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# The Reception and Criticism of Geo Widengren in the Nordic Countries: The Debate over the Origin of Religion

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## Introduction

Many contributors to this anthology would agree that Professor Geo Widengren's main research in the field of the History of Religions concerned topics such as religious phenomenology, criticism of evolutionism, sacred kings and high gods. Although he also addressed other topics, such as Gnosticism, Islam and Mandeism, and sometimes lamented having been associated with these themes much too early in his career, they cannot be ignored in any survey of his importance as a historian of religions. At a workshop held in his honour at the University of Santa Barbara on 21-2 April 1972, Widengren referred to this fact by remarking:

It is understood that I [Geo Widengren] did not start my research work in the firm conviction that it had to be concentrated on culture contact, cultural influence and cultural continuity. Therefore, it is but natural that most of what I have written does not fall under such headings. On the whole I have tried, even if I have not been successful, to be an all-round historian of religion, including also phenomenology and psychology of religion into the sphere of my interests. But it was inevitable that I was concentrating more on some things than on other things. When I was a comparatively young professor, I got a label attached to my persona, and that label was: 'Anti-evolutionism, High-Gods and Sacral Kingship.' Well, I have struggled rather hard to get rid of that label.<sup>1</sup>

Although Widengren is arguably one of Sweden's best-known scholars internationally in the field of the History of Religions, his hypotheses, typologies and explanations were not always accepted outside Uppsala. Despite his engagement in the International Association for the

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<sup>1</sup> Geo Widengren, "Cultural contact, cultural influence, cultural continuity, and syncretism. Some views based on my previous work," in *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity. Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), 19.

Study of Religions (IAHR; until 1955 IASHR) right from the outset, his scholarly work was rarely reviewed or discussed outside Sweden.<sup>2</sup> Two noteworthy exceptions are his textbook *Religions värld* (first published in 1945<sup>3</sup>) and his contribution to the debate over evolutionism included in the book *Religionens ursprung*,<sup>4</sup> which is based on an English article published in the Swedish journal *Ethnos* in 1945<sup>5</sup> and partly translated into German in 1974.<sup>6</sup> As we will show in this chapter, these two publications provoked a public debate, especially in Norway and Finland.

Although Widengren was seldom afraid to voice his opinion on any matter that had to do with the study of religions, it is surprising that he seldom if ever addressed the explicit criticisms he received from Nordic colleagues, such as the Norwegian Biblical scholar and philologist Sigmund Mowinkel (1884–1965) and the Finnish ethnologist and scholar of religions Rafael Karsten (1879–1956). Since we argue that a study of how Widengren’s research was received by his contemporary colleagues in the Nordic countries casts light on some of the theoretical and methodological assumptions that explicitly or implicitly underpin his research, we will discuss Karsten’s extensive criticism of the two books of Widengren’s we have already mentioned, *Religionens värld* (“The World of Religions”) and *Religionens ursprung* (“The Origin of Religion”).

Unlike other critics, such as the Swedish philologist and classicist Martin P:son Nilsson (1874–1967) and the Norwegian scholar, Mowinkel, previously mentioned, Karsten returned repeatedly to his criticisms of Widengren in reviews, books and articles, which call for a thorough analysis of his criticism. Therefore, the focus in this chapter is on the criticisms that Karsten voiced concerning Widengren’s *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung*.

Apart from addressing Karsten’s criticisms, our aim is also to analyse how Widengren and Karsten differed in their respective approaches to the study of religion, and more specifically

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<sup>2</sup> Some important exceptions are included in the chapters in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Geo Widengren, *Religionens värld. Religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> Geo Widengren, *Religionens ursprung* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1946).

<sup>5</sup> Geo Widengren, “Evolutionism and the Problem of the Origin of Religion,” *Ethnos*, Vol. 10, Nos. 2-3 (1945): 57–96.

<sup>6</sup> Geo Widengren, “Evolutionistische Theorien auf dem Gebiet der vergleichenden Religionswissenschaft,” in *Selbstverständnis und Wesen der Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Günther Lanczkowski (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 87–113.

to the importance of high gods and animism as the earliest stages of religion in human history. As our analysis unpacks the debate between Widengren and Karsten, it will be clear that their theories about high gods and animism offer two different, but in many ways similar and overlapping hypotheses about early religious history. Both explanations are also related to a discussion of evolutionism, a term that Karsten and Widengren understood differently and often used to label scholars with whom they disagreed.

Although we cannot go into his biographical details here, Karsten was an internationally renowned ethnologist and scholar of the study of religions, especially for his many books and articles on various aspects of religion based on his extensive field studies of Native Americans in South America.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Widengren, Karsten also had a strong interest in philosophy, as well as in the anthropology and sociology of religions. He was well prepared to discuss methodological issues that Widengren rarely addressed. In other words, Widengren was an archive and desktop scholar, whereas Karsten was a theoretician and a participant observer in the field. Whereas Widengren worked solely with texts, Karsten also included observations of human rituals and behaviour in real life.

Before analysing Karsten's criticisms of Widengren, we will provide a short presentation of Widengren's two books, *Religionens Värld* and *Religionens ursprung*. We will then continue by presenting Karsten's criticisms of Widengren before moving on to an analysis and contextualization of Karsten's and Widengren's positions on the origins of religion. The chapter closes with a conclusion.

### **Religionens värld: the background**

Even though *Religionens värld* was written as an introduction and textbook on the comparative study of religions, it is without doubt one of Widengren's best known and possibly also one of his most widely read books. With its three editions (1945, 1953 and 1971) and translations into German (1969), Spanish (1976) and Italian (1984), it made an impression on several generations of historians of religion, and not only in Sweden and the other Nordic countries.

The first edition of the book was published only five years after Widengren had been appointed Professor in the History of Religion and Psychology of Religion at Uppsala in 1940. From the

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<sup>7</sup> For a biography of Karsten, see Raili Gothóni and René Gothóni, *Rafael Karsten bland indianfolken i Sydamerika* (SFV:s biografiserie 15. Vasa: Svenska folkskolans vänner, 2018).

preface to the 1945 edition, we know that it was Widengren's aim to write a state-of-the-art introduction in Swedish that could be read by both university students and the general public. The textbook includes chapters on myth, magic, rituals, totemism, sacred kingship, the phenomenology of religion and high gods. Over time, it underwent major changes, the different editions containing new chapters, rewritten sections, fresh introductions and some sections that were excluded from the later editions.

Many of the references in *Religions värld* are to Widengren's own publications. It is fair to state that the various editions of the book mirror his own research and interests. Without assessing the value of this specific book – we will return to this topic when we deal with Karsten's criticisms – it is evident that most students at Uppsala read the book in one of its editions from 1945 up until Widengren's retirement in 1973.

Although we do not have any data casting light on if and in what ways *Religionens värld* was used as a textbook at universities apart from Uppsala,<sup>8</sup> its significance appears to have declined after Widengren's retirement. Nonetheless most if not all the contributors to this anthology testify to having read *Religionens värld* when they were fresh students and young scholars in the field of the History of Religions. It is therefore fair to say that the book and its specific outlook have had a great impact on how the History of Religions as an academic discipline was understood in the Nordic countries from the mid-1940s up until at least the mid-1970s.

When the book was first published in the mid-1940s, it stimulated several reviews in Swedish.<sup>9</sup> The overall impression is that *Religionens värld* was generally applauded as a groundbreaking study that should be read by anyone who wanted to take part in public debates about religion. In *Vår Lösen*, for instance, the reviewer Helge Ljungberg concluded:

The publication of *Religionens värld* is surely the most remarkable event in Swedish research in the History of Religion since Nathan Söderblom's work on the origin of the belief in God. The work is not popular science in a conventional sense – on the contrary, it is here and there rather laborious to find one's way

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<sup>8</sup> The central role that *Religionens värld* played in the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University from the mid-1940s can be substantiated via the so-called study handbooks that were given to new students. These study handbooks were called *Teologiska fakultetens studiehandboken gällande föreskrifter och studieplaner för fakultetens examina* and were printed on a regular (but not yearly) basis by Wretmans boktryckeri in Uppsala.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Alfred Haldar, "Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld," *Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift* (1945), 376–380, and Sven Rodhe, "Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalsskrift*, Häfte 4 (1945), 307–308.

through it – but the presentation throughout is clear and well arranged, and requires no previous knowledge of the history of religion. Everyone who at all wishes to discuss the basic questions in the history of religion first needs to make a thorough study of *Religionens värld*. Only then is he welcome to join the debate.<sup>10</sup>

Even though *Religionens värld* is presented as a textbook inspired by a phenomenological approach, it does not contain any references to continental philosophers like, for example, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) or Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Nor does Widengren include essential references to historians of religion like Gerardus van der Leuw (1890–1950) or theologians like Rudolph Otto (1869–1937) when he addresses issues under the heading of phenomenology. Instead, he focuses more on scholars like Edward O. James (1888–1972), associated with the British Myth and Ritual school, and historians of religion like Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959) and Claas Jouco Bleeker (1898–1983).<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the specific approach adopted in *Religionens Värld*, in 1942 Widengren had already published an article in the Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) Association’s journal, *Religion och Bibel*, in which he defines what he meant by this phenomenological approach to the study of religions. In this publication, he writes:

The phenomenology of religion is the study of religion in its different manifestations. It is on the contrary not a science of the manifestations of the religions. . . This is the line of demarcation between the history of religion and the phenomenology of religion. The history of religion in its narrow sense studies the life and evolution of individual religions, while phenomenology deals with religious life in all its phenomena, which may appear in one or the other religion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Helge, Ljungberg, “Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld,” *Vår Lösen*, Årg. 36, Nr. 6–7 (1945): 248-XX.

<sup>11</sup> On the influence of phenomenology on the history of religions, see, for instance, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, “The Phenomenology of Religion and Theories of Interpretation,” *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, Vol. 20 (2012), 26–39. For an outline of Widengren’s understanding of phenomenology, see, for instance, W.O. Carver, “Reflection on Geo Widengren’s phenomenological method,” *Scriptura*, 2 (1986), 21–39. Like Widengren, Pettazzoni and Bleeker played crucial roles in the foundation of the International Association for the Study of Religions (IAHR; until 1955 IASHR) and its journal *Numen*. See, for instance, Geovanni Casadio, “NVMEN, Brill and the IAHR in Their Early Years: Glimpses at Three Parallel Stories from an Italian Stance,” in *NVMEN, the Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR*, eds Armin Geertz and Tim Jensen (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016): 303-348. See also Jensen and Fujiwara’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Geo Widengren, “Religionshistoria och religionsfenomenologi,” *Religion och Bibel*, 1 årgången (1942): 21–25.

Without going into details, the difference between a so-called phenomenological approach and the “ordinary” historians of religion approach is a matter for discussion, something Widengren also admits. One could easily argue that the overarching aim of *Religionens värld* is to provide an overview of the history of religions and to create typologies for classifying and comparing religious phenomena. In order to do so it is necessary to make classifications and categories to sort out the different “phenomena” that, according to Widengren, belong to the category of religion.

Widengren’s heuristic method unfolds in the chapters in *Religionens värld* that deal with various topics or phenomena, such as magic, rituals and holiness. Like most other scholarly works in the History of Religions at that time, Widengren’s book does not contain any methodological discussion (see, for instance, Jan Hjärpe’s chapter in this volume). As a result, it is difficult if not impossible for the reader to evaluate which data were included in and excluded from the textbook. This weakness has perpetually evoked critical comments on *Religionens värld*, being among the points stressed by the Norwegian exegete and philologist Sigmund Mowinkel in his review of the book. Mowinkel wrote sarcastically that the selection process and analysis were unclear because they were driven by Widengren’s personal tastes and preferences, rather than by objective criteria and a thorough methodology.<sup>13</sup> The Finnish scholar Rafael Karsten voiced similar criticisms. Before we turn to his criticism, it is first necessary to say something about the book that Widengren wrote subsequently, *Religionens ursprung*.

### **Religionens ursprung: the background**

After the publication of *Religionens värld*, Widengren felt it necessary to defend himself against some of the criticisms he had received and to address the challenge presented by so-called evolutionist explanations in the History of Religions. The focus of this specific book is the origins of religion, a topic that was closely related to theories on topics such as *animism* and *mana*. Contrary to these theories, which Widengren dismissed as evolutionary hypotheses,

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<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Mowinkel, “Heime og ute: En ny religionsfenomenologi. Recension av Geo Widengren: Religionens värld,” *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift*, Hefte 1 (1946): 181–192.

Widengren proposed his own explanation for the origins of religion, namely the belief in a high god.

In his criticisms of what he regarded as evolutionist theories, it is clear that Widengren had been influenced by his teacher and supervisor Tor Andræ (1885–1947), a Swedish expert on Islam and specifically on the life of Muhammad (on Andræ's importance to Widengren, see Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). However, Widengren had also been influenced by the Russian-born American anthropologist and sociologist Alexander Goldenweiser (1880–1940), whom he frequently refers to in *Religionens ursprung*. Like Goldenweiser, Widengren was sceptical of what he considered to be static evolutionary schemas. Both believed that historical and anthropological studies had clearly demonstrated the impossibility of defending evolutionist explanations.

Instead of stressing the uniformity and parallelism of evolutionism (i.e. that all cultures have to pass through the same developmental stages and must evolve in similar ways), it was necessary to take into account the contradictions, internal variations and importance of outer forces when assessing cultural developments. It is elucidating to read Goldenweiser's belief that one academic guild had been more or less immune to evolutionist theories, namely the historians. For Widengren, history and philology were fundamental and indispensable cornerstones of all solid academic work, and it is therefore likely that he appreciated Goldenweiser's conclusions on this matter. On this specific point, Goldenweiser claimed that:

Of all social scientists the historian proved most nearly immune to evolutionism, for they knew the facts. They were accustomed to deal with series of successive events, and as their experience did not tally with evolutionism, they proceeded for the most part to ignore it. Had the evolutionists been historians rather than amateur anthropologists, the classical theory of social evolution would probably not have progressed beyond its early phases.<sup>14</sup>

In line with the quotation above, criticism of evolutionism became the central theme of Widengren's *Religionens ursprung*. As noted earlier, this book was first written as a lengthy essay in English, published in the Swedish journal *Ethnos*. Later he translated it into Swedish

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<sup>14</sup> Goldenweiser, Alexander, "Evolution, Social," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931, 661.



to challenge the evolutionist theories that, he felt, had become popular among Swedish scholars. In all its complexity it is, among other things, a fierce attack on Professor Martin P:son Nilsson and his study of classical religions in ancient Greece.<sup>15</sup>

In *Religionens ursprung*, Widengren accused Nilsson of advocating the theory that all civilizations have evolved according to a static schema ascending from the lowest to the highest. According to Widengren, theoreticians like Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) and Sir James Frazer (1854–1941), who base their readings of the past explicitly or implicitly on evolutionist schema, have had a devastating impact on a number of scholars, including in the Nordic countries. Widengren argues that those who advocate a static transition from the lowest to the highest and who hold that all civilizations must go through the same stages to develop and evolve have missed the complexity that also exists within and among so-called primitive civilizations.

While labelling several international and Nordic scholars evolutionists, especially for their attempts to find the earliest stages of religion known to humankind, Widengren proposes his own conception of the origin of religion. According to him, it is the belief in a high god that is the earliest and optimum explanation for all religions coming into being, and not contemporary theories involving, for instance, magic, mana or animism.<sup>16</sup> In his presentation of the evolution of religion, and specifically of belief in a god, Widengren argues for a three-stage evolution from a belief in a high god to pantheism and polytheism, and then on to monotheism.

The evolutionists, on the other hand, conceived of religion as evolving from animism to polytheism and then in some cases to monotheism. The three-stage structure of these different versions is more or less the same. The crucial difference lies in the content of the structure, namely whether the origins of religion can be found in belief in a high god or in a beliefs in spirits. The fact that his own suggestion (i.e. the high god theory) also can be read as a form of evolutionism in that it claims that a belief in a high god exists among all religious traditions did not strike Widengren as a problem. This is obviously one of the major weaknesses in *Religionens ursprung*, which Widengren's critics also noticed.

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<sup>15</sup> The conflict between Widengren and Nilsson is present in the correspondence between Pettazzoni and Widengren, see Letter 31-33 included in the appendix of this volume.

<sup>16</sup> On this matter, see, for instance, Göran Larsson, "It's Not Mana, It's High Gods! Another Conceptual History or Another Explanation, but a Similar Problem," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 21, Issue 4–5 (2019): 447–456.

## Straw men and weak methods: Karsten's criticism

As previously noted, Widengren's *Religionens ursprung* could easily be read as a full-blown attack on a number of Nordic and international scholars. Most of those whom Widengren addressed in this particular publication had died long before the book was published, and those who were alive did not care to reply, irrespective of the fact that the original text was first published in English and then translated into German.

As far as we know, neither the English article in *Ethnos* nor the German essay provoked any debates outside of the Nordic countries. They are rarely if ever quoted in studies of evolutionism or the History of Religions. Compared to the English and German editions, however, some responses were ventured by Nordic scholars, notably by the Finnish Rafael Karsten, at that time Professor of Practical Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki.

From our previous discussion it should come as no surprise that Widengren and Karsten completely disagreed on how to explain the origin of religion. According to Widengren, Karsten was among those scholars who argued that, in the earliest civilizations, the only form of religion was a belief in spirits, which in some cases was then elevated into a belief in gods. Consequently, Karsten positioned himself as a follower of Tylor and his animistic theory, thereby neglecting the function of a high god among the so-called "primitive civilizations", precisely the area of research Widengren considered his field of speciality.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, as we shall argue, Karsten was not impressed by either Widengren's research or his explanations.

Whereas we know that Widengren had already made an acquaintance with Karsten's theories and explanations as a student under the guidance of Tor Andrae at Stockholms högskola in the 1930s,<sup>18</sup> Karsten first showed an interest in Widengren's research when he reviewed the books *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung* in a lengthy essay published in *Finsk Tidskrift* (1947).<sup>19</sup> In his book *Stridsfrågor inom den moderna sociologin och religionsvetenskapen*,

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<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Geo Widengren, *Hottgottglauben im alten Iran. Eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets årsskrift 1938:6).

<sup>18</sup> Geo Widengren, *Tor Andrae* (Uppsala: J. A. Lindblads förlag, 1947), 159.

<sup>19</sup> Rafael Karsten, "Modern nordisk religionsvetenskap," *Finsk Tidskrift*, 141:1 (1947): 15–30.

published later the same year, he further elaborates and clarifies three critical comments on Widengren's work, namely his anti-evolutionist attitude, his conception of indigenous people's belief in high gods and his theory of the origin of religion.<sup>20</sup>

To understand Karsten's fierce criticisms of Widengren's two books, one needs to know that the evolutionist and anti-theological position had been a cornerstone right from the beginning of his academic career. His quest at the very end of his essay clearly reflects his own vantage point. He asks:

...how long will it take before the study of religions is relieved from the tutelage of theology, before it will evolve into a positive science of [empirical] experiences, where theories are elaborated on the basis of real ethnological and historical knowledge, according to a critical method and above all – without any tendency.<sup>21</sup>

Given this attitude, it is not surprising that Karsten dismisses the quality of Widengren's books. Indeed, he gives them no credit at all as scholarly works and belittles them as belonging to the genre of popular science or even normative theology.

According to Karsten, Widengren's anti-evolutionist position is outdated and biased. For instance, Widengren had neglected to pay attention to contemporary research on evolutionist theories that pleaded for more nuanced descriptions of human evolution. Therefore, Karsten disparaged him for selecting only those theories that suited his purpose and argued that Widengren had failed to live up to his own criteria for qualitative research. According to Karsten, Widengren's presentations also suffer from weak and unclear definitions, making it hard for any reader to understand the arguments. Karsten writes:

Let us take a closer look at what Widengren means by 'evolutionism'. In the first chapter of *Religionens ursprung* he tries to answer this question, but the answer is so completely perplexing that it is obvious that the author did not really know himself what he meant by that word. The picture Widengren paints of the phenomenon is strangely bewildered and contradictory. With a free hand he draws the ghost of 'evolutionism' on the wall and then attacks his own imaginary picture without asking who is really hit by

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<sup>20</sup> Rafael Karsten, *Stridsfrågor inom den moderna sociologien och religionsvetenskapen* (Helsingfors: Söderström 1947): 83–123.

<sup>21</sup> Karsten, "Modern nordisk", 30.

this criticism, and apparently without realizing that he himself, or the school he represents, is struck thereby.<sup>22</sup>

According to Karsten, Widengren confines himself to referring to scholars who support his own reading of the history of humankind, rather than addressing scholars and theories that argue a different conclusion with the aim of finding better arguments for his own theories. By revealing Widengren's eclectic reading, Karsten dismisses him as a serious scholar and denounces him for creating a false straw man that suits his own purposes. He concludes:

In his criticisms, Widengren completely disregards the concept of 'evolutionism' [and] embraces the conviction that in the early history of humankind an evolution from lower to higher stages took place embodying a number of different and highly divergent trends of opinion. To lump all advocates of the theory of evolution together will simply not do. Therefore, Widengren's controversy over the evolutionists' main points is merely a waste of effort.<sup>23</sup>

However, to understand Karsten's review of Widengren's books, one also needs to acknowledge his disappointment that Widengren almost totally ignored his own studies, *The Origin of Worship: A Study of Primitive Religion* (1905) and *Inledning till religionsvetenskapen* (1928). Karsten's doctoral thesis, *The Origins of Worship*, is based on an extensive reading of studies on the origins of religion at the British Library in 1903 and 1904. During these formative years, Karsten adopted his evolutionist standpoint from his teacher and mentor Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939). The fact that Widengren wanted to free himself from what he considered "rigid evolutionistic schema" was like a red rag to a bull for Karsten:

In his work *Religionens ursprung*, where Widengren is pleased to mention my name only in passing, he gives me to understand that my conception of primitive religion belongs to the past, is utterly out of date, and is already for that reason hardly worth anyone's attention.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Karsten, *Stridsfrågor*, 101–102.

<sup>23</sup> Karsten, *Stridsfrågor*, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Karsten, "Modern nordisk", 16–17.

According to Karsten, it is apparent that Widengren's anti-evolutionist position originates from his Catholic colleague Pater Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), whose thesis on the “primitive High God” is simply a variation on the perpetually re-emerging nineteenth-century theory of a primitive monotheism.<sup>25</sup> When Widengren was a doctoral student, he attended the Olaus Petri lectures given by Schmidt in 1936. Later, in his biography of his supervisor Tor Andrae, he testified that Schmidt's lectures were of great importance for him. It is no surprise, then, that Schmidt is mentioned in *Religionens värld*.<sup>26</sup>

Yet another characteristic feature of Widengren's study is that he does not present any arguments of his own, but confines himself to referring to other scholars, especially Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and his so-called comparative method, also used by his followers, according to Karsten.

Moreover, Karsten discloses a link between anti-evolutionism and the theologians' antipathy towards studying the religions of the world in that they conceive of the concept of evolution mainly in relation to Darwin's ideas. Here again we find Schmidt's hypothesis of stages (*Stufen*), which have evolved uniformly in the various cultures from lower to higher, more or less according to a uniform schema, according to Karsten.

From the history of ideas, we know that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a relentless search for the origins of various phenomena. Naturally, the theologians sought for the origins of monotheism, which, according to Karsten, resulted in their favourite theory of the monotheistic high god. Contrary to the conceptions of Schmidt, Widengren and the school of cultural history, Karsten argues that no indigenous people, culture or religion has survived in its original form. Modern science now calculates the ascent of humans and religions much further back in prehistorical time. Even the most “primitive” people have a long history. Consequently, Karsten argues that it is absurd to think that culture and religious beliefs have survived unchanged over hundreds of thousands of years.<sup>27</sup>

This is one of the reasons why Karsten, in his study *The Origins of Religion* (1935), reluctantly uses the word “primitive”. To his disappointment, Widengren does not even mention this study in his books, where Karsten thoroughly analysed Robert R. Marett's (1866–1943) “pre-animistic” concept of *mana* in the context of Native Americans in South America. Karsten

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<sup>25</sup> Rafael Karsten, “Teorin om >>urmonoteismen<<,” *Finsk Tidskrift* 141:1(1948): 254-255.

<sup>26</sup> Widengren, *Tor*, 199.

<sup>27</sup> Karsten, “Modern nordisk”, 24.

concludes that the *mana* concept is based on a theory of pre-animism, though there is no ethnological material to support this hypothesis.

Besides his criticisms of Widengren's theoretical suggestions, based on his own anthropological research, Karsten did not find any evidence to confirm Widengren's notion of belief in a high god. Karsten is mightily surprised when Widengren states that:

Furthermore, as a religious-historical phenomenon, the belief in a celestial god is a characteristic of a myriad of historically given religions. In fact, this phenomenon is so universal that in many places in this phenomenon one sees the essential content of all faith in God at certain undeveloped stages.<sup>28</sup>

No wonder, then, that Karsten disagrees with Widengren's statements that the origin of most if not all religions is a belief in a high god. According to Karsten, there is only one explanation for Widengren emphasizing this hypothesis – he is a crypto-theologian. Resembling the ideas of the Catholic scholar Wilhelm Schmidt, who had a decisive influence on a number of scholars in Uppsala, especially after his Olaus Petri Lectures, the belief in high gods fits nicely with a belief in Christianity as the highest religion. The theologians preferred this explanation because it gave them an opportunity to defend their own belief in God and to criticize Tylor's animism, which was regarded an attack on belief in God.<sup>29</sup> Karsten writes:

Nearly all movements and schools have their own fixed ideas and special favourite dogmas, which are often difficult to combat. This seems to be especially characteristic amongst theologians who study religions. In their studies, they assume certain dogmatic presumptions, for one thing because they have grave difficulties in liberating themselves from their inclination to apply theological viewpoints to questions that explicitly concern historians of religion. When the current [chair of] the History of Religion, as is the case in Sweden, is in the Faculty of Theology, it is an out-dated arrangement that does not at all redound to the study of religion.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Widengren, *Religionens värld*, 57–58.

<sup>29</sup> Cf., Larsson, "It's Not mana"

<sup>30</sup> Karsen, *Stridsfrågor*, 132.

Karsten elaborates on the issue of the existence of a high god further and claims that, if Widengren had only taken into consideration Karsten's own book *The Origins of Religion*, he would not have written that:

...the serious mistake made by the advocates of animism is that they have entirely neglected the role the form of belief in a personal god we call belief in a high god has played already in the oldest cultures.<sup>31</sup>

According to Karsten, there is no evidence that belief in a high god played the vital role the advocates of a pre-monotheistic stage had argued. For instance, there are no sources supporting the notion that the Finno-Ugric peoples or the Native Americans believed in a high god as a universal intercultural category, two research fields that Karsten had studied in detail. To make a strong contribution to the study of religions, a scholar would need to be able to read literature not only in Oriental languages, German, French and in English, but also in languages such as Portuguese and Spanish. Moreover, the scholar should be familiar with the religions of the Finno-Ugric and other North Asian peoples, which also presupposes a knowledge of the literature in Finnish and Russian.

Given his linguistic background, Karsten could easily show that Widengren had not paid enough attention to sources written in Finnish or Russian, nor to those in Spanish or Portuguese, two languages that Karsten had mastered in his own field studies in South America. His critical comment may seem somewhat childish – “I know more languages than you do”. However, Widengren had often somewhat arrogantly referred to his own philological knowledge when he criticized other scholars for lacking the necessary language skills. One example of this argument is Widengren's harsh criticism of Thede Palm's (1907–1995) thesis *Wendische Kultstätten: Quellenkritische Untersuchungen zu den letzten Jahrhunderten Slavischen Heidentums* of 1937. In his evaluation of this work, he wrote:

The author from Lund is not a Slavist but has in any case achieved a good collection of material, which can serve as a starting point for future research. In principle, one must otherwise distance oneself from the previously abundant method of religious historians entering areas where they lack philological training.

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<sup>31</sup> Karsten, “Modern nordisk”, 26–27.

Such breaking-free strolls have caused a great deal of inconvenience and burdened research with unnecessary hypotheses.<sup>32</sup>

The attitude in the quotation above may have provoked Karsten to point out that all scholars have their shortcomings. Nevertheless, Karsten had acquired genuine and thorough insights into the beliefs of Indian tribes in South America due to his many periods of fieldwork in that continent. That was certainly one of the main reasons for his fierce criticisms of Widengren: he had acquired knowledge of the field through his personal encounters and ethnographic fieldwork, experiences that Widengren lacked.

### **Defence, counter-attacks by proxy and even deeper resentments: analysing the debate**

Widengren never replied to Karsten's fierce and provocative criticisms, although he was surely aware of the review of his books in *Finsk Tidsskrift*, which appeared only two years after the publication of *Religionens värld*. Nevertheless, it is likely that Karsten's criticism was painful for Widengren. Apart from considering himself a historian of religion who was competent to undertake a comparative phenomenological study, Widengren often stressed his own knowledge of languages and criticised other scholars for their weaknesses in philology and the necessary languages.

Instead of Widengren, it was his friend and colleague Helmer Ringgren (1917–2012) who tried his best to defend Widengren in a reply also published in *Finsk Tidsskrift* in 1948.<sup>33</sup> In this short apology, he applauds Karsten for raising important questions, but considers him to be wrong in attacking Widengren's language skills and the theory of the high god. For instance, Ringgren stresses that Widengren knew Persian – a language mastered by neither Karsten nor Ringgren himself – and as a result surely knew his subject.

This response was odd, since Karsten never argued that Widengren do not know Persian or other oriental languages. On the contrary, Karsten's main and only argument is that Widengren's arguments were not supported by the sources that relate to North and South

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<sup>32</sup> Geo Widengren, "Det senaste decenniets religionshistoriska forskning i Sverige," *Ord & Bild* (1945), 561.

<sup>33</sup> Helmer Ringgren, "Religionshistoriska stridsfrågor," *Finsk Tidsskrift* 3 (1948): 132–139.



America and the Finno-Ugric and other North Asian peoples. To know Persian or other Oriental languages does not, according to Karsten, justify general statements about all religions.

Furthermore, it is also clear that Ringgren shares Widengren's argument that we have good reasons to claim that the earliest and oldest belief in a religion is belief in a high god, although no new facts, arguments or evidence is provided to substantiate this statement. To Ringgren, it seems to be enough simply to say that a belief in a high god is most likely the origin of all religions. This theory (or hypothesis) does not require any empirical support if we are to agree with Ringgren and Widengren.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Karsten dismisses Ringgren's reply. For Karsten, Ringgren is best described as a faithful disciple who is trying to defend his teacher out of loyalty. In other words, Ringgren's reply to Karsten was a defence by proxy. However, we know of no data indicating that Widengren encouraged Ringgren to respond to Karsten's criticism.

Leaving aside Ringgren's reply, it is evident that Widengren and Karsten evaluated their earlier studies on evolutionism differently. While Widengren relied on a number of scholars associated with the British Myth and Ritual school – like, for example, James, Arthur M. Hocart (1883–1939) and Samuel Henry Hooke (1874–1968) – and American anthropologists like Robert H. Lowie (1883–1957) and Goldenweiser, Karsten was genuinely suspicious of these scholars and their explanations.

Although we have not been able to find any evidence of a personal conflict between Karsten and Widengren, it seems that Karsten was upset at the Swedish scholar having neglected him and that his name was only mentioned as a sloppy scholar who believed in the theory of animism. Initially, it seems that the conflict between Widengren and Karsten was only a conflict between two male professors with strong egos, but on closer examination it is fair to suggest that Widengren had a tendency to pay more attention to theories and scholars who supported his readings and explanations, and hence boosted his own ideas, than to his sceptics and critics. Perhaps Karsten saw this more clearly than most scholars at that time did. He had been trained in both the human and social sciences, especially in anthropological and sociological methods and theories. For Karsten, Widengren may have represented an outdated approach to the study of religions that belonged to the past.

Even though Karsten's criticisms of Widengren's books were unforgiving, they were not personal. Ever since his early years at the University of Helsinki, Karsten had fought to free

the study of religions from the chains and prejudices of theology.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, it is evident that from the very beginning he adopted a critical attitude towards Widengren, who was then the holder of the Chair in the History of Religions and Psychology of Religions in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Uppsala. In Karsten's view, the Chair of the Study of Religions should have been in the Faculty of Arts, not the Faculty of Theology.<sup>35</sup> This was a matter of principle, and of the existence of the study of religions as an independent discipline. For Karsten, it is likely that Widengren was seen as a representative of the Faculty of Theology, rather than a professor of religious studies.

With this in mind, it is understandable why Karsten disagreed with Widengren regarding the significance of a high god as the earliest stage of religion: his own field research did not support such an interpretation, and the theoretical underpinnings of this theory were seen as a defence of monotheism as the original religion (i.e., it was seen as a kind of *Ur-monotheismus*). Contrary to Widengren, Karsten's studies of the lives and beliefs of Native Americans in South America suggest that a belief in spirits was the earliest form of religion.

Karsten's own field materials confirmed Tylor's theory of animism and contradicted Widengren's hypothesis that the origin of religion was a belief in a high god. Therefore, it is wrong to argue that he blindly accepted the theory of animism as the earliest form of religion: his own research confirmed this notion. It is also evident that Karsten had a negative attitude towards theology, and from this point of view it was surely easier for him to accept Tylor's theories.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, Karsten believed that there was a connection between the theological atmosphere in Widengren's Department of Theology at Uppsala University and his conception of a high god. This link was unacceptable to Karsten. Ever since 1925, he had been firm in criticizing his colleagues, first Westermarck, and then Eirik Hornborg (1879–1965), Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), Wolfgang von Hagen (1908–1985), Thor Heyerdahl (1914–2002),

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<sup>34</sup> In his formative years Karsten had also studied theology for a year, mainly to satisfy his mother's wishes and to be able to argue with the theologians. Thereafter, he continued his studies of religion in the Faculty of Arts, supervised by none other than Edvard Westermarck.

<sup>35</sup> This model was also introduced at the Uppsala university and Carl-Martin Edsman was appointed as the first professor at the Faculty of Philosophy (Humanities), see Larsson's opening chapter to this volume. It goes without saying that Widengren was very negative to this solution.

<sup>36</sup> On Tylor and theology, see Timothy Larsen, "E.B. Tylor, religion and anthropology," *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 46:3 (2013): 476–485.

Wilhelm Kopper (1886–1961) and Wilhelm Schmidt, for their theological preferences, theoretical weaknesses and scientific errors. Eventually, his undiplomatic attitude in his relations with other scholars made him an outsider within Finnish academic circles.<sup>37</sup> From this perspective, Widengren was just one of many colleagues whom Karsten criticized and with whom he eventually ended all contact.

Despite their differences, it is also possible to identify several similarities between Karsten and Widengren. Like Karsten, Widengren also fell out with several colleagues and was over-critical of theological explanations (on this matter, see Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). It is therefore surprising that Karsten and Widengren did not see these similarities and cooperated.

However, on the level of the various academic disciplines, we should not forget that in the 1940s new disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology and the history of religions as a subject separate from theology were introduced in Sweden and Finland. One consequence of his long periods of fieldwork in South America was that Karsten had not been able to take part in planning the introduction of these new disciplines. Therefore, by the time Karsten returned to Finland, the country had become independent, and newly elected professors were defining their disciplines in accordance with modern international trends. In this process, Karsten became an outsider.

Compared to Karsten, Widengren rather benefitted from the academic changes that took place from the 1940s onwards, and his own professorship was a break with his predecessors' (i.e., Nathan Söderblom and Tor Andrae) connections to the Church of Sweden. Although we should not turn to psychological explanations, this development had an impact on Karsten's personal psychology. Over the years he grew quick to take offence. He was constantly defensive in protecting criticisms of his own research and of the discipline of the study of religions itself. This is the context in which Karsten chose to criticize Widengren's books, *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung*.

That said, we need to remind ourselves that, although Widengren could be hard on others, he was also sensitive to criticisms of his own works. Unlike Karsten, he often met substantial criticism with silence or by holding on to his own cherished ideas and conclusions. It is hard to tell whether or not this was a conscious strategy that was common in Uppsala and Helsinki at the time, but it is nonetheless a factor that has had a negative effect on the legacy of the study of religions. Instead of paying attention to methodological issues, theoretical insights, critical

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<sup>37</sup> Gothóni and Gothóni, *Rafael*, 241 ff.

objections and new scientific results that contradicted their respective earlier conclusions, both Karsten and Widengren refused to let go of their own ideas and their boosted egos.

## **Conclusions**

In analysing Rafael Karsten's critical remarks on Geo Widengren's two publications, *Religionens värld* and *Religionens ursprung*, we have uncovered certain theoretical and methodological differences between this Finnish and this Swedish scholar of religions.

As a scholar, Karsten had conducted ethnographic field studies, while Widengren had remained a so-called armchair scholar. From Karsten's critical remarks, it is obvious that he regarded Widengren as a flawed scholar who suffered from several important methodological weaknesses. For instance, instead of assessing the available sources and the most recent findings in the study of religions, Widengren desperately clung on to his favourite convictions. One case in point is Widengren's critical attitude towards evolutionist perspectives. According to Karsten, his criticisms were basically inaccurate, because they rested on outdated conceptions that belonged to the nineteenth century, rather than on the latest studies.

Widengren was unwilling to see that his suggestion of a belief in high gods as the earliest form of religious belief in human history is also a kind of evolutionism and a defence of the so-called *Urmonotheismus*, i.e. the earliest form of monotheism. In his criticisms, Karsten even accuses Widengren of being a "crypto-theologian" in disguise and claimed that his theory was in effect a defence of Wilhelm Schmidt's theologically motivated research programme. Although the criticism is justified on several points, it is unlikely that Widengren was a crypto-theologian. On the contrary, he often stressed the necessity of making a distinction between personal faith and the study of religions (see, for instance, Hjärpe's chapter in this volume). There is no evidence that Widengren was a believer in religion of any kind.

Leaving aside this scholarly debate, there are also personal similarities between Karsten and Widengren. Both had strong egos, were self-confident and were not afraid of voicing their opinions on any matter. Consequently, they had no problem attracting enemies both within and outside academia. Without exaggerating their personal traits, it is something of a mystery why Widengren never responded officially to Karsten's polemical and aggressive critique. Widengren's strategy seems to have been to ignore the criticism and to carry on his research with even greater passion. Instead of embracing the critique and assessing its validity, which we would argue is the only sound academic approach to criticism, he decided not to respond at

all. It is unclear whether this was a conscious strategy or not, but it might be one of the reasons why Widengren's importance declined so rapidly after his retirement from Uppsala University in 1973.

To some extent, Widengren's retirement can be seen as the end of a golden era in the history of religions in Sweden. However, if we truly want to learn from the past (if indeed that is possible), Widengren's way of handling criticism reminds us that academic work and research are a cumulative process, not a one-man show. Instead of viewing criticism as personal failure, criticism is the nerve that drives future research and ensures that we acquire more solid and better knowledge about both the past and the present.

We all know it can be devastating to see one's cherished ideas being ripped apart, but that is the beauty of being a scientist and an academic scholar. If we are not prepared to accept criticism, our work has to some extent been pointless because it has not contributed to the cumulative learning we identify with science and scholarship. Future generations of scholars in the field of the studies of religions must therefore learn to live with criticism and to present their research so it can be tested by other scholars. In our view this is one of the most important lessons we can learn from Karsten's and Widengren's quite futile academic skirmishes.

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