The eclipse of Geo Widengren in the study of Iranian religions

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CHAPTER 5

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1 Introduction

In[1] 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

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.

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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 Mandaeans: "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 Mandaeans 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 Mandaeans* (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 Mandaeans* (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, *Apocalyptique 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]

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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 Pres, 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 nog 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

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, *Religionsphänemenologie*, 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

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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

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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 Pettazzoni (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]

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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

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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. Lehmkühler, *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 entbehrlich' 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.

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41 Lehmkühler, *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* (Suttgart: 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, 19988); 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]

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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 mannaförbund," *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 matīnām," *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* II.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. Schaeder, "Urform 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 Schaeder 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 exstiterunt*: 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 Altertunmskunde 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]

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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-iranicae 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 Gâthâs 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', *aštag*, 'messenger', *bandag*, '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 kingship[78] – 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 Religion**en** 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 Sacral 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 Sorush 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 Manichaean Light Nous) in Manichaean Parthian texts is literally identical with the great and powerful Zoroastrian god Vohu Manah (whose name is used for this particular Manichaean deity, the "Light Nous", in Manichaean 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 Manichaean/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 *Manichaean* 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 Manichaean 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 *manaŋhasca 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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