

**Taking Stock of the Academic Work of Geo Widengren:
Some Observations on a Forgotten Classic and an “All-round Historian of Religion”**

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Abstract

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Swedish scholar Geo Widengren (1907-1996) was a towering figure on the international landscape of the history of religions. This essay reads Widengren as a forgotten classic, i.e., an author whose works have ceased to be read by contemporary students and scholars. Widengren considered himself an “all-around historian of religion”—an aim that nowadays, in the context of increased differentiation and specialization that came about with the successful growth of the discipline, has fallen from grace. Widengren emphasized the importance of history (which does not take the present state of affairs as a necessary given), and he advocated the attempt to get beyond value-judgements informed by Christian ideas and Western presumptions of historical supremacy. In a time of ground-breaking discoveries of new sources, Widengren set out to recontextualize the Bible, Judaism, and Christianity in Middle Eastern religious history (in particular Iran). The essay proposes that Widengren’s de-Christianization of the history of religions resonated with societal changes that lastingly challenged the hegemony of Christianity in academia and other public (social and political) institutions. For Widengren, the gold standard of work in the history of religions was the ability to read sources in their original languages. Yet, rather than yielding objective and value-free interpretations, his sort of philology reimposed problematic assumptions and patterns that obscured rather than clarified his readings. Widengren advocated the separation of historical from systematic perspectives, but instead of following Joachim Wach’s early program of *systematische Religionswissenschaft* for the latter he chose the somewhat misleading label “phenomenology.” Like other phenomenologists and historicists, Widengren repudiated evolutionism—and he was one of the most outspoken critics of this approach in the history of our discipline. He also criticized the comparative method as practiced by evolutionists; yet Widengren was aware of the importance and pitfalls of comparison in the study of religion/s. The essay concludes with some reflections on the importance of scholars’ roles as supervisors, mentors, and members of committees; Widengren assumed the role of paterfamilias in the development of the history of religions in Sweden, but the present generation of Swedish scholars have finally cast off his shadows.

Keywords

History of the study of religions, Geo Widengren, philology, evolutionism, phenomenology

Do we have classics in the study of religion/s? A classic is a work, or a person who has produced that work, enshrined in memory, not forgotten, and not to be forgotten. The reason for this refusal of oblivion is that this work, or that author, still speaks to us. And our education makes sure for this speaking to happen through coordinated interpretation and continued citation. When classics are no longer assigned reading, they do not remain

classics—and they will cease to have something to say. The Swedish historian of religions Geo Widengren (1907-1996) serves as an example. Once a towering figure on the international landscape, his writings are no longer required reading, not even in Sweden, and his work no longer speaks to contemporary scholars.¹ When we revisit his work, we are therefore jumping across a gap of transmission. We look at him from a distance. Can we still make him speak? Is there something we can learn from him, from his achievements and his failures? Are there aspects of his work that are still relevant, or at least of interest? What has changed since his times?

The recently published volume *The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II* (Larsson 2021a) allows us to take stock. My contribution is a meta-commentary on several chapters read in conjunction with each other. The main body of the volume edited by Larsson comprises a series of reviews of the main areas of his work: Widengren's importance for the founding and consolidation of the IAHR, his work on the Mesopotamian background of the Hebrew and Aramaic Bible, his work on Iranian religions (including Manichaeism) and its potential impacts (on Gnosticism, for example), his works on phenomenology and method. There is a chapter that mainly summarizes his many contributions as a popularizer, and in his introduction and postscript the editor addresses a range of other topics. The present essay discusses Larsson's volume and Widengren as a forgotten master of the trade.

I. The Declining Fate of Academic “Allrounders”

Two chapters in Larsson's volume cite an essay published in 1975, where Widengren (at the age of 68) looks back at his career and remarks: “On the whole, I have tried, even if I have not

¹ One dissenting voice is Hedin: “his work is still alive” (Hedin 2022: 236).

been successful, to be an all-round historian of religion, including also phenomenology and psychology of religion into my spheres of interests. But it was inevitable that I was concentrating more on some things than on other things” (cited by Casadio 2021: 156; Gothóni/Larsson 2021: 197). Widengren here points to history of religions as his prime professional identification, with phenomenology and psychology as kind of sub-fields. We can also note his Germanic preference for the singular (“Religionsgeschichte”), in contrast to the French-Italian, and partly also Anglophone, preference for the plural (“history of religions”). In passing, de Jong (2002: 92) comments that Widengren held “a very firm belief in the intrinsic value of ‘religion.’” For Widengren, as far as I can see, religion as such was not a problem—especially since he “knew” that so-called high-gods (or sky-gods) constitute the universal core of religion (see also Larsson 2019); it was more of interest to him, what happened in “the world of religion,” its main structures, how it worked and developed, but the existence of such a world he took for granted. This was, of course, in no way exceptional as the academic and real world in which he lived was that of the age prior to the so-called critical study of religion heralded, in retrospect, by Jonathan Z. Smith in 1982. Widengren was a religion-positivist, a religion-realist—he viewed religion as a given, a reality to be studied by empirical methods.

But what exactly is an “all-round historian of religion” and what does Widengren imply when he used this label? Notably, Widengren did not take the step Mircea Eliade took; he never undertook writing a general history of religious ideas. Instead, with his Dutch kindred spirit Jouco Bleeker, he edited *Historia religionum*, a two-volume work with chapters contributed by leading experts such as E.O. James, H. Ringgren, M.J. Vermaseren, R. Zwi Werblowski, A. Schimmel, and M. Boyce among others; yet, the editors sought to steer the result into a certain direction by giving very clear guidance by providing a thematic scheme for the chapters (Bleeker/Widengren 1969). In addition to a chapter on Israelite-Jewish

religion, Widengren himself contributed “Prolegomena”—a thematic chapter on “The value of source-criticism as illustrated by the biographical dates of the great founders” (Bleeker/Widengren 1969 I: 1-22). It is a telling choice that he went for a methodological piece, rather than for one drawing a big picture.

But again: what is “all-round historian of religion,” and can this serve as a meaningful job description? To begin with the latter question, we need to consider the changing academic context at universities. Widengren occupied the chair in history of religions at Uppsala University for over four decades (from 1940 to 1973). In other words, like his two predecessors (Nathan Söderblom and Tor Andræ), he was more or less on his own in the task of teaching this field. The same, of course, was the case with most pioneer early chair holders. Yet, as departments grew in most countries, a division of labor set in, and departments came to be dominated by patchworks of specializations. Nowadays, in most cases, positions are advertised per fields of specializations—and this reflects the increasing differentiation (others might call it fragmentation) of the discipline, as can be seen in the proliferation of ever more specialized journals (see Stausberg 2016). In that respect, there is no more need for “all-rounders;” with few exceptions in some countries, then, there are no more job opportunities for the kind of profile evoked by Widengren.

Eventually, being “all-rounders” has become anathema to professional respectability.² Another word for an “all-rounder” is the generalist—and the generalist comes close to the amateur and the dilettante. A generalist lays herself or himself open to critique and ridicule by

² From the subsequent generations of scholars, two well-respected generalists were Ninian Smart (1927-2001) and Carsten Colpe (1929-2009). The latter has repeatedly commented on Widengren’s work, often in a positive manner. Several reviews of Widengren’s books by Colpe can be found in Colpe (2003).

specialists. This is not a promising way to embark on a career as a young scholar, and even though all scholars that come to my mind while writing this piece in one way or the other continue to expand their fields of work as they become mature (senior) academics, very few would take the step to abandon all specialist research and embark on a trip to the open sea. Even Widengren did not dare to travel that far out to the open sea beyond the islands of expertise—he did not wish to jeopardize his reputation as a “real” scholar, which for him meant somebody who could read primary sources in the original languages. In his “phenomenological” handbook he mostly picked his examples, or his spotlights (“ögonblicksbilder,” Widengren 1971a: 7), from the cultural area that he was most familiar with and on which he had published various specialized contributions (reviewed in turn in Larsson’s volume).

II. Around the Bible, Beyond Christianity

While Widengren is most widely known as a scholar of Iranian religions; de Jong calls him “the greatest pan-Iranist who ever lived” (2021: 114). Yet, I think that Timuş is right when she finds that his “main field of investigation was not ancient Iran, but the Near East” (2021: 139). His first book was a comparative study of Accadian and Hebrew psalms of lamentation (Widengren 1936). As a historian of religions, Widengren, can be seen as a late exponent of that German research tradition, represented by the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule and others, of “environments of the Bible.” During Widengren’s formative years as a rising star this field was rejuvenated by some of the century’s most spectacular discoveries of religious texts: Ras Sharma (Ugarit, 1928), Nag Hammadi (1945) and Qumran (1946/47). In Sweden, Widengren became one of the main interpreters of these new sources that necessitated a radical rewriting of ancient Oriental religion, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity. As Chiara Tommasi remarks, the similarly remarkable discovery of the Cologne Mani Codex (CMC)

occurred when Widengren had long since established his interpretation of Manichaeism; as the CMC never made an appearance in his later publications, it seems that he was unwilling to rethink his approach (Tommasi 2021: 307).

Maybe it is no exaggeration to say that the Bible was the hidden point of reference, the absent center, in Widengren's work. The late Christer Hedin cites Widengren's credo "Everything in the Bible existed 'before the Bible'" (Hedin 2021: 219). I would go so far as to say that this contextualization and historicization of the Bible was a political act of challenging the supremacy of Christianity in societal institutions; historians of religions may have played a modest role in the de-throning of Christianity, just as they sought to emancipate history of religions from the hegemony of theology and the Church of Sweden. This matches his post-Christian approach to the study of religion as expressed most clearly in his revision of his supervisors Tor Andræ's biography of Muhammad. Jan Hjärpe cites the following sentence by Widengren: "the scientific study of Islam has liberated itself from still clinging to Christian valuations" (Hjärpe 2021: 242). Liberating the history of religions from Christian "valuations"—a de-Christianization of the discipline—was one of Widengren's main programmatic aims, which clearly distinguished his approach from that of his predecessors. In this regard, Widengren's impact on the study of religion/s in Scandinavia can hardly be overestimated.

III. Phenomenology, or the Systematic Study of Religion

Widengren's vast area of research expertise crossed the boundaries of several specialized disciplines—and this 'queer' liberty to transcend disciplinary boundaries is maybe a virtue of historians of religion who are never only historians of specific religions. This is the Müllerian, anti-Harnackian agenda that I still consider axiomatic for the study of religion/s as an academic discipline. In the words of Widengren this boundary-crossing exercise is called

phenomenology of religion. On this note, Gothóni and Larsson cite a relatively early text in Swedish, from 1942, where Widengren states (in English translation): “The history of religions in its narrow sense studies the life of individual religions, while phenomenology deals with religious life in all its phenomena, which may appear in one or the other religion” (Gothóni/Larsson 2021: 202). Casadio shows that, in his critique of Pettazzoni, Widengren warned against conflating history and phenomenology into one undifferentiated approach (2021: 162f). In a relatively late article, Widengren even criticized his own phenomenological work for not having clearly enough demarcated the historical and the comparative method (Widengren 1971b: 167).

To my surprise I cannot see that Widengren ever cites Joachim Wach. In his groundbreaking *Prolegomena* from 1924 Wach makes a fundamental distinction between historical and systematical work (Wach 1924: 72). This resonates with Widengren’s work. Right on the first page of his book *Religionens värld*, which became the German *Religionsphänomenologie*, Widengren defines the aim of the phenomenology as achieving “a systematic synthesis” (“åstadkomma ... en systematisk syntes”), for which historical research merely provides illustrative and representative material (Widengren 1971a: 7). Had he let himself be influenced by Wach he could maybe have avoided his flirtation with or invocation of the popular, but ambiguous label “phenomenology” and followed-up on Wach’s program of a “systematische Religionswissenschaft” (on which see Rüpke 2009). One of the main aims of Widengren’s phenomenology of religion is classification—a project that Wach, however, found suspicious because it tends to involve problematic value judgments (Wach 1924: 94f). Widengren did not hesitate to classify—mostly unsuccessfully, or so it seems from the contribution of Larsson’s volume (see, e.g., Thomassen’s discussion of Widengren’s category “gnostic attitude;” see Thomassen 2021). However, as we already have seen, Widengren shared Wach’s abhorrence of value-judgments (see also below).

IV. Philology and its Limits

In his combination of Semitic and Iranian materials Widengren followed closely on the heels of his teacher H. S. Nyberg (1889-1974; see Kahle 1991 for a biography). Nyberg was not only an Iranologist but primarily a Semitist, who had also worked on early Islamic theology. Widengren's linguistic proficiency that allowed him to read primary sources in many different languages cannot fail to impress, but as Giovanni Casadio warns: "Mastering a lot of languages in fact gives overconfidence in text interpretations" (2021: 171). And there are always some languages even the most polyglot scholar does not know. Thus, the Finnish scholar Rafael Karsten, a widely forgotten merciless critic of Widengren, complained that Widengren "had not paid enough attention to sources written in Finnish and Russian, nor to those in Spanish and Portuguese" (Gothóni/Larsson 2021: 210). A similar ambivalence appears about philology. For instance, de Jong points out that Widengren issued "the warning, time and again, that whereas philology is indispensable, it is never *sufficient* for the writing or understanding of religious history" (2021: 102). De Jong's contribution also shows that philology, at least as practiced by Widengren, does not prevent scholars from creating evidence that others fail to see, from "falsification of data" and historical "distortion" (de Jong 2021: 128), or at least from reading ideas into the data—ideas that then appear as supposed "evidence," albeit only to the master himself, and to his students and admirers. Gilhus (2022) aptly refers to "the philological fallacy." Philology and mastery of language can inspire creative hermeneutics. In retrospect, as pointed out by Daniel Andersson, Widengren was "not a sufficiently critical reader of the source material" (2021: 268). Yet, as Timuş reminds us, for Widengren philology had an instrumental value only, as a means to an end (2021: 127). Philology was absolutely indispensable for the historian of religion but is not to be confused with history of religions—it is a tool, not the trade. Yet, Widengren was by no means a

methodologist monist. In fact, he called for triangulation (without using this word): different methods had to be combined to overcome the limitations every single method brings with it and to approach one's object of research from as many perspectives as possible (Widengren 1963: 85f). Even though his work seems outdated precisely from a methodological point of view, Widengren was not naïve, and he was actively engaged in methodological debates; he even laments that "a timidity for principled debate on method remains a sign of weakness in today's historical sciences" ("skyggheten för metodiska principresonemang förblir ett svaghetstecken i våra historiska vetenskaper;" Widengren 1963: 84). While Widengren was certainly opinionated and self-confident to the extreme he did not shy away from self-criticism; for example, he acknowledged deficits of his earlier work *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* (1938) and he did not hesitate to admit, in 1963, that "awareness that wrong and dated methods were applied has forced me to a reorientation that over the years has become ever more pronounced" (Widengren 1963: 85).³

V. The Origins of Religion and Evolutionism

The combination of being a religion-positivist/realist and the desire to be an "all-round historian of religion" resulted in Widengren's fearless determination to address vexed questions that most contemporary scholars of religion have conveniently left to archaeologists, anthropologists, or sociologists. I am here thinking of the question of the origins of religion. The origin-question was tied to evolutionism—something that we nowadays would call a paradigm. However, de Jong laments that it "never becomes clear what he means by it" (93). I beg to disagree. While more clarity in definitional matters is

³ "Men medvetandet om att felaktiga og föråldrade metoder har tillämpats had nödgat mig till en omorientering, som med åren blivit altmer utpräglat."

always desirable, I think that by citing the description given in a standard textbook written by a renowned anthropologist—namely Alexander Goldenweiser (not to be confused with the composer!), a student of Franz Boas and a teacher of B.R. Ambedkar—Widengren has chosen a reasonable strategy. Nowhere does he claim that the arguments against evolutionism that he put together were of his own making only; but his wide reading in anthropological theory must be acknowledged, and I agree with Casadio’s side-remark that Widengren’s dismissal of evolutionism is “still valuable in most of its points” (161). Widengren found that searching for the origins of religion lost its meaning in conjunction with the fall from grace of evolutionary thinking (which has returned in our days, albeit with somewhat different theoretical assumptions; see, e.g., Pyysiäinen/Hauser 2010). Against evolutionism, he opted for taking a historical approach, to wit studying the well-documented oldest civilizations that had been in existence for thousands of years (Widengren 1963: 69). This, of course, resonated with his interest in ancient Oriental religious history, and its later impact and geographical diffusion through culture contact—another one of Widengren’s main themes.

Among the aspects of evolutionism that Widengren objected to are the ideas of universal laws or necessary stages. Widengren deplored a lack of historical perspective. His defense of the importance of history, for which he considered Raffaele Pettazzoni and his school as important allies (Widengren 1966: 5), resonates with the continued importance of the humanities. Widengren also felt that evolutionism was unsound as it, in his reading, seemed to imply value-judgments and an arrogant looking down on “primitives” or “heathens”—two categories he kept on dismissing. After several decades of postmodern and postcolonial theorizing much of what he writes can no longer be taken for granted; his assumption of being able to clearly separate his private personal antipathies and sympathies from his scholarly public persona (Widengren 1966: 6f) was naïve, or at least optimistic. Yet, his aim of being unbiased or unjudgmental (“fri från vurderingar;” Widengren 1971a: 7) was

Commented [SR1]: This word seems out of place.

an important weapon of cultural and political critique against Christian and colonial supremacism.

VI. Comparison: A Double-edged Sword

It is a common misperception to identify the phenomenology of religion with untamed comparativism. Being a philologist, Widengren seems a good candidate for comparativism—and this is how he is presented by Göran Larsson on the first page of his edited volume: “Widengren was a comparativist” (2021a: 3). Indeed, his early work on Accadian and Hebrew texts was subtitled as “A Comparative Analysis.” And did he not also publish a piece called “La methode comparative” in *Numen*? Indeed, he did (Widengren 1971b). However, far from being a programmatic essay on comparative methodology, this article turns out as a critical commentary on a major publication by Raffaele Pettazzoni. Toward the end, Widengren gives an outline of the four steps of phenomenological method. In other words, the article is a misnomer, or, rather, the title is a palimpsest, as it alludes to an essay by Pettazzoni published with the same title (albeit in Italian: “Il metodo comparativo”) in the same journal (Pettazzoni 1959). It seems to me that for Widengren comparison had the same importance as philology: it is a necessary tool, but nothing more—a tool used both in historical and phenomenological research. In fact, evolutionism also practiced “the comparative method”—and Widengren had no sympathy at all for this procedure (Widengren 1963: 9). So, the label “Widengren the comparativist” must be applied with some caution; he knew all too well that “the comparative method” was a double-edged sword that must be used with utter care (see Stausberg 2021 for a review of comparison as a method in the study of religion/s).

VII. Supervision and Genealogies

The preceding reflections on Widengren were sparked by the recent publication of *The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren*. This impressive work—which has relatively few parallels in terms of scope and depth of engagement with a single scholar of religion—explores almost every corner of Widengren’s oeuvre. In their contributions, experts critically review Widengren’s treatment of approaches, methods, problems and areas, but the reception and *Nachleben* of his work is dealt with more tangentially (but see Gothóni/Larsson 2021). Surprisingly, the book has very little to say about Widengren’s work as teacher, supervisor, mentor, and his work on various examination board and appointments committees.⁴ Yet, it is precisely through these activities that he became an academic paterfamilias as much as, if not even more than, through his writings.⁵ Widengren has cast a long shadow over the study of religion/s in Scandinavia. His students occupied most of the chairs when the discipline expanded in Sweden—in an era by two contributors called “a golden era in the history of religions in Sweden” (Gothóni/Larsson 2021: 215). This was facilitated by his extremely long reign on the chair at Uppsala University. We see the footprints of similar genealogical proficiency all around us. From the generation between Widengren and myself, consider the case of my own Doktorvater, Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (1939-1999; see Stausberg 2005). Even though his writings are rarely read these days, his doctoral students held or hold chairs at

⁴ Hjärpe mentions the number of “more than thirty doctoral dissertations presented under the tutorship of Widengren” (2022: 238). Göran Larsson informs me that no list of these dissertations is readily available. For a list of his main students see Casadio (154f: note 31). Two of the 15 contributors were students of Widengren and wrote their dissertations under his supervision (Jan Hjärpe and Anders Hultgård).

⁵ See also Gilhus (2022) who sees Widengren as an example of “autocratic male professors ... who forged a strong bond between himself and his scholarly sons”.

various universities, including Basel, Bern, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Leipzig, and Tübingen. Compared to Widengren, however, we see a remarkable change: while Widengren, judging from the cases known to me, mainly supervised doctoral dissertations that are related to his own vast fields of research, the works supervised by Klimkeit radiated into ever more diverse directions. I don't know whether that was the result of a more liberal attitude or mindset on Klimkeit's part, whether we as his students found his work less inspiring and normative or his personality less intimidating, whether it signals the shifting boundaries of the discipline, or whether it reflects a change in academic culture, where professors have less power and students cannot be "disciplined" that easily. Most of Widengren's students had research expertise on more than one religious tradition, but none of them, I assume, would claim for themselves the label of "all-round historians of religion." To some extent, their research was still operating in the long shadows cast by Widengren. At present, the second and third post-Widengren generations of scholars of religion—several of whom are students of his students—are taking the study of religion/s in new directions; the volume edited by Larsson indicates that they are now ready to critically discuss the work and legacy of this forgotten classic of the study of religion.

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