

Learning from the past

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The Legacy of the Past

The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II, edited by Göran Larsson covers most aspects of Geo Widengren's work (Larsson 2021a).¹ The volume includes contributions from scholars who were supervised by Widengren as well as from more critically inclined outsiders. It also contains Widengren's bibliography and correspondence with Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883-1959), Ugo Bianchi (1922-1955), and Helmer Ringgren (1917-2012).

The Legacy has, as the title indicates, to do with roots, identity, and academic heritage. Göran Larsson suggests in the concluding chapter, that "Geo Widengren can be used as an example showing how the study of religion as a discipline has evolved and changed over time" (Larsson 2021c: 329). Larsson has done an excellent job in making this happen, for by drawing the portrait of a prominent scholar, the volume offers a picture of the Study of Religion, from 1940s to the 1970s, for some milieus, even longer.² It covers a period when this study existed at the outskirts of theology, had few positions and was, in the main, tended by autocratic male professors with theological backgrounds and much power, a *Doktorvater* who forged a strong bond between himself and his scholarly sons.³

By reading the book, and by reading between its lines, it is much to be learnt about how academic culture was built in the last century, how it operated and why it was altered. It leaves the reader with mixed feelings of fascination of a not-so-distant past and relief that things have changed (Larsson 2021b: 28). Today the study of religion is less monolithic and authoritarian, there are more self-critical reflections, academic milieus are more robust, women are included.

¹ I want to thank the participants in the panel at the EASR conference in Cork, and especially Göran Larsson, for fruitful comments to the article.

² Together with books by van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade, Geo Widengren's *Religionsphänomenologie* was part of the curricula in Norway in the 70s and 80s (Gilhus and Jacobsen 2014: 69).

³ See also Stausberg's text in this issue of MTSR.

If we take a broad view of research history, it is easy to see that some scholars continue to inspire new research and to be referred to long after they have died. This is, for instance, the case with Max Weber (1864-1920) and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), however, the last was dismissed by Widengren as being outdated. Other scholars have been neglected or misunderstood in the past, and their reintroduction to the scholarly world sometimes offer new inspiration. Examples are Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957), whose *Les Rites de Passage* from 1909, was translated into English more than fifty years later; Vladimir Propp (1895-1970), whose folkloristic breakthrough book, *Morphology of the Folktale*, published in Russian in 1928, was rather unnoticed in the West until it was translated into English in 1958;⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), who was active in Russian debates on aesthetics and literature in the 1920s was rediscovered in the 1960s; and Maurice Halbwachs' (1877-1945) work on collective memory, was published by his daughter in 1950, five years after he had died.

After having read *The Legacy*, the impression is that Widengren has not been much read and referred to in the last decades, and that his scholarly work is mainly interesting today because it represents an earlier phase in the Study of Religion. According to Einar Thomassen, "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 be based" (Thomassen 2021: 276). So, what can we still learn from Widengren's example? In what ways can a scholar of the past serve as an inspiration for the present and future study of religion? I will comment on what I think should be criticized and what I think is fruitful in his work.

Phenomenology, Philology, and the History of Religion

Widengren's research is characterized by profound historical interests, excellent philological competence, and the use of phenomenology of religion as a systematic discipline. Several of the chapters in *The Legacy* re-evaluate and criticize Widengren's historical studies, including his doctoral thesis about Accadian and Hebrew psalms of lamentations (Widengren 1936), his studies of Iranian religions, and of Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Seen together, the chapters give a rather nuanced picture of his historical work. Especially interesting is how the strong historical dimension of Widengren's oeuvre was combined with a comparative approach

⁴ It had influenced Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes.

(Widengren 1971), because this approach has a more general interest for the present and future Study of Religion. In a joint chapter, written by Tim Jensen and Satoko Fujiwara, Jensen comments on Widengren as his scholarly ideal: “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” (Jensen and Fujiwara 2021: 67). Giovanni Casadio (2021) elaborates on this scholarly profile and sees his approaches to the Study of Religion as well worth revisiting in the present.

This does not, however, imply to agree on the theoretical presuppositions on which Widengren’s combination of history and phenomenology was based. A plethora of critical comments in this book makes this road a dead end.

Widengren’s main systematic work is his *Religionsphänomenologie* (1969).⁵ According to the author, to create a phenomenology of religion, it is necessary to make the most complete historical basis for each phenomenon and collect as many instances of the phenomenon as possible, and then, from the collected material one gets the key (Widengren 1969a: 2; see also Casadio 2021: 157-159; Cavallin 2021: 179 ff.). Widengren discerns between magic and religion and is convinced that belief in God(s) (*Gottesglaube*) is the inner essence of religion (1969a: 3). High gods played, according to him, the dominant role in religious life (*ibid.* 46-92; see also Larsson 2019), and he criticizes theories about the evolution of religion and the idea of a uniform development of religion (Widengren 1946:103). His choice of themes is partly idiosyncratic, based on his research interests and on topics that he repeatedly returned to, for instance Gnosticism, and partly explained by themes, which were in scholarly focus at the time when his *Religionsphänomenologie* was written.

In addition to his more generally known favorite themes, such as high-gods, sacred kingdoms, and founders, Widengren had wide interests. One example is that he wrote comparative studies about clothes. In his “Harlekintracht und Mönchskutte, Clownhut und Derwischmütze: Eine gesellschafts-, religions- und trachtgeschichtliche Studie” (1953), he focuses on the use of patchwork robes (*Flichengewand*) and rag skirts (*Lappenrock, Lumpenrock*) by several religious and other groups. Widengren tries to show similarities and long historical lines,

⁵ It was originally published in 1945, and according to Albert de Jong, rather outdated when it was translated and published in German in 1969 (de Jong 2021: 92).

which stretches from harlequins, mime-actors, Christian monastics, Muslim dervishes, and Indian monks to Indo-European *Männerbund* and to the common pre-history of the Indo-Germanic people. Widengren does much the same with clothes, as he does with other topics, looks for similarities, finds them and relate them to historical origins. In the words of Bruce Lincoln, comparisons, including Widengren's diffusionist type, "constitute similarity as the fact of primary interest and regard difference as a complicating development of considerably lesser importance" (Lincoln 2012: 122). While Widengren was critical towards evolutionistic theories, he was, like many scholars of his time, interested in origins, founders, and historical roots. Origins tend to be believed to give essence and prestige to things (Foucault 1980: 142-143, cf. Gilhus 2014: 196).

It is fascinating that Widengren singled out clothes as a topic of study, but perhaps not unexpected. In *The Legacy*, we read about Widengren that he was interested in horse-riding, that he owned a horse and that, "riding breeches and a horse whip were often part of his paraphernalia when he lectured" (Larsson 2021b:13). We also read that his surroundings were not unaffected by this apparel. Widengren obviously had an eye for the effect of dress, and personal interests tend to be reflected in research. Widengren also wrote articles about ancient horsemanship.

Widengren's unique philological competence and intimate knowledge of texts from various ancient cultures made it possible for him to read his sources comparatively. However, the method of heaping historical informed example together and then making a comparison with stress on similarities and minimal theorizing, is no longer viable. A comparative approach should still be a nerve in the study of religion, but what is needed is a theoretically sound comparative approach. Clement Cavallin makes a good point in *The Legacy* when he regrets 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" (Cavallin 2021: 178).

Oliver Freiberger has recently argued for comparison as the foundation of the Study of Religion and for comparison as a method (Freiberger 2019: 1, 2018b). He throws new light on how comparison works and on the methodological process and presents a theoretically informed discussion about the methodological frame of comparison including its goal, mode, scale, and scope (Freiberger 2018a, 2018b). Freiberger shows the complexity of comparison

and the need for theoretical awareness and refinement, not least in relation to the units, which are selected for comparison as well as in the choice of the *tertium comparationis*, the aspect in view of which two selected units are compared (Freiberger 2018a: 288). The rationale behind the selection of these units should be made as transparent as possible (2018a: 305). Another example of a fruitful way to renew the typological variety of a phenomenology of religion is shown in Jeppe Sinding Jensen's article in this issue of MTSR. However, the term "phenomenology" is ambiguous because it has been used about different theoretical approaches, some of them heavily criticized, and the question is if it is fruitful still to use it for new comparative approaches.

In relation to theoretically informed discussions about comparison, such as Jeppe Sinding Jensen's and Oliver Freiberger's, many of the previous attempts of comparisons, such as Widengren's, fall short. Today, historians of religion should to a higher degree take part in the theoretical development of the study of religion, and one way to do this is by means of developing theoretically informed comparative methods and theories.

Widengren relies heavily on philology, but philological competence does not substitute theoretical and contextual information, in the words of Giovanni Casadio: "Mastering a lot of languages in fact gives overconfidence in text interpretations" (Casadio 2021: 171, see also de Jong 2021: 102). This overconfidence could perhaps be labelled the philological fallacy. It implies to have too much faith in the importance of mastery of languages at the cost of more critical and self-critical views.

One example of the philological fallacy is described in Shaul Shaked's critical review of Widengren's book, *Die Religionen Irans*, which was the fruit of Widengren's long-term work in this area (Shaked 1969). Shaked gives Widengren credit for "enormous range of knowledge," but also points out that the book "demonstrates some grave weaknesses" (1969:161). He regrets that "the mode of presentation is such that the reader is not given help towards appreciating the lack of evidence, and in consequence the speculative nature, of many of the statements based on indirect, sometimes remote, information" (Shaked 1969: 161), for instance that Pahlavi texts from the ninth century AD are quoted to describe what happened 1500 years earlier. "A large proportion of the book is thus based on hypotheses and surmises, but only a careful checking of references will bring this fact to light. The tone of the book does not usually betray the uncertainty that this type of material calls for" (Shaked 1969:

161). Shaked criticizes Widengren's translations and use of loanwords from different languages in his attempt to recreate older phases of Iranian religion. And he asks, "whether it is legitimate, or good method, to neglect the study of texts for what they can tell us about their own period and culture, in favour of treating them as a mere conglomeration of survivals and fragments of an ancient and lost culture" (Shaked 1969: 162). In short, Shaked cannot "accept certain basic aspects of the author's approach to his subject and of the way he uses his source material" (Shaked 1969: 162). Shaked had the necessary philological expertise which made him able to examine Widengren's work more closely and make devastating criticism of his speculative use of philology and his referring to much younger sources to reconstruct earlier phases of Iranian religion.

Despite these critical remarks, Widengren's historical and philological competence was formidable and admirable, and is still an unattainable ideal for most historians of religion. Casadio makes an excellent point when he describes Widengren as "a champion of the comparative historical study of religion who challenges the new generations of historians of religion, who, mainly interested in contemporary manifestations of living religious traditions, have lost contact with the historical, diachronic dimension of the same tradition" (Casadio 2021: 171).

Why do Widengren's historical approach challenge new generations of historians of religion? There are several reasons for this. One strong argument for studying religions, not only in the present, but also in the past, which is stressed by Casadio, is that contemporary religions have long historical roots, which the believers relate themselves to (Casadio 2021). Another argument is that history, not least the history of religions should always be reworked, because new times invite new questions. According to Charlotte L. Riley history should be rewritten for several reasons, one of them is that rewriting tells us much as much about who we are now as about what happened then (Riley 2021: 281). Posing new questions to the past implies to create new opportunities for comparisons with the present, which will contribute to throw new light on the past as well as on contemporary issues.

Academic milieu

A revisiting of scholars of the past is also a revisiting of their academic milieus. Göran Larsson writes about Geo Widengren's academic background, his national impact, mentions conflicts, which he had with other scholars (Larsson 2021: 26-28), and, in a concluding meta-

reflection, shares some of his general and critical thoughts about the academic milieu, which Widengren established (Larsson 2021: 340):

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 research 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 to accept the ideas and hypotheses he suggested, otherwise it would be easy to be labelled as a 'traitor' or an enemy, which could have a negative effect on one's future academic career (Larsson 2021: 340).

Here Larsson encourages us to learn from the past by creating more robust academic milieus in the future. But when he mentions 'traitors' and enemies, it had been extremely interesting to have some contributions from them. It had also been illuminating to have a list of Widengren's doctoral students.⁶ Not least, because, according to Larsson, he "supervised the great majority of scholars in the field of the History of Religions who defended their theses in Sweden from the Second World War up until his retirement in 1973" (Larsson 2021: 27). We hear about Widengren's general influence and of those of his students who became professors, two of them, Jan Hjärpe and Anders Hultgård contribute to this edited volume, but what about the others? What about female scholars?

Women is mentioned by Larsson in one enigmatic sentence: "Other uncertainty surrounds the situation for female students and PhDs at the University of Uppsala from the 1940s until his (GW's) retirement in 1973" (Larsson 2021c: 343). Why is this an uncertainty, why does it remain an uncertainty, and why did not anyone look closer? It would have been extremely interesting to know if there were any female students, and, if, who they were. After having posed the question about female doctoral candidates to my colleagues, the name Kaarina Drynjeff (later Drynjeva) came up.⁷ She wrote a thesis about the Naasener tractate (Drynjeff 1973). She also did what many doctoral students have done through time, male as well as female, she compiled a bibliography of her Doktorvater (*Bibliographica Geo Widengren 1934-1944*). The bibliography is referred to in *Legacy* (Drynjeff 1972). But did Widengren supervise other female doctoral candidates? An in that case, what happened to them?

⁶ A list of his lectures is included.

⁷ Håkan Rydving, personal communication (3.05.2022).

As for academic milieus and women, a long footnote in Albert de Jong's contribution to *Legacy*, is worth noting (de Jong 2021: 90 and 90, note 5). Here de Jong mentions the correspondence between Geo Widengren and Ethel Stefana Drower, the great scholar of Mandaean Studies, which is included in Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley's biography of Drower (2012). De Jong uses the correspondence as a "particularly painful example" of how Widengren "vacillated between claims to superior philological insights on the one hand, and claims to better (more generally accepted) methodology on the other." The short version is that Widengren, according to de Jong, accused Drower of "basic mistakes in grammar and lexicon, all in a tone that can only be qualified as magisterial." When it was revealed that she in this case was the one who had superior philological knowledge (she later co-authored *A Mandaic Lexicon* with Rudolf Macuch), and when "he could not pretend to know Mandaic better than lady Drower" Widengren went on to attack her methods of translation, which, among other things, reveals that they have different views of translation. Drower's response to Widengren's criticism, is that her very long acquaintance with Mandaean texts has taught her that dictionary meanings do not always correctly render the intention of an author, and she suggests that these dictionary meanings of words should be confined to footnotes (Buckley 2012: 196). Widengren preferred it the other way round, that "a paraphrase, if such one be needed, being given in a note or in a commentary" (quoted in Buckley 2012: 197). Widengren stuck to literal dictionary meanings of Mandaean words, while the more knowledgably Drower preferred interpretative translations. I will dwell on Drower for one more minute.

Matthew Morgenstern (2014) wrote a review of Buckley's book and characterizes Lady Drower in this way:

The picture that Buckley presents of the intellectual world of the 1930s to the 1960s is a fascinating one, in which a tacit battle is fought between pioneering field-workers who recognize that religion and culture are rooted in a complex web of society, material culture, language and imagery, i.e. a world of religious practice, and stuffy bigoted theologians for whom pure religious theory must remain untainted from the contemporary observations of a woman not conversant with Greek and Hebrew. While one suspects that the theologians whom Drower so despised might occasionally have had a point, it seems that Drower would have found a much more receptive ear amongst modern students of religious history, with their increased emphasis on popular religion, than she found in her own day.

And, indeed, Drower's book about *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (1937) is still fascinating read. This is not always the case of Widengren's publications on the same material, which because of his ideas about high-gods and use of too wide comparisons seem more outdated.

The quote above about "pioneering field-workers" versus "stuffy bigoted theologians" is about Drower and her opponents more generally, not explicitly about Widengren, but it includes him when it refers to rigid scholars and new approaches and contrasts conservative textual studies with the world of contemporary lived religions. That he accuses her of elementary linguistic mistakes is rather condescending. However, the impression from Buckley's book is that Widengren otherwise treated Drower with the respect that she deserved, she received for instance an honorary degree from Uppsala University (1960).

It had been interesting if more had been added in *The Legacy* about Widengren's collaborators in the Nordic and Scandinavian milieus. One example is the Norwegian professor, Herman Ludin Jansen (1905-1986), who counted Geo Widengren as his closest Nordic colleague. He is mentioned in one of Widengren's letters to Pettazzoni as "mon ami et collègue" (Larsson 2021: 363). Like Widengren, Ludin Jansen had his background in theology and Old Testament studies, published on several Middle Eastern and Mediterranean religions, was interested in Gnosticism, based his research on studies of texts, was skilled in several ancient languages and was, probably on Widengren's initiative, made *doctor honoris causa* in Uppsala in 1973 (Gilhus and Jacobsen 2014: 65-66). To map out the correspondence and interrelations between scholars in the Nordic countries deserves future research.

Conclusion

Geo Widengren was one of the most prominent and productive scholars in the Study of Religion in the 20th century and one who promoted this study globally, for instance by being one of the founders of *Numen*, International Review for the History of Religions, and a long-time vice-president (1950-1960) and president (1960-1970) of the International Association for the History of Religions. He incarnates and reflects the development of the discipline in several decennia. To read articles and books by him and to read *Legacy* makes research history come alive. It also shows more clearly the contrasts between then and now, and the changes, which have taken place.

That Widengren's publications are in the main outdated is the normal course of events in any prospering field of study. Research moves on, and research paradigms change (Stensvold

2004). Ideas of the past are replaced by ideas formed by contemporary concerns, new perspectives are introduced – the present will always guide the questions we pose to religion, culture, and history.

What we can learn from Widengren's example is to give historical approaches more space in the Study of Religion. Earlier the Study of Religion was a historical study, but with little interest in the later phases of religious history. Today the weight is on contemporary religion, and the older history has been pushed into the background. This is objectionable for several reasons. The long roots of contemporary religions, and therefore also the relevance of their older phases, should be taken in consideration; the necessity to pose new questions to the past; the consequences of being a global and comparative discipline, to mention some reasons. Philology and source criticism are, of course, still extremely important, but these skills should be supplemented with theoretical awareness and an adequate methodology.

Widengren does not offer many comments on theory and method, his comparative approach is to a small degree theoretical informed, and he does not usually define his concepts (Cavallin 2021: 180, 190). There is a lack of a firmer theoretical foundation in some of his work and an overconfidence in the importance of some of the pet ideas of his time. At his time, it was a strong belief in the ability to be objective and in the absolute truth of what one found out, reflected, for instance, when Widengren dogmatically states: "Das es Hochgötter in allen Stadien der Kultur und in allen Teilen der Welt gibt, kann als gesicherte Tatsache bezeichnet werden" (Widengren 1974: 107). This type of excessive confidence in one's own ideas has weakened, and there is a stronger wish to discern between empirical data and concepts.

Widengren's research reflects a hierarchical view of religion with its stress on high gods, sacred kingdoms, holy books, and founders, which is different from how the study is pursued today with its interest in several types of sources, ordinary people, interactions and communications, life-worlds, and lived religion. Scholars today have begun to speak about a shift of paradigm and about a new relational paradigm (Stensvold 2004, Krech 2020, Krüger 2022). When paradigms are changed, it strongly affects the evaluation of earlier times and tends to speed up the process of making earlier research seem less relevant.

What Widengren's example can teach us is to pursue historical and comparative studies, develop philological competence, and create bold theories. At the same time, we should learn

from his mistakes and cultivate a stronger theoretical awareness, create dynamic research milieus, and never close our minds for new ideas.

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