difficultés en essayant de lui donner une juste appréciation. Mais vous en votre qualité d'expert sur les mythes des peuples non-civilisés, pourriez me communiquer ce que vous trouvez là de mérite (et de défaut ?) ! Je serais très redevable à vous si vous pourriez m'envoyer quelques lignes *avant le 15 ce mois* quand je dois présenter mon opinion. Les mérites ethnographiques sont d'une haute valeur, comme atteste M. Lagencrantz.

J'espère aussi qu'il sera possible pour vous d'envoyer les épreuves de votre ouvrage avant le ½ 52, si possible, ça va de soi. En tous cas, je serai forcé de donner mon manuscrit à l'imprimerie avant le ½ 52. Nous avons donc à notre disposition encore un petit délai.

En toute hâte
votre Geo Widengren

12 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 10 déc. 1951.

Cher Collègue,

le travail de M. Abrahamsson est, à mon jugement, excellent. Le sujet est de grand intérêt pour l'histoire générale des religions. La documentation est la plus étendue qu'on puisse désirer. La classification typologique, qui représente la partie la plus importante du travail, est bien faite, d'après des motifs typologiques bien choisis. Bref, il fait

honneur à l'école d'où il sort. Les résultats sont nécessairement partiels, étant donné le cadre strictement africaniste de l'enquête. Mais ils serviront de base pour tout travail ultérieur visant à élargir la recherche d'autres domaines ethnologiques. Déjà un pair de mes élèves m'a demandé s'il serait possible d'entreprendre une enquête pareille pour les mythes d'origine de la mort en Amérique du nord ou du sud, voir même (mais là il y eu de choses à trouver, je crois) en Australie. Et d'autre part il faut que cette recherche soit réservée à quelqu'un de vos élèves ou à un élève de M. Lagerkrantz [*sic.* <Store> Lagerkrantz], qui a peut-être déjà entrepris cette enquête. Veuillez, je vous en prie, bien remercier de ma part M. Abrahamsson, qui a bien voulu envoyer un exemplaire de son ouvrage ; je l'ai transmis à la bibliothèque de notre institut pour les civilisations primitives. Je vous prie aussi, à l'occasion, de présenter mes salutations cordiales à M. Lagerkrantz [*sic.* Lagerkrantz].

Je garde encore quelque espoir de vous envoyer assez tôt non pas les épreuves, mais la traduction anglaise des parties de mon ouvrage qui peuvent vous intéresser.

Je suis actuellement en train de m'occuper encore de la question concernant le siège du prochain Congrès d'histoire des religions. Je vous mettrai au courant.

M. Bleeker vous aura informé des décisions prises à la réunion du Bureau du Conseil permanent à Paris, à laquelle il a participé. Les subventions de l'UNESCO ne vont, à ce qu'il paraît, qu'à des Bibliographies, du moins en principe ; et encore il faut présenter un projet et budget détaillé, ce que nous ne pourrons faire que dans un terme assez éloigné. Il nous faut donc envisager dès maintenant la nécessité de publier notre revue générale avec nos propres moyens éventuellement (sans négliger en tout cas de demander les aides de l'UNESCO). Si seulement nos Collègues américains se décidaient à nous assurer leurs subventions ! Nous attendons toujours, M. Bleeker et moi, les propositions détaillées et formelles de la part des Presses Universitaires. Je vous avoue, à ce sujet, que j'ai été impressionné, lors de notre réunion à Amsterdam, par la possibilité envisagée par M. Puech, que les Presses Universitaires ne soient pas trop disposées à s'intéresser activement de la nouvelle Revue pour ne pas créer une concurrence à la RHR. En tout cas, *M. Bleeker* a reçu une proposition qui me semble raisonnable de la part d'un éditeur *hollandais*. Nous aurions à en tenir compte.

Raffaele Pettazzoni

13 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Upsal 22/12 1951

Cher collègue,

Je vous remercie pour votre lettre qui m'a été d'une inestimable valeur pour l'appréciation de l'ouvrage de M. Abrahamsson. Un des élèves de M. Lagercrantz s'occupe maintenant avec une tâche correspondante pour l'Océanie, mais pour le reste le champ reste libre pour des cultivateurs.

J'ai reçu de la part de notre collaborateur infatigable M. Bleeker une lettre assez pessimiste. En réponse j'ai proposé d'attendre les décisions définitives de l'UNESCO pour procéder ensuite aux pas décisifs quant à notre revue. Si l'UNESCO ne veut que subventionner un bulletin et une bibliographie, eh bien, publions-nous donc un bulletin séparément et une bibliographie en des fascicules et préparons-nous l'an prochain la publication d'une revue du format et du caractère déjà esquissés ! Je trouve comme vous et M. Bleeker que l'offre hollandaise est à prendre au sérieux et si les Presses Universitaires ne s'intéressent pas pour le projet, il faut certainement se décider pour l'imprimerie hollandaise. Seulement dans ce cas il reste toujours à trouver un secrétaire de rédaction qui sera en contact avec cette imprimerie. M. Bleeker a des propos à cet égard, mais je crois qu'il vaut mieux attendre la réponse de l'UNESCO et préparer le contenu de l'année première de notre revue.

Pour ma part je pourrais contribuer en premier lieu un aperçu de l'état présent des problèmes dans les religions iraniennes. À l'occasion je voudrais aussi très volontiers donner un résumé de l'œuvre scientifique de Tor Andræ, spécialement en qualité d'islamisant, parce qu'on aura la possibilité en tel cas de présenter quelques problèmes dans l'histoire de l'Islam qui sont d'un grand intérêt pour l'historien des religions en général, mais qui échappent souvent à son attention grâce aux barrières techniques qui séparent l'Islamwissenschaft de l'histoire des religions. J'ai écrit en suédois un tel article que je pourrais réviser en approfondissant un peu les problèmes. Je crois qu'une telle entreprise restera en dedans du cadre de notre revue parce qu'elle rendra accessible au monde scientifique beaucoup d'ouvrages et d'articles publiés par Tor Andræ seulement en suédois.

J'ai lu dans notre journal suédois "Dagens Nyheter" un article très bien informé sur l'Action Catholique en Italie où il a été dit que M. De Gasperi ainsi que des autres membres du gouvernement italien sont des membres de ce mouvement. Vos difficultés me sont maintenant beaucoup plus explicables.

Avec les vœux les plus sincères pour Noël et Nouvel An pour Madame Pettazzoni et vous-même.

Votre
Geo Widengren

14 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 11 février 1952

Cher Collègue,

il y a bien longtemps que j'aurais voulu répondre à votre aimable lettre du 22 XII. Veuillez m'excuser de ce retard.

Je serai à Paris le 22 prochain pour prendre part à l'Assemblée générale du CIPSH. J'aurai donc l'occasion de rencontrer les Collègues Bleeker et Puech, et de régler avec eux définitivement les questions concernant nos projets de publications (y compris le choix d'un secrétaire de rédaction pour la Revue), d'autant plus qu'il nous sera donné probablement de connaître le chiffre de la subvention dont nous pourrions disposer sur les fonds de l'UNESCO. Vous serez naturellement mis au courant.

Par prudence je me suis abstenu, jusqu'à ce moment, de solliciter l'envoi d'articles pour *NUMEN*, tant que la chose n'était pas définitivement arrangée. Mais je compte toujours sur les articles promis par les différents membres de notre Comité exécutif, à commencer par vous. Les deux contributions que vous avez bien voulu m'annoncer, un aperçu général sur les problèmes actuels de l'histoire des religions iraniennes et un résumé de l'œuvre de Tor Andræ comme islamisant (d'autant mieux dans le cadre des études d'histoire religieuse islamique), sont excellentes, et je m'attends de recevoir vos deux manuscrits "at your earliest convenience".

Je regrette beaucoup qu'il n'a pas été possible de vous envoyer les parties de mon prochain ouvrage sur 'The All-knowing God', que j'aurais bien voulu vous remettre en temps utile. Faute de cela, vous pourrez vous en tenir, si vous en aurez l'opportunité, à ce que j'ai écrit dans la Préface à mon volume de "Saggi di storia delle religioni e di mitologia" (Rome, 1946), que vous connaissez.

La 'question romaine' traîne encore. J'ai cru utile de prendre la parole en public par l'article publié dans notre hebdomadaire *IL MONDO*, dont je vous envoie à part le numéro. La demande a été renouvelée, et j'attends actuellement la réponse définitive. Jusque-là il vaut mieux garder une attitude d'attente.

La traduction italienne de l'EDDA poétique vient de paraître comme premier volume d'une nouvelle Série italienne dédiée au [*sic*: aux] CLASSICI DELLA RELIGIONE. J'ai écrit la Préface. La traduction est l'œuvre d'un jeune savant qui a étudié en Suède. Dans un Avant-propos il cite pas mal des personnes scandinaves (en premier lieu suédoises, à commencer par Axel Boethius) auxquelles il se sent obligé. C'est donc, en quelque mesure, un livre italo-suédois. J'ai prié l'éditeur (CASA EDITRICE SANSONI, Florence) de vous envoyer un exemplaire du volume ; nous vous serons tous très obligés si vous voudrez bien écrire quelques mots pour signaler l'ouvrage dans un journal quotidien suédois, ou autrement. J'espère que l'éditeur suivra mon conseil.

Veillez agréer, cher Collègue, mes salutations les plus cordiales.

Raffaele Pettazzoni

15 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 30 novembre 1952

Cher collègue, Ms. le Prof. Widengren,

bien merci, d'abord, pour le tirage-à-part de votre excellent article sur les bases iraniennes de la Gnose, que vous avez bien voulu m'envoyer avant de quitter la Suisse (je vous avoue que j'avais espéré vous revoir en Italie avant votre rentrée en Suède).

Le Gouvernement Italien a fini par donner son consentement à la réunion de notre Congrès international à Rome en 1955. La route est débarrassée de tout obstacle préalable, ce qui ne signifie pas que toutes difficultés soient éliminées. Nous aurons l'occasion d'en parler d'une façon définitive à la réunion de notre Bureau Exécutif projetée pour l'année prochaine à Paris conjointement à la réunion d'experts patronnée par l'UNESCO avant sa crise actuelle.

Mon voyage en Hollande en octobre dernier a donné entre autres des résultats concrets. En me trouvant à Leyde sur invitation de l'Université, j'ai eu une entrevue très intéressante avec le Directeur de la Maison Brill. Brill accepte de publier NUMEN, comme organe périodique de la I.A.S.H.R. Les conditions sont exceptionnellement favorables, sans aucune subvention de notre part. C'est pourquoi, d'accord avec M. Bleeker, je n'ai pas hésité à m'engager, sur de l'approbation <de vous> et de celle de M. Puech (je lui écris en même temps), et des autres Collègues du Bureau exécutif de la I.A.S.H.R.

Il est convenu que NUMEN paraîtra en 3 fascicules par an, comme vous savez, de 80 pages chacun, à partir de janvier-avril 1954. Il est donc temps de nous mettre au travail

dès maintenant pour réunir un nombre d'articles suffisant à assurer la continuité régulière du périodique pour les deux premières années au moins. C'est pourquoi je viens vous prier, cher Collègue, de bien vouloir rédiger les deux importants articles que vous m'avez promis et de me les envoyer "at your early convenience", p. ex., s'il m'est permis d'entrer tout de suite en fonction comme organisateur, celui sur la religion de l'Iran avant le 31 mars, et l'autre avant le 30 juin de 1953.

Vous savez qu'en prenant sur moi cette lourde tâche, que j'estime en tout cas de toute première importance pour l'avenir de nos études, je compte surtout sur l'assistance de mes Collègues. La vôtre me sera particulièrement utile et précieuse.

J'attends donc un mot de votre part, et dans cette attente je vous prie d'agréer mes salutations les plus cordiales.

Encore une demande, s'il vous plaît. Je vous ai parlé il y a plusieurs mois de la traduction italienne de l'EDDA, publiée à Florence par l'éditeur Sansoni. L'éditeur m'assure qu'il vous en a envoyé un exemplaire. L'avez-vous bien reçu ?

Raffaele Pettazzoni

16 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

KINGSLEY HOTEL

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27/1/1953

Cher Collègue,

Seulement quelques lignes pour vous avertir que j'ai fini enfin le premier article pour notre revue mais que la correction de mon (en effet très mauvais !) français prend quelque temps.

Aussitôt après mon retour en Suède je veux entamer l'autre article que je vous ai promis. C'était ma conférence à Cambridge, qui a bouleversé mes plans et causé un délai regrettable pour lequel je dois m'excuser.

À Cambridge j'ai essayé de faire quelque propagande pour notre Association qui reste encore tout à fait inconnue dans ce pays ! J'ai écrit ma lettre à Bleeker pour l'informer sur cet état de choses – très regrettable à mon avis, parce qu'il existe après tout dans l'Angleterre beaucoup de savants qui s'intéressent pour l'histoire des religions, mais qui ignorent notre existence. Ce sont surtout des islamisants, des exégètes et des

orientalistes qu'il faut gagner. Chose étonnante, il y a à Oxford une chaire pour l'histoire des religions occupée par un iraniste, Zaehner, dont j'ai fait la connaissance à Bruxelles 1938, mais qui avait abandonné la science pour le service militaire et diplomatique. C'est seulement l'année dernière qu'il <est> rentré à Oxford. Évidemment il subsiste des espérances qu'on pourrait un peu « vitaliser » les études de notre domaine en Angleterre. On peut compter peut-être surtout sur M. Guillaume, un des meilleurs islamisants et hébraïsants qui est avant tout historien des religions. Sa position est à l'Université de Londres, actuellement la plus grande dans ce pays.

Eh bien, comme vous comprenez, il y a beaucoup à faire et je veux en essayer autant que possible, aussi l'année prochaine où je me rends très probablement à Cambridge pour le congrès des orientalistes.

En concluant je voudrais vous remercier pour la rencontre à Paris et pour la manière excellente dans laquelle vous avez su conduire la discussion. Je vous prie <de> présenter mes hommages respectueux à Madame Pettazzoni.

En toute sympathie
Votre bien dévoué
Geo Widengren

17 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Uppsala 4. 9. 53

Cher collègue,

Seulement quelques lignes pour vous avertir que j'ai entamé depuis mon retour à Uppsala le second article sur l'état actuel de recherches concernant la religion iranienne. Mais le sujet est très difficile et j'avance assez lentement. Je calcule avec le premier octobre comme la date quand il me sera possible de vous envoyer cet article ou de moins la première moitié pour le premier fascicule de notre « Numen ».

À cause des grèves françaises j'ai été sans communication avec ma collaboratrice française mais évidemment cette chose elle n'est pas de grande importance parce que vous avez l'intention de publier l'article sur Tor Andræ comme islamisant dans un numéro suivant de notre revue. Probablement cependant vous recevrez cet article à la même fois comme l'article iranien, ou à peu près.

Je crois qu'il faut partager cet article sur la religion de l'Iran antique en deux parts, comme vous avez déjà mis en ligne de compte, car le sujet est si compréhensif et controversé qu'il demande un traitement assez circonstancié.

Vous savez peut-être par M. Bleeker que j'ai reçu pour IASHR une contribution *annuelle* de mille couronnes suédoises de la part de gouvernement suédois – enfin ! Mais comme j'ai écrit à Bleeker il faut arranger si possible avant le premier octobre les formalités avec l'admission de la société suédoise (groupe national de IASHR) dans notre association pour nous procurer la continuation régulière pour le futur de cette contribution.

J'espère que vous et M.^{me} Pettazzoni avez eu un été agréable. Quant à moi je suis tout à fait plongé dans les choses iraniennes. J'attends la visite de mon ami et collègue M. Jansen de Oslo pour discuter la création d'une société norvégienne dont les plans sont maintenant très avancés.

Ma femme et moi vous remercions en vous priant de dire nos hommages à M.^{me} Pettazzoni.

En toute sympathie
Geo Widengren

18 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 9 septembre 1953.

Cher Collègue,

bien merci de votre lettre du 4 c. m. Je compte donc d'une façon définitive sur le 1 oct. comme date de l'envoi de votre article. Je me rends compte qu'il s'agit d'un bien lourd travail ; je n'insisterai donc pas pour recevoir l'article complet. Il suffira que vous m'envoyiez la première partie, comme d'accord. Brill va lancer une annonce publicitaire à large diffusion pour annoncer la prochaine publication de NUMEN et sa parution en janvier prochain, avec le Sommaire du premier fascicule, etc. C'est aussi en vue de cet engagement que je me permets de bien vouloir mener à bout la première partie de votre article et de me l'envoyer au plus tôt possible. C'est entendu que la II partie, de même que l'autre article sur Tor Andræ paraîtront dans les prochains fascicules de NUMEN.

Je me félicite sincèrement de votre succès auprès du Ministère pour la subvention annuelle de 1000 couronnes. De même je vous suis très reconnaissant de vos efforts pour la formation des groupes anglais et norvégien de la Int. Association. C'est un vrai scandale qu'il n'existe pas encore un tel groupe en Grande Bretagne !

J'ai bien reçu votre article sur les études d'histoire des religions en Suède. C'est un aperçu extrêmement utile et qui donne la sensation du splendide développement de nos études dans votre Pays, dans lesquelles il vous revient un rôle si éminent.

Nous avons eu des agréables vacances dans les Alpes. Ma femme s'unit à moi pour vous remercier bien vivement et pour présenter ses compliments à M.^{me} Widengren, avec nos amitiés les plus cordiales.

A Paris j'ai oublié de soumettre à notre Bureau une proposition visant à abrégé le nom de notre Association. A mon goût, "Intern. Assoc. for the Study of the History of Religions" est trop long ; je crois qu'il vaut mieux dire simplement "Intern. Ass. for the History of Religions". Je songe à adopter ce titre abrégé dès le premier fasc. de NUMEN, dans l'espoir de voir ratifié par l'Assemblée générale pendant le Congrès de Rome en 1955. Dites-moi si vous avez des objections. Dans ce cas je n'aurai aucune difficulté à renoncer à mon projet.

Raffaele Pettazzoni

19 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Uppsala 5.x. 53

Cher collègue,

Aujourd'hui j'ai enfin achevé l'article pour « Numen » sur l'état des problèmes de la religion de l'Iran antique mais il faut maintenant le dactylographier et un peu corriger. J'ai cependant à ma disposition une assistante allemande très capable qui en finira probablement dans une semaine. Je m'excuse pour encore un petit délai, mais j'ai travaillé en effet cette fois sous des conditions assez pressantes. Ma femme a reçu au milieu de septembre un fils – événement très joyeux en soi pour des époux sans enfants après un mariage de neuf ans – mais qui a entraîné une petite révolution de notre vie et m'a déjà coûté beaucoup de temps et m'a causé une perte de concentration considérable, comme vous certainement comprenez !

En toute sympathie
Votre Geo Widengren

20 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 24 octobre 1953

Cher Collègue, le ms de votre article est arrivé. Je suis content de pouvoir disposer de cette importante contribution pour le premier numéro de NUMEN. Je l'enverrai tout de suite à Brill.

Je vous félicite sincèrement pour la naissance de votre enfant, et ma femme s'unit à moi pour présenter nos compliments à M.^{me} Widengren dans cette heureuse occasion. Il paraît qu'une nouvelle réunion de nous en petit comité se rendra nécessaire prochainement pour prendre des accords au sujet du Congrès de Rome. Le thème du Congrès dans la formulation adoptée à Paris est en réalité la fusion assez peu organique de deux thèmes différents, et comme il arrive toujours dans les compromis, il risque de causer des embarras.

Avec mes meilleurs vœux, votre
Raffaele Pettazzoni

21 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

14 décembre 1953

Cher Collègue,

je vous remercie beaucoup de votre savante étude sur l'émasculatation. Je me rappelle avoir lu quelques données concernant cet usage dans nos journaux lors de la guerre en Abyssinie. D'autres données intéressantes sont probablement enregistrées dans les ouvrages de nos éthiopiens Conti Rossini, Cerulli, etc.

J'espère que vous avez depuis longtemps renvoyé à Brill les premières épreuves révisées de votre article pour *NUMEN*. Toute sollicitude de votre part dans la correction des épreuves nous sera précieuse. J'ose même vous suggérer d'envoyer directement ici à moi les épreuves définitives avec votre *imprimatur* ; cela nous fera épargner du temps.

J'espère que mes idées concernant l'organisation du Congrès de Rome rencontreront du moins en partie votre approbation. Toute suggestion de votre part me sera précieuse. J'attends vos indications au sujet de la personne à inviter pour une conférence générale sur la royauté chez les non-civilisés. Je connais les ouvrages de plusieurs savants suédois qui ont travaillé récemment sur ce thème.

Le professeur J.W. Hauer, Tübingen, vient de m'offrir sa collaboration à *NUMEN*. Avez-vous quelques réserves à faire au sujet de cette collaboration ?

Nos meilleurs vœux pour la Noël et la nouvelle année à M. Widengren et à vous-même.

Raffaele Pettazzoni

22 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Upsala, 5. 1.1954

Cher collègue,

C'est seulement hier que j'ai reçu les épreuves corrigées et les erreurs restantes étant peu nombreuses (bien qu'il semble presque impossible de faire prévaloir certaines corrections !) j'ai pu les renvoyer aujourd'hui avec mon imprimatur.

La deuxième partie de mon article "iranien" porte le même titre que la première, mais avec les sous-titres "II. Geschichte" et "III. Schlussfolgerungen". L'article sur Tor Andræ (prêt depuis longtemps) j'ai appelé très simplement "Tor Andræ comme islamisant".

Il m'a réussi d'obtenir une promesse de mon collègue M. Arne Furumark de nous fournir d'un article sur la portée du déchiffrement de l'écriture minoen-mycénienne pour nos connaissances des stades les plus anciens de la religion grecque. À mon avis nous avons là une contribution de la plus haute importance, car tout en se basant sur la belle découverte de Ventris mon ami Furumark a su en améliorer la lecture de certains textes du système "linear B" et à la même fois déchiffrer et expliquer maints passages du système "linear A", le système qui restait encore non-déchiffré. Son article sera très court – environ 10 pages – mais contiendra tout ce qui sera essentiel pour l'histoire des religions. Furumark a en effet déjà trouvé des faits de grande conséquence pour notre thème de congrès c.a.d. en ce qui concerne la royauté sacrée hellénique de l'époque la plus ancienne. J'ai pris part moi-même au séminaire de Furumark où nous avons travaillé avec le déchiffrement de Ventris, mon collègue et ami G. Björck ayant donné des contributions linguistiques d'une grande valeur (reconnue par Ventris dans son article paru dans le "Journal of Hellenic Studies").

Quant à la question de Hauer je manque encore des renseignements sûrs sur son rôle réel mais je crois pourtant qu'il se soit brouillé avec les Nazis à une date assez reculée. Il faut peut-être donc qu'on remette la décision pour les besoins à venir. M. Hauer a en effet *des idées très suggestives* sur l'ancienne religion indienne et sa coopération serait pour nous très précieuse, étant donné que son intégrité morale soit affirmée. Est-ce que vous savez ce que pense Puech sur cette question délicate ?

J'ai médité beaucoup sur le programme du congrès et j'envoie ces jours les résultats de mes méditations à notre ami Bleeker sans vouloir prétendre être un expert dans ces matières.

Mais je sais par une lettre de notre collègue Alföldi que la proposition d'imprimer avant de les présenter les conférences générales rencontre une opposition très marquée de son côté et je dois donc confesser que je suis entièrement de son opinion. Je propose à Bleeker que nous passons un compromis.

J'avoue volontiers qu'on pourrait dresser encore de plusieurs façons un programme du congrès mais ce que j'ai souligné pour Bleeker c'est d'abord et surtout l'importance des choses purement pratiques et techniques. J'espère qu'il nous soit possible que nous ayons un rendez-vous d'affaires à Rome en avril pour discuter ces choses.

Vous recevrez la continuation de mon article iranien au commencement de février. Par malheur on vient de publier quelques articles sur les Gâthâs et Zoroastre qu'il faut que je médite diligemment.

Avec les meilleurs vœux pour 1954 et pour votre "Numen".

Votre Geo Widengren

23 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

11 janvier 1954

Cher Collègue,

je vous remercie bien vivement de l'aide précieuse que vous prêtez à notre Périodique. L'article de Furumark s'annonce très important ; dites-lui de ma part, je vous en prie, que je serai heureux de le publier dans le 2. numéro de NUMEN, s'il pourra me l'envoyer avant la fin de février. Les découvertes méritent qu'on leur donne la précedence, car elles doivent être mises en circulation au plus tôt possible.

J'ai demandé à Bleeker un article sur l'œuvre de Kristensen comme historien des religions ; il a exercé une influence considérable sur les études hollandaises et sur van der Leeuw en particulier ; mais il me semble qu'il n'est pas assez connu à l'étranger. Il en est de même, en quelque sorte, de Grönbech ; je crois que NUMEN devrait publier un article sur Grönbech et je vous demande, non pas de le préparer vous-même (car je crains de vous trop demander pour NUMEN), mais de m'indiquer un savant nordique qui serait particulièrement qualifié pour cette tâche; tant mieux si vous voudrez vous même adresser cette demande à mon nom à la personne que vous aurez choisie.

Je m'aperçois qu'il est extrêmement difficile d'organiser un/notre congrès par correspondance. Une réunion de notre petit comité (j'entends vous, Puech, Bleeker et moi) au mois d'avril serait très utile à bien des égards. Il s'agit de choisir le lieu. Je sais que Bleeker compte venir à Rome en avril. Je suis invité à Groningen, et j'ai proposé d'y aller à la fin de mai, mais je n'ai pas encore de réponse. La Suisse serait indiquée comme point de réunion plus central. À Bâle l'on pourrait rencontrer aussi Alföldi, je suppose.

Votre Raffaele Pettazzoni

24 Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

UPPSALA UNIVERSITET
TEOLOGISKA FAKULTETEN
Upsal, 19. 1. 1954

Cher collègue,

Je vous propose de vous adresser à mon ami S. Pallis, professeur pour l'histoire des religions à l'université de Copenhague. Son adresse est :

Toldbodvej 28^{IV}, Copenhague.

Pallis est un ancien élève de Grönbech sur lequel il a publié en danois un mémoire tout à fait remarquable, très nuancé et vraiment méritoire. Je crois donc qu'il sera le plus qualifié pour cette tâche que vous trouverez. Vous pouvez si vous le croyez nécessaire vous référer à moi.

Quant à Furumark je veux faire mon mieux pour obtenir un article de lui avant le premier mars.

De Bleeker j'ai reçu maintenant des copies des réponses aux projets pour le congrès. Or, elles semblent indiquer que mes propres propos ne contiennent pas {au}quelque chose original ou neuf, mais impliquent plutôt un ensemble d'idées, proposées par tous les correspondants.

Brill me demande le numéro des tirages à part de mon article dans NUMEN, ce que je n'avais pas indiqué parce que je comptais avec un numéro fixe, ce qui est d'ordinaire la chose régulière, n'est-ce pas ? N'est-il pas utile avoir une règle fixe dans ce cas, mais ça a peut-être déjà trouvé un règlement ?

En toute hâte
Votre bien dévoué
Geo Widengren

25 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

25 janvier 1954

Cher Collègue,

bien merci de votre lettre du 19 et de l'adresse du Prof. Pallis ; je lui écrirai très prochainement.

Je ne savais pas que vous proposez de venir en tout cas à Rome en avril prochain pour des recherches *in situ*. Je l'ai appris d'une lettre de Bleeker. Naturellement ce n'est plus le cas de songer à Bâle comme endroit de notre rencontre ; il est entendu que j'aurai le plaisir de vous voir ici de même que M. Bleeker, et, je le souhaite vivement, M. Puech ; j'ai prié Bleeker de lui écrire à ce sujet.

M. Bleeker m'a remis une copie de votre Pro Memoria concernant le Congrès. C'est la plus complète et la plus détaillée des réponses qui nous sont parvenues ; elle nous sera précieuse à bien des points de vue. Je suis d'accord avec vous sur plusieurs points. J'ai déjà renoncé pour mon compte au projet des quatre grandes sections, et j'ai dessiné un tableau de dix sections qui coïncide presque entièrement avec le vôtre.

Quant aux personnes à inviter pour donner les conférences générales j'ai reçu jusqu'à ce moment une vingtaine de noms. Le choix est très embarrassant. Rowley, p. ex. (suggéré par James pour les textes de Ras Shamra) n'est pas à négliger à côté de Dupont Sommer. À part cela et sans vouloir aucunement renoncer à Dupont Sommer, je crois que l'Angleterre ne devrait pas être trop sévèrement punie à cause de n'avoir pas su garder sa position de jadis dans les études d'histoire des religions ; il faudrait au contraire la solliciter pour regagner sa place.

Le point le plus controversé est celui qui concerne l'impression d'avance des textes des conférences générales. Bleeker insiste dans ce sens (il y tient aussi à être chargé d'une conférence générale à part le résumé final). Il y a là le *pro* et le *contra*. Le principe de la publication d'avance a trouvé son application la plus intégrale au Congrès de Philosophie à Amsterdam, où les Congressistes ont reçu préalablement quatre gros volumes imprimés contenant toutes les communications du Congrès. Ainsi tout le temps a été dédié à la discussion. Vous me direz que la discussion convient aux philosophes plus qu'aux historiens. Mais voilà que les organisateurs du Congrès des Sciences historiques qui aura lieu à Rome en septembre 1955, ont décidé d'adopter le même principe.

Heureusement sur ce point et sur les autres nous aurons l'occasion de nous éclairer réciproquement lors de notre réunion prochaine à Rome, et je suis sûr que nous parviendrons à nous accorder dans l'intérêt même du Congrès.

Avec mes salutations bien sincères,

Raffaele Pettazzoni

26 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

13 février 1954

Mon cher Professeur Widengren,

je viens de recevoir le fascicule de NUMEN avec l'agréable surprise que vous avez bien voulu me faire au nom des autres Collègues et collaborateurs. Je vous suis infiniment reconnaissant, et je vous remercie pour toutes les belles choses, trop belles en vérité, que vous avez cru pouvoir dire de moi. Je ne suis pas bien sûr de les mériter. Je ne crois pas, p. ex., qu'il y ait parmi mes compatriotes beaucoup de personnes disposées à m'attribuer des qualités diplomatiques. "Nemo propheta in patria !" Je suis en train de faire des curieuses expériences au sujet de notre prochain Congrès. Je puis vous assurer que toute appréciation, toute manifestation de solidarité qui me viendra de l'étranger me sera précieuse pour le succès de mes efforts.

Vous souhaitez que je trouve le temps de publier mes conférences d'Uppsala (voilà un des souvenirs les plus agréables de ma vie que mon séjour dans votre ville paisible, et la visite à Sigtuna en compagnie de Tor Andræ, etc. etc. !!). Eh bien, ces conférences sont devenues un gros volume de peut-être 450 pages. Ce volume est prêt en traduction anglaise. Il gît [*sic*] depuis deux ans chez Methuen à Londres, qui s'est engagé à le publier. Mais, voilà ma tragédie quotidienne, on n'a pas encore commencé à l'imprimer ! C'est là le plus fâcheux échec de ma diplomatie !

Je tiens beaucoup à avoir vos impressions sur le fascicule de NUMEN. Quelques fautes d'impression y sont malheureusement glissées ; mais il était presque inévitable dans un premier numéro. Je me propose d'insister chez Brill pour assurer un contrôle mieux organisé sur place.

M. le prof. Pallis vient de me donner une réponse négative. Il dit qu'il a déjà trop de fois écrit sur la vie et l'œuvre de Gronbech pour revenir sur ce sujet. Il me donne les noms de deux savants danois qui pourraient le remplacer, le bibliothécaire J. Prytz Johansen et le prof. Joh. Pedersen. Mais je vous avoue que maintenant je suis plutôt hésitant, car je crains de m'exposer à un autre refus.

Je vous serre cordialement la main, mon cher ami, et je compte vous revoir ici en avril éventuellement, je l'espère avec M.^{me} Widengren si elle ne sera pas retenue par votre enfant.

Raffaele Pettazzoni

27 **Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni**

18.4.1954. Prof. et Madame Pettazzoni
 Via Crescenzo, 63
 Rome
 Italien

Dans l'attente que nous nous reverrons bientôt à Rome je vous envoie mes vœux pour la fête de Paques.

Votre bien dévoué
 Geo Widengren

28 **Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni**

UPPSALA UNIVERSITET
 TEOLOGISKA FAKULTETEN
 Upsal 20/5 1954

Cher Collègue et Ami,

Voici enfin une lettre de moi ! Tout d'abord je remercie Madame Pettazzoni et vous pour trois jours à Rome pleins d'une grande hospitalité. Ma femme envoie aussi ses remerciements très vifs à Madame Pettazzoni pour les beaux souliers à notre petit fils. J'espère que tout va bien avec les préparations pour le congrès et que tout s'arrange de la meilleure façon.

Voici ci-inclus les renseignements sur le livre de Karsten et sur le passage de Dēnkart. Quant à Dēnkart il a fallu quelque temps – comme je vous ai dit à Rome – pour en trouver un exemplaire, ce qui a été la cause de ce délai.

Je voudrai bien souligner le fait que l'opinion de mon collègue et ami M. Campbell est sans aucun doute bien fondée, car il est lui-même un expert en des choses lapponnes et possède à la même fois une très bonne formation comme historien des religions. Il va de soi que nous ne savons pas si l'ouvrage de Karsten dans la forme où il va paraître chez Brill ait peut-être complètement changé sa nature – ce que nous ne croyons pas cependant !

Dans le passage de Dēnkart il faut noter que tout ce texte est composé des citations d'un texte avestique perdu et des gloses exégétiques. J'ai marqué avec des crochets la glose explicative qui se trouve dans le passage traduit. L'original avestique

est transparent partout. Le texte pahlavi qui a servi de base pour le compilateur de Dēnkart a été un ouvrage exégétique, un *nikēž i vēh dēn*. D'un point de vue philologique le texte mériterait un commentaire détaillé, mais je crois que la transcription et la traduction soient suffisantes pour vos besoins. Ici seulement un petit détail que vous avez peut-être déjà noté. Le Saoshyant est qualifié tout-voyant, *nikīrēt ... hač harvisp nēmak* comme Ōhrmizd dans le Bundahishn éd. Anklesaria p. 8 est *harvisp ... nikīrītān*. Là Gayōmart est aussi *rōšn čiyōn xv aršēt*. Vous trouvez les passages dans Journal Asiatique 1929, p. 2/2, 224.

Avez-vous reçu la thèse de Lindskog ?

En toute sympathie
Geo Widengren

28 a Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni

Dēnkart ed. Madan, p. 675: 3–8

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It (i. e the Religion = the Avestic Revelation) says that “when there is the coming of the last rotation of those rotations of the epoch of Ušētarmāh, that man Saoshyant is born whose nourishment is spiritual, whose appearance is (like) the sun” ;
[that is, his body is as radiant as the sun]

This too, that “he looks on all sides with the aid of 6 eyes, he sees the remedy against the affliction (caused) by the Foe (the Druj).”

Restoration of the probable metrical original text (after the Pahlavi transl.): When there is the coming of the last rotation of those rotations of the epoch of Ušētarmāh, that man Saoshyant is born whose nourishment is spiritual, whose appearance is (like) the sun.

He looks on all sides with the aid of 6 eyes, he sees the remedy against the affliction (caused) by the Drug.

29 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 4 juin 1954

Cher ami et Collègue,

merci de votre lettre, de votre précieux renseignement sur le passage du Denkart, de votre travail sur Harlequin (une nouveauté inattendue !), ainsi que du jugement de M. Campbell, que je vous prie de remercier à l'occasion bien vivement de ma part. Et encore je vous prie de remercier à l'occasion M. Hartman pour son Gayomart ; si je ne l'ai pas encore fait, c'est à cause du lourd travail qui pèse actuellement sur moi (Congrès, Numen, épreuves de mes livres, etc.).

J'ai les réponses favorables de M. Radin et Dumézil ; voici les titres : Radin, *The sacral chief among the American Indians*; Dumézil, *Les reges et les flamines maiores*. Par là les conférences générales sont toutes établies (Alföldi, Dupont-Sommer, Dumézil, Puech, Radin, Tucci, Widengren), sauf celle du Prof. Schramm. Je n'ai pas de réponse de lui (le terme était le 31 mai). Il faut donc le remplacer, et il faut le remplacer par un autre Allemand. J'ai écrit à M. Heiler pour avoir son opinion ; il me semble, qu'en tout cas nous pouvons inviter Heiler même à donner la conférence générale au lieu de Schramm. Malheureusement ce n'est pas possible pour moi de vous consulter, vous et Bleeker, à chaque instant ; je vous prie de me laisser une certaine liberté de décider par fois moi-même, étant donné que le temps passe vite.

Il y a cependant un point important sur lequel il me faut avoir votre avis, car il modifie essentiellement nos accords de Rome en avril. Je me suis persuadé qu'il nous convient d'élargir le cadre des conférences générales et que nous avons la possibilité de faire cela. Si nous dédions chaque jour (4 jours) 3 heures et 1/2 (p. ex. de 3 1/2 à 4 ou bien de 4 à 7 1/2 de chaque après-midi) aux conférences générales, cela fait 210 minutes pour 3 conférences, c'est à dire 70 minutes pour chaque conférence, dont 50 pour la lecture et 20 pour la discussion. Cela nous donne la possibilité d'avoir 12 conférences générales, ce qui nous permettra de demander une conférence générale à Pedersen à Duyvendak et autres de façon à compléter le panorama du thème central. Veuillez me donner votre avis possiblement à tour de poste sur ce point.

D'ailleurs le travail marche bien ; l'on est en train de le préparer la 2^o circulaire qui donnera toutes les données pratiques nécessaires, y compris les excursions.

Avec mes salutations les plus cordiales, aussi bien de la part de ma femme à vous et à M.^{me} Widengren. Votre

Raffaele Pettazzoni

30 **Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren**

28 septembre 1954

Cher ami et collègue,

NUMEN No. 2 vient de paraître avec beaucoup de retard ; c'est la faute à Brill. Je crois que les choses marcheront plus vite dorénavant. Pour regagner le temps perdu je compte faire paraître le No. 3 vers le 15 novembre et le I Fasc. de 1955 vers 15 février. Pour cela il est nécessaire que je puisse disposer au plus tôt possible de la seconde partie de votre travail sur les religions de l'Iran, ainsi que de votre article sur Tor Andræ. Vous m'obligerez beaucoup en m'envoyant l'un ou l'autre, possiblement l'un et l'autre. Je voudrais bien pouvoir compter aussi sur l'article de M. Furumark ; voulez-vous le lui rappeler, et lui dire combien je voudrais pouvoir compter sur son intervention au Congrès de Rome.

La préparation du Congrès marche bien. La deuxième circulaire est actuellement sous presse. Nous sommes en train de dresser une liste des Universités, Académies, etc. des différents Pays, que nous voulons inviter à se faire représenter au Congrès ; cela va faciliter le voyage à plusieurs de nos Collègues, qui ont déclaré de compter sur leur désignation comme délégués, pour être en partie remboursés de leurs frais. Je vous demande de bien vouloir me remettre une liste des adresses des Universités, Académies et autres institutions savantes (les plus importantes) de Suède, Norvège, Danemark, Finlande que vous jugez utile d'inviter. Le problème se présente s'il nous faut étendre les invitations aux Universités etc. des Pays telle que la Tchécoslovaquie, Hongrie, Roumanie, Bulgarie, etc. ou comme Espagne, Portugal, etc. ; je tiens beaucoup à avoir votre avis là-dessus.

Encore et enfin : avez-vous des nouvelles récentes de M. Alföldi ? Je l'ai prié de nous donner la confirmation de son intervention au Congrès, mais je n'ai pas reçu de réponse. Schramm, comme vous savez certainement, a déclaré de ne pouvoir pas participer au Congrès ; à sa place ce sera Heiler qui donnera une conférence générale sur : "Die Wandlung des antiken Gottkönigtums im Bereich der christlichen Kirchen".

Avec mes salutations bien cordiales et bien des souhaits pour M.^{me} Widengren et votre petit enfant, votre

Raffaele Pettazzoni

31 **Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren**

Rome, le 21 janvier 1955

Cher Collègue,

Au cours des conversations que nous avons eues, pendant ces jours derniers, à propos de plusieurs questions relatives au prochain Congrès de Rome, nous avons étudié également la situation suédoise, telle qu'elle est venue à se créer à la suite de la constitution du nouveau groupe SAMFUNDET FOER RELIGIONSHISTORISKA FOERSKNING à côté du SVENSKA RELIGIONSHISTORISKA SAMFUNDET.

Quelles que soient les causes qui provoquent une pareille situation, nous ne pouvons que la déplorer et adresser un urgent appel à nos Collègues de l'un et de l'autre Groupe, afin de les inviter à prendre en considération la nécessité pressante d'une détente dans l'intérêt de tous. Nous sommes absolument certains qu'il n'est nullement impossible, si on le veut, de parvenir à une entente. A ce propos, il nous semble que l'on puisse interpréter favorablement le fait que certains d'entre nos Collègues Suédois – si nos renseignements sont exacts – ont adopté une attitude plus conciliante, en donnant leur adhésion à l'un et à l'autre Groupe.

D'un point de vue réaliste, nous prions tout particulièrement nos Collègues Suédois, dans leur ensemble et chacun en particulier, de bien vouloir se rendre compte que l'actuelle scission risquerait de compromettre très sérieusement la prise en considération de la proposition (déjà faite au Congrès d'Amsterdam en 1950 et qui sera probablement présentée, de nouveau, à Rome) de réunir en Suède, en 1960, le prochain (IX^e) Congrès International de l'Histoire des Religions.

C'est pourquoi, avant d'envisager cette question selon un point de vue officiel, nous jugeons utile d'entreprendre cette démarche amicale, aussi bien vis-à-vis de Membres de SAMFUNDET FOER RELIGIONSHISTORISKA FOERSKNING que des MEMBRES DU SVENSKA RELIGIONSHISTORISKA SAMFUNDET, afin qu'ils veuillent bien nous donner, dès que possible, l'assurance que chacun de deux Groupes est disposé à entamer des pourparlers en vue de mettre fin à l'actuelle situation.

En un tel cas, nous serons toujours heureux, en notre qualité de Président et de Secrétaire Général de l'I. A. S. H. R., d'agir – si on nous le demandera – comme intermédiaire pour faciliter l'entente et parvenir à l'unification des Groupes. A notre avis, c'est là, en effet, la solution la plus souhaitable, tant du point de vue intérieur en ce qui regarde les rapports avec le Ministère Suédois, que du point de vue international en ce qui concerne l'organisation de l'I. A. S. H. R.

Nous vous informe que la présente lettre est également adressée à Monsieur le Professeur MARTIN P. NILSSON.

Veillez croire, Cher Collègue, à l'expression de nos sentiments les plus distingués.
Raffaele Pettazzoni

Monsieur le Professeur G. Widengren

UPPSALA

32 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 16 mars 1955

[*prima redazione della lettera ufficiale ai due presidenti poi ritoccata* : Mario Gandini]

Cher Collègue,

Il est très regrettable que ma démarche officieuse faite le 21 janvier d'accord avec M. le Secrétaire général de la I.A.S.H.R. pour inviter les deux groupes des historiens Suédois des religions à entamer des pourparlers en vue d'une solution conciliante de leur différend, n'a pas eu de succès.

D'autre part je suis d'avis qu'une résolution officielle dans cette matière ne saurait être prise par le Président et le Secrétaire général de la I.A.S.H.R. sans avoir consulté le Bureau Exécutif et le Comité International de la I.A.S.H.R.

Le prochain Congrès de Rome nous donne l'occasion la plus favorable pour cette consultation. Je prie donc chacun des deux groupes de nommer chacun *un* représentant au sein du Conseil International qui va se réunir à Rome pendant le Congrès.

Cette résolution prise d'accord avec M. le Secrétaire général est provisoire. Elle vise à garder à la Suède sa représentance [*sic* : représentation] globale de deux membres dans le Comité International de la I.A.S.H.R. Elle vise aussi à créer les conditions les plus favorables d'information et de discussion pour les décisions définitives, en transférant la question de son milieu national trop surchauffé dans l'atmosphère plus sereine du Congrès international.

M. le Secrétaire général de la I.A.S.H.R., Amsterdam, Churchill-laan 292/I attend de connaître le nom de votre représentant pour lui envoyer l'invitation aux réunions du Comité International de la I.A.S.H.R., qui auront lieu à Rome pendant le prochain Congrès.

Je vous prie, Monsieur le Professeur et cher Collègue, de bien vouloir agréer l'assurance de mes sentiments le plus distingués.

La même lettre est envoyée en même temps à M. ...

Raffaele Pettazzoni

33 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

Rome, 16 mars 1955

Cher Monsieur et Collègue,

Il est très regrettable que ma démarche officieuse faite le 21 janvier dernier d'accord avec M. le Secrétaire général de la I.A.S.H.R., pour inviter les deux groupes des historiens Suédois des religions à entamer des pourparlers en vue d'une composition de leur différend à la veille du Congrès de Rome, n'a pas eu de succès.

D'autre part je suis d'avis qu'une résolution officielle dans cette matière ne saurait être prise par le Président sans avoir consulté le Bureau Exécutif et le Comité International de la I.A.S.H.R.

Le prochain Congrès de Rome nous donne l'occasion pour une telle consultation. En vue de cela j'ai l'honneur d'inviter le Samfundet för religionshistoriska forskning et le Svenska religionshistoriska Samfundet à nommer chacun un représentant au sein du Bureau International. Cette résolution est provisoire ; elle vise à la Suède une représentation [*sic* : représentation] globale de deux membres bien que distribuée entre les deux groupes jusqu'à leur unification, qui demeure toujours la solution la plus souhaitable à tous les points de vue.

Dès que le nom de votre représentant aura été communiqué à M. le Secrétaire général (Prof. C.J. Bleeker, Churchill-jaan 290/i, Amsterdam), on lui transmettra toutes les communications concernant les séances du Comité International qui auront lieu à Rome pendant le Congrès.

Veuillez agréer, cher Monsieur et Collègue, l'expression de mes sentiments le plus distingués.

Cette lettre est envoyée en même temps à M. le Professeur Martin P. Nilsson. Lund

Monsieur le Professeur Geo Widengren.

UPPSALA

Raffaele Pettazzoni

34 Raffaele Pettazzoni to Geo Widengren

NUMEN

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

ISSUED BY THE

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

The Editor

R. Pettazzoni

Roma, Via Crescenzo, 63

Roma, 30 décembre 1956

Cher Collègue,

je tâche, comme vous le savez, de ne pas déranger les Collègues du Bureau Exécutif de la I.A.S.H.R., qui sont coresponsables, avec moi, de la publication de NUMEN. Mais voici un cas où je ne saurais me passer de votre avis, avant de prendre une décision.

Il s'agit d'un article de (Rev.) C.F. Whitley (M.A., B.D., Ph.D.) Lecturer in Theology, University College of North Wales, Bangor, ayant pour titre "The Date and Teaching of Zarathustra".

Je vous envoie à part, sous pli recommandé, le manuscrit de cet article, avec prière de bien vouloir le lire au plus tôt possible et me le renvoyer avec votre opinion sur l'opportunité de le publier.

Encore je vous prie de bien vouloir consulter M. Furumark, et le prier de me faire savoir si je puis toujours compter sur l'article "Early Greek Religion in the Light of New Evidence", que M. le Prof. Furumark a réservé depuis longtemps à NUMEN.

Je prends l'occasion pour vous envoyer mes vœux sincères pour la nouvelle année.

Monsieur le Professeur Dr. Geo Widengren

U P P S A L A

Raffaele Pettazzoni

35 **Geo Widengren to Raffaele Pettazzoni**

Gunnarstorp 2.6.59

Dear Colleague,

Thanks to correspondence with Prof. Bleeker I gather that you might perhaps appreciate a few words from me concerning NUMEN.

It was with the deepest regret I read of the serious difficulties you meet with as an editor. Difficulties of such a nature as to create a real threat to the very existence of NUMEN. This being the case I thought it imperative to offer my assistance – in company with Prof. Bleeker –. As long as I hold the post as one of the two vice-presidents of IAHR I deemed it my duty to show my earnest will to be something more than a passive member of the Executive Board. On the other hand, I didn't feel that I could postpone other duties, and above all urgent scientific work, in order to secure the future publication of NUMEN without sharing in the capacity of a co-editor the official responsibility for the journal which actually was the proposal put forward by Prof. Bleeker. This my attitude was conditioned by some experience I have had as a co-editor or a member of editorial committees in the case of some journals or series of scientific monographs. I may add to this connection that I have declined to engage myself in the preparation of a revival of "Archiv für Religionswissenschaft" and in the editing of a new journal for the history of religions, "Kairos".

It goes without saying that from a purely egoistic point of view I am only too glad not to be forced to assume any new duties as my time is very occupied, and this for years to come.

It is quite obvious that the unexpected difficulties you met with as an editor must have their origin and cause in the regrettable fact that NUMEN hasn't yet acquired such a "standing" as to attract the best pens. From the many letters I receive asking for my collaboration in various journals I know that even old journals with the best reputation suffer from serious difficulties. There are to-day too many scientific journals. May be, however, that the situation for NUMEN will improve, at least I hope so. With my deepest respects to Mrs. Pettazzoni.

Sincerely yours, Geo Widengren.

Letters between Geo Widengren and Ugo Bianchi (1959–1970), including a letter by Helmer Ringgren

1 Geo Widengren to Ugo Bianchi

15.7. 58

PROFESSOR GEO WIDENGREN
GUNNARSTORP, GETÅ
TEL. NORRKÖPING 91240

Dear Dr. Bianchi,

I thank you very much for your interesting and stimulating book which unfortunately arrived too late to be mentioned in the bibliography that was added to a short and rather popular exposition of the Iranian religions I have written. It is to be published shortly in Italian and I shall of course send it to you. In that short article, however, I have on the whole only reproduced my positions from “Stand und Aufgaben”. As I think I told you in Rome my researches in the field of Iranian studies of late years have been more and more concentrated on philological and historical-political problems, more than on the history of religious ideas and institutions. During the last two years I have also abated publishing the results of these researches. However, I shall in the near future publish a collection of Iranian texts in translation, accompanied by an introduction and a short commentary, and a book on Mani. Most probably these will also follow a rather comprehensive work on Iranian religion to the downfall of the Sasanian empire. After only a very cursory reading of your book it is too early for me to say how far your views will change my ideas of the development of Iranian religion in ancient times, ideas in general shared with such scholars as Nyberg, Wikander, Benveniste, Dumézil *et alii*. In some cases, I dare say already at this moment that I am not afraid of being without arguments when it comes to a discussion. There is much more in the texts than you would seem to have picked up!

I spend the summer here in my country house, where I do some reading but very little writing.

With kind greetings,
Yours sincerely,
Geo Widengren

1 bis Helmer Ringgren to Ugo Bianchi

Uppsala 13.1.59

Dear Dr. Bianchi,

It is already long ago that you sent me your book *Zamān ı Ōhrmazd*. I wrote a letter to you thanking you for your great kindness in sending it to me, but since I misread one of the figures in the number of the house, I got my letter back after some time. Meanwhile, I received another book from you, *Il dualismo religioso*. But then I fell ill and could not read or work for a couple of months. Now I try again and I hope that you have found the correct address so that this letter really does reach you.

I want to thank you most cordially for the two books. Owing to the circumstances just mentioned I have not been able to read them thoroughly, but what I have read, especially of the first one, impresses me. It may be that several of the theses concerning Zervanism and related problems, put forward by Uppsala scholars will have to be revised along the lines you have indicated. The other book falls a little outside my special field, and I feel I had better not venture a judgment on it, but I find your argument very interesting.

Thank you.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Helmer Ringgren

Ringgatan 39 A

Uppsala

2 Geo Widengren to Ugo Bianchi

Tjänste

UPPSALA UNIVERSITET THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION

Religionshistoriska institutionen FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

DEKANHUSET, UPPSALA (I.A. H. R.)

THE PRESIDENT

PROF. GEO WIDENGREN

LUTHAGSESPLANADEN 16

UPPSALA · SWEDEN

Uppsala le 23 mai 1969

Cher Collègue et Ami,

Je vous remercie de votre lettre et aimable invitation. Bien que je sois probablement assez occupé dans le mois décembre et encore plus fatigué il va de soi que je suis conscient de mon devoir de participer à une telle occasion.

Je tiens à remercier la Société Italienne de sa promesse de contribution à mes frais de voyage.

Je compte donc de recevoir de vous des détails nécessaires sur le colloque en question.

Dans environ 6 semaines vous recevrez l'édition allemande de mon ouvrage phénoménologique, appelée simplement "Religionphänomenologie" (à peu près 700 pages). Ce travail m'a coûté beaucoup !

Je vous prie, Cher Collègue et Ami de vouloir bien accepter les expressions de mon estime et sympathie

Geo Widengren

3 Ugo Bianchi to Geo Widengren

Roma, le 9 octobre 1969

Cher Collègue et Ami,

comme nous sommes en train d'imprimer le programme des séances, des 6-7 décembre : L'histoire des religions. Problèmes et méthodes. 1959-1969 (à l'occasion du dixième anniversaire de la mort de R. Pettazzoni), nous vous prions de vouloir bien préciser le titre de votre conférence, dont la durée est fixée à 45 minutes environs. Nous confirmons aussi la contribution de Lit. 70000 pour le frais de voyage.

Nous avons reçu les programmes du Congrès de Stockholm, et nous les avons diffusés parmi les membres de notre Association.

Veuillez agréer, cher collègue et ami, l'expression de mes sentiments distingués.

Ugo Bianchi

ps. L'autre participant au Colloque résident à l'étranger sera le prof. Bleeker.

4 Geo Widengren to Ugo Bianchi

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS
(I.A. H. R.)

THE PRESIDENT
PROF. GEO WIDENGREN
LUTHAGSESPLANADEN 16
UPPSALA SWEDEN
Upsala le 17 Octobre 1969

Cher Collègue et Ami,

Je vous remercie de votre lettre. J'avais en effet préparé une lettre à vous pour vous demander quelques éclaircissements, parce que j'ai rencontré des difficultés en essayant de préparer ma conférence.

Pouvez-vous donc me dire aussi exactement que possible ce qui est à votre avis le but essentiel de ma contribution. J'ai médité beaucoup sur votre formule : "La méthode comparative: entre philologie et phénoménologie" et j'ai étudié de nouveau très attentivement les déclarations de Pettazzoni – aussi dans ses notes post<h>umes. Est-ce-que vous voulez avoir une description de la méthode recommandée et suivie par Pettazzoni – avec quelques réflexions personnelles de ma part – ou quelque chose plus encore ?

C'est bien gentil de vous me donner encore quelques temps à ma disposition. Je suis actuellement très occupé, mais l'organisation de mon congrès ne demande pas encore toute mon activité.

Si je serai éclairé sur votre formule je pourrai vous envoyer mon texte à moins quelques semaines avant le colloque, mais pour le présent je suis vraiment embarrassé.

J'attends maintenant chaque jour la publication de mon livre phénoménologique.

Je vous prie, Cher Collègue et Ami, d'excuser ces problèmes interrogatifs de ma part et d'accepter les expressions de ma sympathie profonde,

Geo Widengren

5 Ugo Bianchi to Geo Widengren

Via S. Agnese, 12, 00198 Roma

le 5 novembre 1969

Cher Collègue et ami,

je vous remercie de votre lettre du 17 octobre, à laquelle je réponde seulement aujourd'hui à cause du retard provoqué par la grève des postes.

Notre opinion à nous, de Bausani et la mienne, est que vous pouvez traiter le thème selon votre préférence, pour ce qui est de l'équilibre à établir entre la référence (expositive et critique) aux vues de Pettazzoni sur la méthode comparative et l'exposition de vos vues personnelles sur le même sujet, telles que vous les avez exprimées, p. ex., dans (surtout la deuxième partie de) l'article dans les *Acta Univ. Upsaliensia*, que vous avez eu l'obligeance de m'envoyer, ou, je crois, dans votre livre qui va paraître.

Pour ce qui est du titre de votre conférence, nous aurions aimé d'en laisser la détermination définitive à votre préférence, mais des raisons matérielles (impression du programme, désormais urgente) nous conseillant de la maintenir, en vous laissant toute liberté de l'interpréter dans le cadre général proposé ci-dessous.

Enfin, pour ce qui est du texte, des raisons matérielles nous conseillent de renoncer à le demander à l'avance pour la polycopie. Les conférenciers auraient le temps voulu pour l'exposition (45 minutes).

Vous recevrez bientôt le programme. J'attends avec intérêt votre volume. Veuillez agréer, cher Collègue et Ami, l'expression de mes sentiments bien cordiaux.

Ugo Bianchi

6 Ugo Bianchi to Geo Widengren

00198 Roma, Via S. Agnese, 12

Le 16 déc. 1969

Cher Collègue et Ami,

je tiens encore à vous remercier, au nom de mes collègues et mien, d'avoir bien voulu participer à notre rencontre.

Je vous prie maintenant de m'envoyer le texte de votre conférence.

Réfléchissant à nos travaux, je me rends compte comme il est difficile de théoriser la façon dont s'intègrent, dans une même science, la recherche historico-religieuse (l'histoire des religions *sensu stricto*) et la phénoménologie de la religion, et la *ratio* du passage de l'une à l'autre de la part d'un même savant dans l'exercice de son *Fach* unitaire. Je pense qu'il faudrait provoquer des déclarations sur cet objet, même au bénéfice de notre dossier.

J'ai oublié de vous dire à Rome, que l'on prépare ici une Histoire des religions en cinq volumes, qui va paraître.

Veuillez agréer, Cher Collègue et Ami,
l'expression de mes sentiments cordiaux.

Ugo Bianchi

7 Geo Widengren to Ugo Bianchi

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS
(I. A. H. R.)
THE PRESIDENT
PROF. GEO WIDENGREN
LUTHAGSEPLANADEN 16
UPPSALA · SWEDEN

Upsal 1.6.70

Cher Collègue et Ami,

J'ai enfin envoyé mon manuscrit avec les notes, le délai a été causé par le fait que j'ai attendu en vain la mise à ma disposition d'un livre dont j'avais besoin.

Vous trouvez aussi mon manuscrit original parce qu'il se trouvent çà et là quelques passages douteux.

Excusez mon style "télégraphique" mais je suis très occupé, non seulement par le congrès mais aussi par beaucoup d'autres choses.

Je serai heureux de vous revoir à Stockholm.

Votre bien dévoué

Geo Widengren

Geo Widengren's Bibliography

Giovanni Casadio

Göran Larsson

The following bibliography is based on three previous studies:

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Whilst we depend on these earlier studies, we have also updated and corrected errors found in the earlier bibliographies of Widengren's published research. We would like to express our gratitude to professor Albert de Jong at Leiden University who has provided most of the information about the translations of Widengren's publications into Persian and Arabic. We have decided to include these publications in the bibliography, but the status of these publications is somewhat unclear and we have not found them in any European database. The edited volume by U. Monneret de Villard, G. Widengren & L. Hambis from 2000 is one case in point and we have not found any additional information about this publication. The same is also true for the publication *Iran and Islam*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing/New York: Prometheus Books, 1979.

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