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Geo Widengren and the Non-Confessional Academic Study of Religions in Sweden

A Disciplinary History

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Abstract

Geo Widengren (1907–1996), Professor of the History of Religion and Psychology of Religion at Uppsala University from 1940 till 1973, was, like all individuals, a complex and often contradictory person. My focus in this short text is on Widengren's scientific credo, which stresses that “religion” should be studied like any historical subject and the scholar should therefore not use personal or normative judgements when analyzing the religions of either the past or the present. In other words, the academic and scientific study of religions should be non-confessional. Inspired by biographical studies and microhistory, I have used Widengren as a case for studying the microlevel or individual level. However, to grasp the microhistory, one also needs to zoom out and focus on the larger picture, i.e., social changes and prevailing discourses. By doing so, it becomes clear that Widengren's academic credo for the study of religions also found resonance in the public discourse when, during the 1950s and 1960s, Sweden adopted a law on the freedom of religion and changed the content of “religion” as a school subject from the study of Christianity to the study of religions in general.

Keywords

history of religion – Uppsala University – Geo Widengren – microhistory – Sweden

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Resembling¹ most if not all Western countries, the Study of Religion as a non-confessional academic field in Sweden emerged from the confessional and theological study of religion.² With the establishment of the two universities in Uppsala and Lund in 1477 and 1666 respectively, the study of religion became closely connected to the Church of Sweden and the Swedish state. The aim of this theological study was basically to make sure that the priests of the Church of Sweden were “proper” Lutherans and, of equal if not greater importance, that they remained loyal to the Swedish state. Theological training was therefore a political instrument in the hands of the Church and the Swedish state. The early study of religion was predominantly confined to Christianity and Lutheran theology,³ and the foremost aim was to defend the dogma of the Church of Sweden and to refute non-Lutheran theological claims to the truth. However, in the late 19th/20th century, the academic study of religion changed from a primarily theological study to a non-confessional study: in other words, it could be said that it was partly secularized. How and when did this happen in the Swedish context?

To answer these questions, we need to delve into the historical records and study both individual scholars and more general changes in society when it comes to the role and place of religion in Sweden. To highlight some of these changes, I will make use of my earlier studies of Geo Widengren (1907–1996), a Professor of the History of Religion and Psychology of Religion at Uppsala University from 1940 till 1973.⁴ Besides being a world leading comparativist of Middle Eastern religions with more than two hundred publications in Swedish, English, German, Italian, Spanish, later also translated into Arabic and Persian,⁵

1 For a more detailed outline of the disciplinary history of the study of religion in Sweden, see Henrik Bogdan and Göran Larsson (eds.), *The Study of Religion in Sweden: Past, Present and Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

2 Michael Stausberg, “The study of religion(s) in Western Europe (1): Prehistory and history until World War II,” *Religion* 37(4) (2007): 294–318.

3 For instance, the Qur’an was studied and partly translated into Swedish in Uppsala in the eighteenth century. See Christopher Toll, “The translation of the Koran into Swedish,” in Bo Isaksson, Mats Eskhult and Gail Ramsay (eds.), *The Professorship of Semitic Languages at Uppsala University 400 years: Jubilee Volume from a Symposium held at the University Hall, 21–23 September 2005* (Uppsala: Studia Semitica Upsaliensia 24, 2007), pp. 199–217.

4 On Widengren, see Göran Larsson (ed.), *The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022); and Göran Larsson, *Geo Widengren. Stridbar professor i en föränderlig tid* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Langenskiöld, 2023).

5 Giovanni Casadio and Göran Larsson, “Geo Widengren’s bibliography,” in Göran Larsson (ed.), *The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), pp. 386–403.

Widengren was a strong advocate of the non-confessional study of religions. In this article, I will use Widengren as an example of how a biographical or microhistory approach can help us cast light on social and academic changes. However, I will not argue that Widengren should be viewed as an exceptional case; on the contrary, his way of thinking about religions and how they should be studied is most likely to have been influenced and molded by both local and international changes and interactions with a vast number of scholars around the world.⁶

If Widengren can be seen as a scholar who highlighted and drove changes on the microlevel, there were also strong forces in Swedish society that advocated a separation between church and state in the twentieth century. Following the end of the Second World War, Sweden embraced freedom of religion and from the end of the 1960s Swedish school education was based on the non-confessional study of religions. These changes mainly took place on the meso- and macro-levels. Following Matti Peltonen's reading of Clifford Geertz's "microscopic" approach to the study of social phenomena, it is necessary both to reduce the scale of observations (i.e., the method applied by most scholars within the field of microhistory) and to focus on details, as well as zooming out to see the larger picture of social patterns and changes. Peltonen writes:

One of the most important lessons is to consider micro and macro as relative concepts. A small incident, a peripheral and obscure clue that the microhistorian starts to follow is not small as such but only relative to something bigger or longer. It is self-evident that we can only define micro with the help of some micro-macro distinction.⁷

The change from the theological and confessional study of religion to their non-confessional and academic study began in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, as I will show, it would be a long time before scholars became able to talk about the study of religion in a way that was methodologically detached from theological truth claims in Sweden. To some critics the study of religion is still suffering from normativity and confessional claims, but in this overview I will primarily focus on the study that is known today as the History of Religion, or more generally as the Study of Religion/s. By this procedure

6 Wim Hofstee, "Phenomenology of Religion versus Anthropology of Religion? The 'Groningen School' 1920–1990", in Sigurd Hjelde (ed.), *Man, Meaning and Mystery: 100 Years of History of Religions in Norway. The Heritage of W. Brede Kristensen* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 173–190.

7 Matti Peltonen, "What Is Micro in Microhistory?", in Hans Renders and Binne De Haan, (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 114.

I will leave out internal developments within academic fields like Systematic Theology, Biblical studies, the Sociology of Religion or the Psychology of Religion. However, as critical readers and historians we should also be cautious and bear in mind that the dividing lines between these subdisciplines of the study of religion are recent and that the boundaries were generally much more open and flexible in earlier times.

My article is organized in the following way. First, I provide background to the place and function of religion in Sweden from the Reformation to the end of the nineteenth century. Secondly, I will briefly discuss the introduction of the first chair in the History of Religion (or more correctly Theological Praenotations and Theological Encyclopaedia) at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Uppsala that were inaugurated at the turn of the twentieth century. With this development, we also witness the first major split between the theological and the non-confessional study of religion that was to be played out at this university. This distinction is exemplified by the failure and disapproval of Torgny Segerstedt's (1876–1945) thesis in the History of Religion. Thirdly, I place the focus on the importance of Professor Geo Widengren, who is arguably one of the most important pioneers when it comes to the promotion of the non-confessional study of religion in Sweden. The fourth section of my article contains an overview and discussion of some of the social and legal changes that are important in the emergence of the non-confessional academic study of religion in Sweden. The article closes with some conclusions and thoughts on how a microscopical approach to history must include a focus on both the microlevel and the meso- and macrolevels.

1 The Backdrop: State, Religion and Universities

Gustav Vasa (1496–1560) was the first Swedish Lutheran king, and with his coronation a process of leaving the Roman Catholic Church was initiated. From now on the Church of Sweden became a powerful tool for the nationalization and consolidation of the Swedish state. Several royal decrees and decisions that were issued during the sixteenth century—not least the so-called Uppsala meeting in 1593⁸—contributed to the creation of a strong alliance between the new Lutheran Church of Sweden and the state. With this new direction, Gustav Vasa started a process that enabled the king to take control of the possessions of the Church and to give himself power over both it and the state.

8 Lars Eckerdal and Per Erik Persson, *Confessio fidei: Uppsala mötes beslut 1593 om Svenska kyrkans bekännelse* (Stockholm: Verbum, 1993).

For instance, the Church Act from 1634 stipulated that all Swedes should be Lutherans and should follow the dogmas that were laid down by the Church of Sweden. Accordingly, the very essence of being Swedish is to be loyal to the Church and to the king. To put it in the words of the sociologist Erika Willander, “religion was believed to contribute to social unity”.⁹ To deviate from the Christian faith—that is, in its Lutheran interpretation as adopted by the Church of Sweden—was therefore a sin and an offence against both God and the state. Consequently, from the seventeenth century the Swedish state relied on religious unity as a model for its governance.¹⁰

Mirroring this structure, the establishment of the two universities in Uppsala and Lund were closely related to both Church and state.¹¹ Even though priests were mainly trained outside the universities at different local schools (i.e., *katedralsskolor*, *domkyrkor* or *gymnasieskolor* in Swedish) at least until the 19th century—before that there was no organized systematic priest training at Swedish universities. From 1831 all priest training was located to the university.¹² All priests were ordained by a bishop, but both the Church and the state had to make sure that future priests and other civil servants were good Lutherans and loyal to the state. Besides their two fundamental tasks, namely to preach to and teach the public about the Lutheran faith, the priest and the Church had the responsibility for keeping civil registry of the population (*folk-bokföring* in Swedish). These records, introduced in the Church Act of 1686, were of great importance for the state, while they were also the basis for both taxation and enrollment in the army.¹³

However, as I will show in the next section, from the end of the nineteenth century there were novel developments within academia that questioned the relationship between the academic study of religion and the Church. This

9 Erika Willander, *Sveriges religiösa landskap: samhörighet, tillhörighet och mångfald under 2000-talet* (Stockholm: SST, 2019), p. 10, my translation.

10 Ingun Montgomery, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria: Enhetskyrkans tid* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2002), p. 140.

11 See, for instance, Jan Bergman, “The History of Religions,” in Helmer Ringgren (ed.), *Uppsala University 500 years: Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1976), pp. 3–23; and Lars Österlin (2001), “Teologi i Lund före 1900,” in Birger Olsson, Göran Bexell and Göran Gustafsson (eds.), *Theologicum i Lund: Undervisning och forskning i tusen år* (Lund: Arcus, 2001), pp. 11–37.

12 Per Erik Persson, “1900-talet: Utbildning, ämnesområden och examinina,” in Birger Olsson, Göran Bexell and Göran Gustafsson (eds.), *Theologicum i Lund: Undervisning och forskning i tusen år* (Lund: Arcus, 2001), p. 57.

13 Ragnar Norrman, “Den svenske prästen under 1600-talet: vägen till tjänsten,” in Ingun Montgomery, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria: Enhetskyrkans tid* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2002), pp. 238–247.

development mirrors other social changes that had emerged and was the point at which a new academic subject appeared, namely the History of Religion.

2 The First Chair in the History of Religion

From the mid-nineteenth century, the History of Religion became a subdiscipline within several leading theological departments on the continent. The reason for this novelty is complex, but the development of a subdiscipline called “History of Religion” is closely related to both linguistic discoveries (i.e., family resemblances between different languages like Indo-European and Semitic) and colonial enterprises around the globe. The last aspect was less driven by idealistic motives, but more by materialistic or political motives. However, as argued by Hans Kippenberg, the study of religions is also related to processes of secularization and the rise of a modern society that should be based on science and a disenchanting materialistic world. As a counterbalance, there was still a need for mysticism and metaphysical speculations, argues Kippenberg, and this void could partly be filled by romanticism, nationalism, and a growing interest in ancient traditions. In this situation, the exotic and mysticism found in religious traditions—not the least Near Eastern and Oriental traditions—was tempting for many Westerners. However, to study these traditions, it was necessary both to master difficult languages and to have access to texts and documents from these traditions. Some of these needs could be filled by the rise of the academic study that is today known as the History of Religion.¹⁴

Leaving aside the interesting debate about the emergence of the History of Religion as an academic discipline, Sweden installed its first professor in the History of Religion in 1901, most likely to follow leading universities in countries like France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. The first holder of the Swedish post was Professor Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), who was a member of the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University.

Besides his duties as a priest in the Church of Sweden, Söderblom had studied oriental languages in France and in 1901 had defended his thesis, *La vie future d'après le mazdéisme à la lumière des croyances parallèles dans les autres religions: étude d'eschatologie comparée*, at the University of Sorbonne, Paris. Unlike most of his fellows in the Church of Sweden, the topic of Söderblom's thesis was not Lutheran theology or the Bible, but the History of Religion, and

14 Hans Kippenberg, *Discovering religious history in the modern age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

more specifically Zoroastrian religions. At this point in time this was an unusual topic, but the subject matter was also related to the question of prophecy and so-called primitive religion. Söderblom was a versatile scholar, and among his publications we find both theological specimens like sermons and dogmatic texts, and studies in ancient Near Eastern and primitive religion.¹⁵

With Söderblom's appointment, it also became possible to write and defend doctoral theses in the History of Religion at the Faculty of Theology. The first doctoral candidate was Torgney Segerstedt, who embarked upon a research project on the history of polytheism. This topic was controversial, and when he defended his thesis, *Till frågan om polyteismens uppkomst*, on May 8, 1903, it failed on the ground that it did not take a clear stance against polytheism or defend the Lutheran Church.¹⁶ The failure of the thesis was much discussed in Swedish media, and it was argued that the decision illustrated that the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University was still a stronghold of the Church of Sweden. This was maybe not a surprise, but the discussion that was played out in Swedish media illustrates, at least according to my understanding, that the position of the Church of Sweden was under discussion. Without going into any details, Segerstedt was later promoted as a doctor in theology at the University of Lund. In 1913, he was appointed professor in the History of Religion at Stockholm University College.¹⁷ This was the first time a professor in the History of Religion in Sweden was installed at a non-theological faculty. This could have been the beginning of the non-confessional study of religion in Sweden, but Segerstedt soon left this position to pursue a career as a publicist. In 1917, he became the chief editor of *Göteborgs Handels och Sjöfartstidning*, because of which he was never able to establish himself as a scholar within academia.

Segerstedt's chair at Stockholm University College remained vacant for some years, but in 1927 the position was taken up by Tor Andræ (1885–1947), yet another theologian and priest with a strong connection to the Church of Sweden. His specialty was Islamic studies, and especially the early history of Islam and the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Like Söderblom, Andræ was a versatile scholar working on several different topics, ranging from theology to

15 Eric H. Sharpe and Anders Hultgård (eds.), *Nathan Soederblom and his Contribution to the Study of Religion: Essays in Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of his Death* (Uppsala: Horae Soederblomianae, VIII, 1984).

16 Eva Stohlander Axelsson, *Ett brännglas för tidens strålar: Striden om Torgny Segerstedts docentur 1903* (Lund: Arcus, 2001).

17 Eva Stohlander Axelsson, "Kring den religionshistoriska professuren i Lund," in Eric Reenberg Sand and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (eds.), *Edvard Lehmann og religionshistorien: Et symposium ved fagets 100-års jubilæum i Danmark* (København: Institut for Religionshistorie, Københavns Universitet, 2001), 65–68.

the psychology of religion. When in 1914 Söderblom was appointed Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Andræ was appointed professor at Uppsala University. But walking in the footsteps of Söderblom, Andræ also left the academy and became Bishop of the diocese of Linköping in 1936. His replacement was the young adept Geo Widengren, who had studied the History of Religion and Philosophy at Stockholm University College under the guidance of Tor Andræ.¹⁸

3 The Microlevel: Geo Widengren and the Non-confessional Study of Religion

Unfortunately, there are hardly any records that can give us any information about Widengren's childhood or youth. His father, Georg Hugo Wilhelm Jakobsson (1875–1927), worked as a clerk in the Swedish customs service, while his mother, Anna Matilda Leontina Widengren (1883–1969), came from a family that had established a successful clothing business and worked as a housewife and an office clerk. Unlike most families of the time, the couple divorced in 1917. Following the divorce, it appears that Widengren had little contact with his father and chose to abandon the surname Jakobsson, adopting Widengren instead. Divorce was rare at this time and likely carried a social stigma—at least for Widengren's mother—but there is no information about how Widengren himself was affected by the separation. There are no records to indicate that Widengren had a personal faith or that his family were religiously inclined. He was married in the Church of Sweden in 1944, but this does not tell us much about his personal beliefs. Even though it was legal to have a civil marriage at this point of time, the common practice was to have a marriage in a church.¹⁹

Leaving aside his personal life, we know that Widengren was an excellent philologist with a historical and comparative perspective and despite a focus on Ancient Near Eastern religions in the thesis, his main research focus was Iranian religions, culture, and history. Without going into any details about his academic career, in order to stick to the interest of this special

18 When Andræ became the holder of the Chair in the History of Religion at Uppsala University, Widengren moved forward under the guidance of Andræ and defended his thesis, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents: A Comparative Study* in 1936. Geo Widengren, *Tor Andræ* (Uppsala: J.A. Lindblads Förlag, 1947).

19 For this and more information on Widengren, see Larsson, *Geo*, and Larsson, *The Legacy*. On the history of civil marriage in Sweden, see Jan Janson, *Debatten om civiläktenskapets införande i Sverige (Mit einer deutsche Zusammenfassung)* (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 1964).

issue, I will here only focus on how Widengren treated confessional claims and how he developed his non-confessional approach to the study of religions.²⁰

Between 1940 and 1973, when Widengren held the chair in the History of Religion and Psychology of Religion at the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University, there are several indications that the study of religion became separated from both confessional and normative statements that were previously related to the Church of Sweden. Unlike his predecessors, moreover, there are no indications that Widengren had any personal belief whatsoever. For example, in an interview for the Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet*, Widengren makes the following statement about why humans have religions:

It's about psychological therapy—the need to have someone to turn to, whether it's paternal or maternal feelings.²¹

Even with this reductionist view of religion, Widengren remained loyal to the Faculty of Theology throughout his academic career. For instance, he consistently showed deep respect and admiration for his supervisor, Tor Andræ, and earned the respect of several leading theologians and academics, both in Sweden and internationally. Unfortunately, there are no records that shed light on how his colleagues at the faculty responded to his view that religious beliefs functioned as a kind of “psychological therapy.” However, his differing opinions were not limited to his views on religion; he also diverged from both his former and current colleagues at the Faculty of Theology in other respects. For example, contrary to Söderblom and Andræ, Widengren's Sundays were devoted solely to horse-riding and not to church attendance.²²

Even though it is difficult to find an explicit explanation for Widengren's methodological outlook and why his attitude towards normative and confessional studies was different from those of his predecessors, it seems plausible that he was inspired by the phenomenological approach of scholars like Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Besides the simple fact that several of his studies bear the word “phenomenology” in their titles, Widengren has explained

20 If nothing else is indicated, the following description of Widengren as a historian of religion is based on Larsson, *The Legacy*, which contains several articles on his career and his contribution to the study of religion, or Larsson, *Geo*, a scientific monograph on Widengren and the academic study of religions in Sweden.

21 Bertil Appelgren, “Då jag själv blir deppig tar jag mej en ridtur med Attila,” *Aftonbladet*, February 2, 1969, my translation.

22 Appelgren, “Då jag” and Bengt Hallgren, *Guds finger i Uppsala* (Stockholm: Alba, 1981).

this approach in a *Festschrift* article called “Some remarks on the methods of the phenomenology of religion,” published in 1968.²³ In this text, which was in line with most phenomenological studies, Widengren stresses the necessity of applying *epoché* (i.e., bracketing the researcher’s own opinions or values) when studying a phenomenon. That said, Widengren seldom if ever made explicit references to philosophers like Husserl or other scholars who made use of a phenomenological approach. For Widengren, phenomenology was mainly a way of drawing up typologies that could be used for comparative purposes,²⁴ while according to Bruce Lincoln, Widengren used this approach to “trace [the] diffusion of certain traits from one group to [an]other over the course of history.”²⁵ Even though this is not the right place to explore Widengren’s phenomenology in detail,²⁶ I believe that *epoché* was an important ideal for him. For example, in a forward to the Swedish translation of the Italian scholar Ugo Bianchi’s (1922–1995) book *Problemi di storia delle religioni*, Widengren takes a clear stance against normative statements about religious beliefs.

In doing so, I have also taken a stand against the thesis that the history of religion would have the right to “make value judgments about the object of study”. The fact that, as Professor Bianchi quite rightly points out, researchers of the most diverse kinds are guilty of such value judgments cannot of course be invoked as an excuse, because the fact that some researchers commit a methodological error cannot justify [the claim] that everyone else must be guilty of the same error. According to what acceptable objective standard could such value judgments be made? To ask the question is to answer it! Such an objective norm does not exist. As a feeling and reflective individual, I can like certain religious phenomena and detest others, but as a historian of religion I again have the opportunity to

23 Geo Widengren, “Some Remarks on the Methods of the Phenomenology of Religion,” in *Universitet och forskningen: Studie tillägnade Torgny T. Segerstedt på sextioårsdagen*, 250–260 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1968).

24 Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, “Learning from the Past”, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religions*, 2022, 35(4): 293–305.

25 Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations in, on, and with comparison*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 26. See also Einar Thomassen, “Widengren, Gnosticism, and the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” in Göran Larsson (ed.), *The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), pp. 279–280.

26 For more details, see, for instance, W.O. Carver, (1986), “Reflection on Geo Widengren’s phenomenological method”, *Scriptura*, 2 (1986): 21–39, as well as examples in Larsson, *The Legacy*.

objectively justify my sympathies and antipathies and therefore no right to publish my private opinions as scientific.²⁷

According to Widengren, academics should not make value judgements or distinguish between what should be labelled primitive and non-primitive religion respectively. Even though this categorization can be helpful in an academic analysis—for example if you want to make a distinction between cultures that have or lack a writing system (i.e., written sources, or not)—value judgements are not part of the scholar's task, argues Widengren. According to this methodological ideal, all religions should be treated as equal: in particular, there is no reason to place Christianity or the Bible in a superior position to all other religions. To level out all religions and argue for a non-confessional and non-biased approach, no matter what the religious tradition—ranging from the oldest to the latest forms of religions—was a clear break with how Söderblom and Andræ had studied the religions of humankind and how they related their studies to their own Christian beliefs. Committing an “academic patricide” is, however, not uncommon in academia, both in the past and present. It is also likely that Widengren's approach to the philosophy of science—specifically, his perspective on how to conduct religious studies—differed from that of Söderblom and Andræ, who maintained a dual loyalty to both academia and the Church. From this perspective, Widengren was only loyal to academia.

Yet another example of Widengren's non-confessional approach is found in his reworking of his supervisor's introductory book on the Prophet Muhammad. In 1930, Andræ had published a Swedish summary of his research on early Islamic history and the life of the Prophet Muhammad in a more popular form. After Andræ's death in 1947 the publishing company thought it would be a good idea to publish a revised second edition of his book, and they asked Widengren to undertake the task.²⁸ This choice was not entirely uncontroversial: for example, some criticism can be found in a review of the revised edition written by Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1889–1974). It should be noted that Nyberg also had been Widengren's teacher in Semitic and Iranian languages at Uppsala University, and even though they shared many research interests, there are also ample

27 Geo Widengren, “Förord,” in Ugo Bianchi, *Religionshistoriska problem*, 5–10 (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 1968), pp. 6–7, my translation.

28 Tor Andræ and Geo Widengren, *Muhammad: Hans liv och hans tro* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1950). On this book, see Jan Hjärpe, “Tor Andræ and Geo Widengren: Perspectives and Purposes of the Study of the History of Religions,” in Göran Larsson (ed.), *The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), pp. 238–248.

examples of tensions and conflicts between them.²⁹ In the preface to Widengren's revised edition of *Andræ*, we can also see that Widengren himself found the editing process of this work difficult. Besides stressing that all additions to *Andræ*'s original text is based on his own studies and the latest research literature, Widengren writes that: "It was with great hesitation that I [Widengren] undertook the task of revising and editing the new edition."³⁰

On the one hand, Widengren displays a deep admiration for *Andræ*'s profound knowledge of Arabic sources, but on the other hand he disliked *Andræ*'s normative and strongly biased statements. For example, in the original edition, *Andræ* ends his book by making a comparison between Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad, using this procedure to conclude that Jesus is better than Muhammad in all respects. To put it in *Andræ*'s own words:

Despite all that can be said about Muhammad's religious sincerity and faithfulness to his calling, his perseverance, his magnanimity and nobility, one does not do the Prophet of Islam an injustice if one says that his moral personality is not fully on a par with his talents in general, not rather on par with his religious endowment. To do him justice, however, we must not forget that, consciously or unconsciously, we like to compare him with the unaccomplished, lofty figure that meets us in the Gospel, just as we cannot fail to see his historical personality against the background of the perfect moral ideal to which the faith of his congregation wants to make him. And what personality does not fall short when it is measured against such a yardstick?³¹

However, his conclusion in the above quotation is not congruent with how Widengren approached and read the sources. Consequently, Widengren found it necessary to delete the last chapter in *Andræ*'s original book on Muhammad. According to Widengren it was primarily an apology for Christian belief, claims of a sort that should be left out of science. In his analysis of the two editions, Jan Hjärpe concludes:

29 See, for instance, Bo Utas, "Introduktion," in *H.S. Nyberg: Muntlig tradition, skriftlig fixering och författarskap sammanställt enligt efterlämnade manuskript och kommenterat av Bo Utas* (Uppsala: Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-samfundet i Uppsala, 2004). See also Henrik Samuel Nyberg, "Review of T. Andræ and G. Widengren, *Muhammad: Hans liv och hans tro*", *Svenska Dagbladet*, September 23, 1951.

30 Tor Andræ and Geo Widengren, *Muhammad*, no page number ("Förord"), my translation.

31 Tor Andræ, *Muhammed: hans liv och hans tro* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1930), pp. 238–239, my translation.

There is a difference between them [Andræ and Widengren] as to what kind of reader they expect. Andræ sees his audience as more or less Christian, the very concept of religion and of ethics having Christian connotations. For Widengren, it is important to avoid moral estimations with these connotations and sees his readers, regardless of religious belonging, as a more secular audience, an orientation on what he sees as important patterns, among them especially the idea of the persistent pattern of a Near Eastern divine kingship.³²

Besides Widengren's importance for the development of the study of religion in Sweden, he was also very active in international milieus, and throughout his career contributed to several academic institutions and organizations. Among many things, Widengren was one of the founding fathers of the International Association for the Study of the History Religion (today abbreviated as IAHR), an organization that was started after the Second World War. In this position, he advocated basing the History of Religion on academic and scientific merit and not on confessional beliefs. As we can see in the following quote, he stresses that there are variations between different academic milieus when it comes to this requirement:

So far, Islamic states have not been admitted to the international organization. These are not yet sufficiently scientifically trained. In Uppsala, we can possibly look objectively at the founder of Christianity. In the countries mentioned, not even in a country as secular as Turkey can you do that when it comes to Mohammed.³³

In the quote above, it is interesting to note that Widengren suggests it is "possible" that his colleagues at Uppsala can "look objectively at the founder of Christianity." To what extent this implies a criticism is difficult to determine, but Widengren seems to have little, if any, trust in how so-called Islamic states study the history of Islam or Muhammad.

Even though there were also tensions, conflicts and even disputes about how to study religion within the IAHR, Widengren was one of the professors that more openly—like in the quotation above—defended the position that the study of religion must be based on an "objective" and non-confessional approach. It should also be said that this ideal is still the guiding principle of the IAHR,³⁴ on the homepage of which we can read the following statement:

32 Hjärpe, "Tor Andræ", p. 247.

33 Widengren quoted in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 15 November 1962, my translation.

34 On IAHR and Widengren's role in developing its profile, see Giovanni Casadio, "NVMEN,

The IAHR seeks to promote the activities of all scholars, member and affiliate associations and societies contributing to the historical, social, and comparative study of religion. As such, the IAHR is the preeminent international forum for the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion, past and present. The IAHR is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns.³⁵

Even though it would be exaggerated and even wrong to attribute this statement solely to Widengren, it is very much in line with how he and subsequent generations of scholars in religious studies have thought that the study of religions should be conducted.

4 The Macro Level: Social and Institutional Changes

Some of the changes I have discussed in the previous sections coincided with several social and institutional changes in Swedish society. For instance, with the public debate that has become known as the faith and knowledge debate (“Tro och vetande” in Swedish) the Church of Sweden was heavily criticized during the 1950s by the Uppsala Professor of Philosophy, Ingemar Hedenius (1908–1982). This debate is named after a book of essays published by Hedenius in 1949. Among other topics, he discussed the clarity and strength of religious language in contrast to logical empiricism, the problem of theodicy, and the limitations of a religious worldview. Even though Hedenius was not unique in his criticism,³⁶ his polemic and criticism of a religious worldview stimulated a strong public reaction, and for the sake of my article it should also be stressed that Hedenius was not only targeting the Church of Sweden, but also the rela-

Brill and the IAHR in Their Early Years: Glimpses at Three Parallel Stories from an Italian Stance,” in Tim Jensen and Armin Geertz (eds.), *NVMEN, the Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 303–348; and Tim Jensen and Satoko Fujiwara, “Professor Geo Widengren, IAHR Vice-President 1950–1960, IAHR President 1960–1970, IAHR Honorary Life Member 1996,” in Göran Larsson (ed.), *The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), pp. 50–70.

35 “What it the IAHR?”. Retrieved from <https://www.iahrweb.org/about.php> (accessed June 16, 2024).

36 Cf. Anton Jansson, “Humanister på apologetikens scen: Ateism och kristendomskritik i efterkrigstidens offentlighet,” in Johan Östling, Anton Jansson and Ragni Svensson Stringberg (eds.), *Humaniora i välfärdssamhället: Kunskapshistorier om efterkrigstiden* (Göteborg and Stockholm: Makadam, 2023), pp. 87–113.

tionship that he thought existed between the Church and the theological faculties in Uppsala and Lund. His criticism specifically targeted academic theology (i.e., theology produced at universities), and Hedenius believed that theology as an academic subject should be removed from the university because it did not live up to the criteria that all sciences should live up to.³⁷

As far as I know, it was primarily Swedish theologians—such as Anders Nygren (1890–1978) and Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977)—who responded to Hedenius’ criticism. The suggestion to remove the History of Religions from theological faculties and place it within the faculty of humanities was not adopted in either Lund or Uppsala. This division was not either propagated for within the broader academic circles that Widengren was part of. Most Historians of Religion, including Widengren, remained loyal to the traditional academic structures that placed the study of religion within the faculty of theology, and as shown in an earlier quotation, Widengren also believed that the history of Christianity was studied “objectively” at Uppsala university.³⁸ This attitude is a topic that warrants further exploration in future studies. However, when it comes to Widengren, there is no explicit material available to reconstruct how he engaged with Hedenius’ arguments.

Even though there are no records casting light on how Widengren understood Hedenius’s criticism of the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University, both men seem to have been united in their belief that the academic and scientific study of religions should not be mixed up with theological studies that were speculative, normative and confessional. But to study how religious traditions have unfolded and impacted on societies and cultures over time is a legitimate object of study that has no problem in living up to scientific criteria. This way of approaching the sources resembles how “ordinary” historians or social scientists study their specific topics. Therefore, argued Hedenius in the late 1950s that, History of Religions, as an academic subject, should be removed from the Faculty of Theology and relocated to the Faculty of Humanities (which includes languages, history and philosophy).³⁹ This suggestion, however, was rejected by Widengren, most likely because it would have had a negative impact on his own position at Uppsala University.⁴⁰ Without going into any details, there are several other cases indicating that Widengren was a power player pre-

37 See Ingemar Hedenius, “De teologiska fakulteten,” *Dagens-Nyheter*, 10 January, 1958. See also Svante Nordin, *Ingemar Hedenius: En filosof och hans tid* (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2004) and Larsson, *Geo*.

38 Widengren quoted in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 15 November 1962, my translation.

39 Hedenius, “De teologiska”.

40 Cf., Larsson, *Geo*.

pared to defend the Faculty of Theology when it benefitted his own research agenda. Disagreements and university politics were most likely also tainted by personal conflicts, pride and vanity. One example is Widengren's conflict with Professor Carl-Martin Edsman (1911–2010), who became the first professor in the History of Religions at the Faculty of Humanities in Uppsala in 1959.⁴¹ To leave his position as an established and often undisputed leader in the Faculty of Theology (Widengren was, for instance, Dean at the Faculty of Theology three times in 1944–1945, 1950–1951 and 1965–1971⁴²) and move to a different Faculty would most likely be risky for him personally.⁴³

Without assessing the impact of Hedenius and the so-called faith and knowledge debate that raged in the Swedish media for many years, the end of the Second World War brought new ideas to the forefront. In 1951, the Freedom of Religion Act (1951:680) was adopted, and for the first time in Swedish history it became possible to leave the Church of Sweden without having to join a Christian congregation that was approved by the Swedish state.⁴⁴ Moreover, although the religious landscape was still dominated by Christian congregations, this was soon to change. From the end of the 1960s, Sweden also became a country in receipt of guestworkers of other religious faiths. From the 1970s and onwards, Sweden had simultaneously developed into one of the most secular societies in the Western world. With workforce migration, asylum-seekers and humanitarian crises, Sweden today is a multireligious society that hosts large groups of Muslim and other religious believers.⁴⁵

41 On this conflict see, for instance, Oloph Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten vid Uppsala universitet 1916–2000. Historiska studier* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2021) and Carl-Martin Edsman, "Ein halbes Jahrhundert Uppsala-Schule," in Michael Stausberg (ed.) *Kontinuität und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgård zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 23.12.2001* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 194–209. See also Larsson, *Geo*.

42 Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten*, pp. 113–114.

43 That said, as I have pointed out elsewhere, there are reasons to believe that Widengren may have been reluctant to switch faculties, as doing so would have diminished his influence. Having already been appointed Dean of the Faculty of Theology, he was reappointed to this position just one year after the publication of Hedenius' book. Removing professors or subjects with a theological or confessional orientation would have undermined his own position. Rather than risk being relegated to a less influential role as a professor among many in the Faculty of Humanities, Widengren appears to have chosen to remain loyal to his old faculty, even if this decision might be seen as a compromise of his scholarly ideals. Cf. xxxx

44 On this law, see Victoria Enkvist, *Religionsfrihetens rättsliga ramar* (Uppsala: Iustus Förlag, 2013).

45 See, for instance, David Thurffjell, *Det gudlösa folket: De postkristna svenskarna och religionen* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2015); and Willander, *Sveriges religiösa*.

In 1969, the Swedish school system changed the name of “religion” as a school subject from Christian Education (Kristendomskunskap) to Religious Education (Religionskunskap) (Lgr 69).⁴⁶ The aim of this change was to make “religion” into a non-confessional subject and diminish the influence from religious institutions in the Swedish school. Religion should therefore be taught as a subject that is based on scientific knowledge and not confessional beliefs. However, the break with the Church had already begun in the early 20th century when the state exempted the Church from controlling Swedish schools by establishing the National Board of Education (Skolöverstyrelsen in Swedish).⁴⁷ This was not the only change, argues Sven Hartman, who writes:

The 1919 curriculum for the elementary school involved considerable changes. The religious instruction was reduced by 50 per cent and social studies, mathematics and the mother tongue were given more time. The secularization of the school system had started.⁴⁸

The above-named changes in the Swedish school system are therefore strong indications that the grip of the Lutheran tradition had become weaker and that religious beliefs were no longer seen as a fundamental tool that the state could use to create social cohesion.

With time, we can conclude that religion and belief have become more of a private matter and not something that is of major concern for the Swedish state or Swedish identity.⁴⁹ Finally, in 2000 the relationship between the state and the Church of Sweden was changed, and the national church became somewhat more equal to all other religious traditions and congregations. However, it should be emphasized that the Church of Sweden still holds a privileged position, as it is regarded as a key part of Sweden’s cultural and national heritage.

46 On this change, see, Göran Larsson and Karin Kittelmann Flensner, “Swedish Religious Education at the End of the 1960s: Classroom Observations, Early Video Ethnography and the National Curriculum of 1962”, *British Journal of Religious Education* 36 (2) (2014): 202–217.

47 Gunnar Richardson, *Svensk utbildningshistoria* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1994), p. 79.

48 Sven Hartman, “The Development of the Swedish Educational System”, in Marie Carlsson, Annika Rabo and Fatma Gök (eds.), *Education in ‘Multicultural’ Societies: Turkish and Swedish Perspectives* (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, Vol. 18, 2007), p. 260.

49 That said, it could be argued that religion, as an identity marker, has resurged and become an increasingly important factor in Swedish politics. In particular, the question of Islam and ‘Muslimness’ is frequently debated today in Sweden, often in relation to issues such as integration and national solidarity.

Due to this status, for example, church buildings are more frequently protected by the state, and most cemeteries are administered by the Church of Sweden.

5 Conclusions

Geo Widengren, like all individuals, was a complex and often contradictory figure. In this brief text, I focus on Widengren, who argued that “religion” should be studied like any other historical subject. According to Widengren, scholars should avoid personal or normative judgments when analyzing the religions of both the past and the present. In other words, the academic and scientific study of religion should be non-confessional.

To unpack Widengren’s views on how religions should be studied, I highlight not only his personal opinions on science but also relate his perspectives to broader social changes in Sweden. From the 1950s onward, Sweden introduced Freedom of Religion legislation, which contributed to a more open and plural society that also encouraged secular opinions and criticism of the role of the Church of Sweden as well as a right to hold religious beliefs and start congregations outside of the Church of Sweden. In my article, these shifts are exemplified by the so-called *Faith-and-Knowledge* debate, the introduction of freedom of religion legislation, and changes in Swedish educational policies.

For instance, by the late 1960s, religion—as a school subject—was to be based on scientific knowledge, with teachings presented in a non-confessional manner. While Widengren was largely aligned with these changes, it is important to note that he held a professorship at the Faculty of Theology and published several of his works with Christian-affiliated publishing houses. For example, his renowned textbook *Religionens värld* (1945), which was also translated into Italian, Spanish, and German, was published by Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelses bokförlag, a Christian publishing house. Based on my analysis, his loyalty to the Faculty of Theology is most likely driven by internal university politics and personal strategies. However, at that time, the History of Religion was primarily taught and researched within faculties of theology, rather than in the humanities or social sciences.

Following Hans Renders’ and Binne de Haan’s advice, the scholar interested in biography should refrain from viewing the study object as a unique person.⁵⁰

50 Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, “Introduction: The Challenges of Biographical Studies,” in Hans Renders and Binne De Haan (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 1–8.

To see the parts, one also needs to understand the whole (i.e., the social fabric and the dominating discourses that prevailed at a given time). To conduct a biographical study, the scholar must approach the study object (i.e., the person in focus) from a historical perspective. Inspired by Matti Peltonen's use of the so-called microscopic perspective (in this case attributed to Clifford Geertz), the biographer needs to focus on both the microlevel and the larger context (i.e., the meso- and macrolevels).⁵¹ Like most microhistorians,⁵² I have tried to reduce the scale of observation by concentrating on Widengren and his understanding of how to conduct the study of religions. Even though it would be wrong to see him as one of a kind, he was of great importance in Sweden, someone to be taken into account if we want to understand how a non-confessional and academic study of religion was formulated in Sweden. Scholars before him, like Söderblom and Andræ, were often restrained and biased by their personal beliefs, and it was only with the arrival of scholars like Widengren that it began to be emphasized that the study of religions should be a historical and non-confessional subject. But to grasp the microhistory, one also needs to zoom out and focus on the larger picture, i.e., social change and the prevailing discourses. By doing so, it is plausible to argue that Widengren's academic credo for the study of religions also found resonance in public debates.⁵³ During the 1950s and 1960s, Sweden adopted the freedom of religion law and changed the school subject of "religion" from the study of Christianity into the study of religions generally. That is, in the biography of this specific person, we can see a general trend towards a more secular framework for how religion is understood and studied.

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52 See, for instance, Giovanni Levi (2001), "On Microhistory," in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspective on Historical Writing* (London: Polity, 2011), pp. 97–119.

53 See, for instance, Jansson, "Humanister" and Nordin, *Ingemar Hedenius*.

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