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GEO WIDENGREN ON SYNCRETISM:
ON PARSING UPPSALA METHODOLOGICAL
TENDENCIES*

BY

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"I do not think that I ever ran the risk of being classified as a specialist in syncretism, but it has been of great interest to me to see how far my work could be said to be useful to the study of syncretism."

Geo Widengren

Strictly speaking, I am not an historian of religion. Consequently, my contribution to the subject, unlike most other contributions, will not be based on textual studies, philological analysis, or even on recent archaeological findings. My interests are different. Trusting the truth of Thomas Kuhn's observations regarding the functions of paradigms in scientific research¹⁾, and Pierre Thévenaz' contention that revolutions in thought come more from methodological than from substantive innovations²⁾, I am interested in certain approaches to religious studies that have been fostered recently in Scandinavia, and particularly at Uppsala and Lund. Aspiring to become something of an historian of the history of religion, I am suggesting that much can be learned by studying the traditions of scholarship by which the field has been formed. In addition, being of Swedish descent on my mother's side, my interest in Scandinavian religious self-consciousness, whether

*) This paper is an elaboration of remarks made in a symposium in honor of Professor Geo Widengren of Uppsala University, hosted by the Institute of Religious Studies of the University of California, Santa Barbara, April 21-22, 1972, and held at the Franciscan Mission in Santa Barbara. Its author is Director of the Institute. In revised form the paper will be included in the volume of Proceedings of the Symposium, edited by Birger A. Pearson, entitled *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity. Conversations in Honor of Geo Widengren*.

1) Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

2) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?*, trans. James M. Edie, Charles Courtney, Paul Brockelman (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), p. 38.

tutored or not, is probably part of my own strategy for probing those questions of religious identity which continue to fascinate me. Thus, in turning my attention to Scandinavian traditions of scholarship, I move as one who hopes to identify some of his own religious and cultural roots; and, in doing this in connection with a symposium on the thought and work of Professor Geo Widengren, I am giving tacit recognition to the assumption that Professor Widengren is a self-conscious practitioner of certain deep-seated Scandinavian dispositional factors³). I suspect that these factors register as much in scholarly fields as they do in literature, the arts, certain branches of the social sciences, and even in religious enthusiasms.

The assumption I want to test has to do with the presence of paradigms in the formation of scholarly approaches to a subject and in the cultivation of intellectual positions. To put the matter less exactly, there is a certain style that becomes evident when one surveys the approaches employed in religious studies in Scandinavia—for our purposes, particularly in Sweden. This style is implicit both in methodological stances and in the tenor of historical investigations. I do not pretend to be able to identify its source, but I believe one can go some distance toward identifying a few of the ingredients in its morphology. That it exhibits coherence—that it is, in fact, a style—is indicated by its ability to operate effectively in several different but related fields. For example, I suspect that the way in which the Lundensian theologian and philosopher, Anders Nygren, employs motif-research is methodologically congruent with the way in which some historians of religion at Uppsala University have approached “divine-kingship ideology”, and that both of these resonate very well with the dominant current manner of doing philosophy in the two institutions⁴). The interest

3) The precedent on which this presumption is based is Professor Widengren's continuing attempt to recapitulate the best in Uppsala scholarship in his own research. His writings also give evidence of deep interest in interpreting Scandinavian scholarship to others throughout the world. See, for example, his essay “Theological Studies and Research,” in *Ergo International* (Uppsala: 1964), and the comprehensive essay „Die Religionswissenschaftliche Forschung in Skandinavien in den letzten zwanzig Jahren,” in *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*. Vol. V (1953), pp. 193-221 and 320-334.

4) Anders Nygren, *Religiöst Apriori* (Lund: Gleerupska, 1921); „Det Religionsfilosofiska Grundproblemet,” in *Bibelforskaren*. Vol. XXVI (1919), pp. 290-313; *Filosofi och Motivforskning* (Stockholm: 1940); „Dogmatikens Vetenskapliga Grundläggning,” in *Lunds Universitets Årsskrift*. Vol. XVII, No. 8 (1921); and *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1957).

in descriptive accounts, in motifs, modes, and studies of themes, has become increasingly characteristic of twentieth-century Swedish approaches in religious studies. That is, whether one looks at philosophy of religion, history of religion, certain examples of systematic theology, or even at philosophical analyses, he can detect some common methodological features⁵). It is in this sense that I speak of a distinctive style of reflection.

But, before pursuing that topic directly, I find it necessary to supply some information about the genesis of the symposium in honor of Professor Widengren for which occasion these remarks were originally prepared. Such information will be useful, I believe, in helping to establish the framework within which symposium discussion occurred, as well as the "program strategy" which the planners inserted into its format. It is also germane to my subject.

5) In addition to some of the references already cited, the following essays provide helpful background material on developments within the academic fields cited in Scandinavian centers of learning: Robert T. Sandin, "The Founding of the Uppsala School," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. XXIII, No. 4 (1962), pp. 496-512; Erik Ryding, *Den svenska filosofins historia* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1959); "Scandinavian Philosophy" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), Vol. VII, p. 294-302, prepared by Justus Hartnack; and Widengren's two-part article, "Die Religionswissenschaftliche Forschung in Skandinavien in den letzten zwanzig Jahren," already cited.

Significantly, the standard Scandinavian textbooks on the history of philosophy look very much like standard European textbooks on the history of philosophy: an inordinate amount of attention is not given to developments within Scandinavian schools. Anders Wedberg's *Filosofins Historia* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1966) incorporates Scandinavian tendencies in the evaluation of schools and trends which originate elsewhere, although it also gives large place to positivistic and analytical philosophical trends including Scandinavian investments in these traditions.

Certain background factors can also be detected in Thor Hall, *A Framework for Faith. Lundensian Theological Methodology in the Thought of Ragnar Brinç* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), especially pp. 13-33, although Hall concentrates on developments in theology and philosophy of religion. Nygren himself goes into these matters in some detail in his new book, *Meaning and Method. Prolegomena to a Scientific Philosophy of Religion and a Scientific Theology*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

Nygren's successor at Lund, Gustaf Wingren, has prepared two useful survey-discussions of the recent development of theological trends in Sweden: "The Main Lines of Development in Systematic Theology and Biblical Interpretation in Scandinavia," published by the Library, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, 1964, and "Swedish Theology Since 1900," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Vol. IX, No. 2 (1956), pp. 113-134.

In terms of the intentions of its sponsor, the Institute of Religious Studies of the University of California, Santa Barbara, the symposium was the third in a series of conferences on eminent living scholars who have made a distinctive contribution to the arts, sciences, and humanities and have been particularly influential in giving shape and direction to the scholarly study of religion. From its beginnings in 1967, the Institute has shown particular interest in "breakthrough models" of interdisciplinary research in religion. Thus, a symposium series on the work of persons who have broken new methodological ground became a natural product of an ongoing attempt to trace the genesis of "breakthrough" in man's expanding comprehension of the role assigned to religious factors in the composition of selected cultures. Informally, the Institute has been referring to these symposia by the rubric "catalytic figures". With such phraseology it means to emphasize that the persons whose work is being studied, discussed, and assessed have made a contribution to the field of religious comprehension that far transcends the mere accumulation of new or otherwise extensive information. In every case, the "catalytic figure" in question generated a lively interest within the field by prompting a new pattern of arrangement. Georges Dumézil's tripartite approach to Indo-European mythology is a significant example of this, and gave the series its inaugural meeting⁶). Erik Erikson's work with the human life cycle, his concentration on relationships between the ego and society, and the implication of the advent of psycho-history for the study of religion, provided another eminent instance which the Institute was privileged to treat⁷). The same combination of achievements was implicit in the work of Geo Widengren, whose studies in a wide variety of subjects are recognized as being landmarks within several branches of the history of religions.

And yet, the designers of the symposium encountered organizational

6) The proceedings from this symposium are forthcoming in a book entitled *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (The Proceedings of the Dumézil Symposium), edited by Gerald J. Larson, to be published by University of California Press, 1973.

7) The proceedings of this symposium are being prepared for publication by Professors Donald Capps of the University of Chicago, M. Gerald Bradford of Brigham Young University, and Walter H. Capps of the University of California, Santa Barbara. The editors expect that the book will be published by University of California Press under the title *Historical Interpretation and Religious Biography*.

difficulties because of Professor Widengren's persistent lifetime campaign against simplistic, reductionistic identification with methodological labels and scholastic slogans. He has taken pains to point out, for example, that he really is not an unqualified "divine kingship" advocate, whatever that turns out to be. Similarly he is something more than an "anti-evolutionist" in the comprehension and interpretation of man's religious history. Moreover, his work cannot be reduced to a scholar's personal compulsion to trace down every example of "belief in high gods", the scope of that inquiry being restricted to the ancient near eastern world. Thus, he is not this easy to type. His contribution to the morphology of the field cannot be accounted for quickly, because the significance of his studies is not automatically classifiable. As I have described his career in another place:

Trained under Professor Tor Andrae (whom he has succeeded at Uppsala) in the history of religion, and thoroughly trained in philological skills, Widengren has conducted extensive and painstaking research in a wide range of areas. His dissertation in 1936 dealt with Babylonian and Israelite religions as self-contained entities. He has also done significant work in Iranian religions, Islam, the Old Testament, and Gnostic studies. Widengren has championed sacral kingship theory, influencing Ivan Engnell, the author of *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*. Because of the times in which he has lived, Widengren has also inherited an interest in the evolution of religion, and, more particularly, the theory of the "high God" as advocated by Wilhelm Schmidt. Against Schmidt he rejects the notion of a primitive monotheism, but with Pettazzoni (whose theories he has embellished) Widengren attributes particular power to the sky-god. As an heir to the evolutionist traditions from the days of Frazer, Widengren is also a very severe critic. ... From another side, he also registers as a phenomenologist of religion (witness his book *Religionsphänomenologie*). However, if he were asked to typify his approach, Widengren might reply that he identifies most readily with those who approach religion through sound and thorough philological studies of primary textual materials, regardless of the area or the subject under scrutiny⁸).

And yet, this description tends to beg the question. Geo Widengren has been something far more than a diligent, painstaking, persistent, and meticulous worker on "inside problems" within the field of the history of religions. He has also been a very conscious designer and articulator of the field's contours and configurations. What he has achieved is not exhausted by the impressive array of materials he has

8) Walter H. Capps, *Ways of Understanding Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 119.

amassed, classified, cross-referenced, and interpreted. These achievements, by themselves, are more than sufficient to justify the almost incomparable reputation Widengren now enjoys among historians of religions. But he has done far more. And that something more, we recognize, has much to do with his catalytic influence upon the shape of the field of study.

But the planners of the symposium didn't have the mechanism to coerce access to Widengren's larger contribution. To be sure, they had hints and suggestions about potential symposium programs through which the distinguishing *sine qua non* might emerge, all of the time recognizing that the emergence of a *sine qua non* cannot be programmed. They recognized too that symposia are never very predictable, especially when the planners aren't clear about what they want to make obvious. Thus, the distinguishing principle in Widengren's thought was not identified, named, or articulated prior to the symposium despite the assurances the planners extended to each other that Widengren would be honored for his formative work. As it turned out, we were correct is not pressing the question further. But before realizing this, our dilemma led us to wonder if a formative principle had ever been grasped by those who have written about Geo Widengren. His work had been widely reviewed and appreciated, but always in pieces, and usually on the basis of this or that contention about a very specific subject. Consequently, its controlling principles have been able to resist articulation. Previous assessments always left remainders: there were large ranges of discourse that were left untended. Given these precedents we recognized that we could probably not expect success in hoping to do more than treat Widengren's contribution to the various areas of scholarship with which he has concerned himself—Islamic and Iranian religions, Gnosticism, Old Testament studies, and the like. But we wanted to point the discussion toward an assessment of overall methodological and interpretive principles. So, acting boldly and with these large hopes, we proposed that the symposium concern itself with the problem of religious syncretism. And we requested that Professor Widengren's own contribution to the symposium be self-consciously autobiographical.

In terms of symposium strategy, such devices provided focus as well as intrigue. In addition, the topic was an aid in urging the symposium participants to talk to each other no matter how varied their individual

specialties and competences. As noted, Widengren's contributions to scholarship extend over such a wide range of important subjects that successor-specialists are prompted to concentrate on smaller portions of it without ever feeling qualified or constrained to tackle the whole lot. At most times and in most instances, particular concentrations enhance both scholarship and insight; but, in terms of the mechanics of symposia, they cannot be counted upon to prompt overall evaluation. Thus, in choosing "religious syncretism" as the symposium's theme, we wanted to make sure that the symposium would be a symposium. We assumed that "religious syncretism" could not be addressed unless attention was paid to ways in which religious phenomena—not to mention special topics—are interlaced with each other. Neither can the theme be approached unless consideration is given to the interaction and overlappings that characterize traditions and cultures. But our compelling interest was in comprehensive review and assessment: it was thought that "religious syncretism" might help the symposium identify some of the controlling, typifying features of a distinguished scholar's life-long work.

Whether the device worked or not must be left for the thirty symposium participants to decide. From some vantage points, there is no question but that the symposium was successful. The contributions were of high quality. Professor Widengren's paper was, can we say, monumental. And the discussion was lively throughout. Furthermore, the participants were persons of solid accomplishment in their respective fields and, of manifestly high interest in Widengren's work. Given these ingredients, there was no way in which the conference could have failed. And yet—as I would be the first to admit—the program strategy brought ambiguous results. Instead of disclosing an identifiable comprehensive principle, "religious syncretism" only seemed able to certify an impasse, a divergence of prolegomenous opinion that seemed to grow wider as discussion progressed. There were provocative insights on syncretism. There were provocative statements on Widengren. There were provocative statements by Widengren on syncretism. And there were provocative insights by Widengren on Widengren. And yet it seemed that the two topics could be talked about separately. In fact, it seemed to some observers that Widengren couldn't satisfy some of the participants on the subject of "religious syncretism" without violating his own orientation. Others, sensing this,

considered it manifestly ignoble that Widengren should be asked to make the attempt. As a result, several persons left the symposium dissatisfied with its results because it didn't seem to produce any obvious marks of culmination.

Partially sharing that attitude, somewhat disturbed by it, and suspecting that it was premature, I reread some of the symposium papers and listened to the tape recordings of the discussion. Then I realized that the topic was more successful than we had projected, in ways we had not expected, because of Professor Widengren's suspicions in approaching it. "Religious syncretism" is a theme which Widengren's outlook has some difficulty reaching, but the difficulty is self-conscious. He can get to the topic, although only after doing the necessary preliminary work on the semantics and logic of it. But when he does this, he does so with a certain apology, almost as though he had accepted an assignment which is not altogether of his own choosing⁹). But this, I would argue, tells us something significant about Widengren's approach, and perhaps more than we would care to know about were he simply advocating or opposing the concept. But to appreciate this, we must know something more about the intellectual background within which Geo Widengren works, for then it becomes possible to detect some of the formative morphological ingredients of that which we have been referring to as the "Uppsala style."

That style was implicit even as early as 1893 when Swedish scholars were invited to attend the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. They found it impossible to attend the Conference because of its "distinctly syncretistic" bias, and, instead, arranged for their own international conference—the *Religionsvetenskapliga Kongressen*—in

9) We do not want to give the impression, however, that Widengren resists treatment of "syncretism." As his paper in this volume indicates, he has spoken and written on the topic several times before, recently, throughout his life. See, for example, the following studies: *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism. Studies in Manichean, Mandaean, and Syrian-Gnostic Religion* (König and Saviour II). (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 3, 1946); *Mani und der Manichäismus* (Stuttgart, Urban Bühler, 57, 1961); „Synkretistische Religionen," in *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, edited by B. Spuler. Vol. VIII, No. 2 (Leiden, 1961), pp. 43-82; and „Synkretismus" in der Syrischen Christenheit?" in *Proceedings of the Symposium „Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturraum," October 1971*, forthcoming under the auspices of the Goettingen Academy. These articles, together with a long list of others, simply reinforce the fact that Professor Widengren works thematically rather than syncretistically.

Stockholm in 1897¹⁰). The stress during the Stockholm conference was on *Religionswissenschaft*, a topic selected to give emphasis to the scientific character of the discipline as it was practiced in Scandinavia as distinct from the preoccupations of the Chicago conference¹¹). Looked at from one vantage point, the intent of the conference was to purge the history of religion from all “Chicago elements”. From the time that Nathan Söderblom became Professor in Theological Encyclopedia and Prelections, and even before, there was distrust of “religious syncretism” in Uppsala, especially when this implied any sort of meta-historical, “spiritualistic” modulation of historical traditions. The distrust was inspired in part by orthodox Christian theological encounters with Swedenborgianism in Scandinavia¹²). It was fostered too by an interest in strictly textual and historical studies. And finally, it was reinforced by the dominant climate of thought in Sweden, a climate to which Uppsala had made a significantly large contribution.

With Vienna and Cambridge, Uppsala owns the distinction of being the locale in which positivistic philosophy originated. Working independently of likeminded thinkers in Austria and Great Britain, the philosophers of the “new Uppsala school” came to similar conclusions about the epistemological inaccessibility of so-called metaphysical realities. For the bulk of the nineteenth century, because of the prominence and influence of Christopher Jacob Boström, (1797-1866), the dominant philosophical tendency in Sweden was idealism, not out-and-out Hegelianism, but an idealism that had been influenced by both Hegel and Schelling. Boström’s philosophy, frequently described as a kind of Plotinian neo-Platonism, was metaphysically oriented, and tended to conceive reality in spiritual terms¹³). Reality

10) This fact is documented in Bengt Sundkler’s biography of the late Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, *Nathan Söderblom. His Life and Work* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), pp. 50 ff.

11) The proceedings of the Stockholm conference were edited by S. A. Fries for the volume *Religionsvetenskapliga Kongressen i Stockholm 1897*.

12) Many persons were worried about “spiritualism,” not only churchmen, theologians, and historians of religion. See, for example, Axel Hägerström’s “Lectures on So-Called Spiritual Religion”, translated by C. D. Broad, in *Theoria*. XIV (1948), pp. 28-67.

13) Readers restricted to English sources can become familiar with Boström’s thought best by reading the translation of *Skrifter av Christopher Jacob Boström*, H. Edfette and G. J. Keijser, eds., 3 vols. (Uppsala: 1883-1906), which is entitled

itself was spiritual, for Boström; determinations of reality occur in consciousness primarily; and the entities of the world are ideas. Consistent with idealist contentions, Boström argued that everything that is is a determinative mode of self-consciousness. Being then is a system of ideas. And, as Justus Hartnack has summarized, "Boströmianism was for Swedish intellectual life almost what Hegelianism was for the intellectual life of Europe¹⁴). It dominated Swedish metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of law, and philosophy of religion, and until the beginning of the twentieth century it had no rival"¹⁴).

Its rival was shaped by the philosophical inquiries of Axel Hägerström (1868-1939)¹⁵ and/or Adolf Phalén (1884-1931)¹⁶); the

Philosophy of Religion, trans. Victor E. Beck and Robert N. Beck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963). An able description of Boströmianism is included in Erik Ryding, *Den svenska filosofins historia* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1959). Axel Lundberg summarizes Boström's philosophy in his *Sweden's Contribution to Philosophy* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1927), pp. 410-423. Consult Beck's "Selected Bibliography" for additional works.

14) Hartnack, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

15) Hägerström's philosophy is becoming more widely known among American and English philosophers because of recent translation. For example, see his *Philosophy and Religion*, trans. Robert T. Sandin (New York: Humanities Press, 1964); his *Inquiries into the Nature of Law and Morals*, trans. C. D. Broad (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1953); and his "Lectures on So-Called Spiritual Religion," *op. cit.*, trans. C. D. Broad. Furthermore, there is an English summary appended to Jarl Hemberg's comparison of Hägerström's and Nygren's philosophies of religion, entitled *Religion och Metafysik* (Stockholm: Diakonistyrelsens Bokforlag, 1966). Then, in addition, Ernst Cassirer, a philosopher generally well known in American and English philosophical circles, has written a perceptive account of Hägerström's position entitled, *Axel Hägerström. Eine Studie zur Schwedischen Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Göteborg: Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift, 1939). Other good secondary materials include two in Swedish: Gotthard Nygren's *Religion och Sanning. Studier i Axel Hägerströms Religionsfilosofi med Särskild Hänsyn till Hans Kritik av Dogmatiken* (Åbo: Acta Academiae Aboensis, 1968); and Konrad Marc-Wogau's *Studier till Axel Hägerströms Filosofi* (Uppsala: Föreningen Verdandi, 1968). Hägerström's *Philosophy of Religion*, entitled *Religionsfilosofi*, was edited by Martin Fries (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1949). A volume published only recently may have some significance for our study, i.e. Hägerström's *Jesus. En Karaktaranalys* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1968).

Hägerström's chief works are *Filosofi och Vetenskap*, ed. Martin Fries (Stockholm: Ehlns, 1957); *Kants Ethik im Verhältnis zu seinem erkenntnistheoretischen Grundgedanken* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1908); *De Socialistiska Ideernas Historia*, ed. Martin Fries (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1946); *Socialteleologi i Marxismen* (Uppsala: Akademiska Boktryckeriet, E. Berling, 1909); and *Stat och Rätt* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1904).

16) A sample of Adolf Phalén's writings would include the following: *Beitrag*

controversy continues as to which of the two men arrived at the point of critical insight first. The initial challenge was on epistemological rather than metaphysical grounds. Then, when the epistemological challenge proved potent, the metaphysical contentions of Boströmian idealism also began steadily to give way. There were intermediate figures, of course. Pontus Wikner (1837-1888)¹⁷, who gave himself to uncovering contradictions in subjectivist epistemology, and Vitalis Norström (1856-1916)¹⁸, who criticized Boströmian metaphysics on grounds that thoroughgoing separations of spirit and matter forced some necessary ideas into becoming mere representations rather than realities, as Boström would have wanted it, provided the earliest challenges. But these were like the first arrows that penetrate a line of stable defense. They are as important for the onslaught they signal as for the particular damage they wreak. The crucial challenge was spirited by Hägerström and Phalén, and both on the basis of epistemological contentions. Steeped in Kantian thought, Hägerström wrestled with the problem of how knowledge of a distinct object is possible. The problem is one that concerned both Wikner and Norström in that each found difficulty with Boström's contention that knowledge is self-consciousness, or, in the familiar formulation, that to be is to be perceived. Phalén attacked the same contention by showing that idealism's conceptual underpinnings lead frequently to self-contradictions. Simil-

zur Klärung des Begriffs der inneren Erfahrung (Uppsala, 1913); *Das Erkenntnisproblem in Hegels Philosophie. Die Erkenntniskritik als Metaphysik* (Uppsala: 1912); *Die Philosophie der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellung* (Leipzig: 1924); „Kritik av subjectivismen i ilika former,” in *Festskrift tillägnad E. O. Burman* (Uppsala: 1910) « “Our common notions and their dialectic movements in the history of philosophy,” in *Proceedings of the 7th International Congress of Philosophy* (Oxford: 1931), *Två Provföreläsningar* (Uppsala: 1916); *Über die Relativität der Raum- und Zeitbestimmungen* (Uppsala: Leipzig, 1922); and *Zur Bestimmung des Begriffs des Psychischen* (Uppsala: Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet, 1890). The latter two volumes bespeak interests familiar to those who have worked with the thought of Edmund Husserl.

17) Carl Pontus Wikner's works have been assembled under the title *Skrifter av Pontus Wikner*, 12 Vols., edited by Adolf Ahlberg and Theodor Hjelmqvist (Stockholm: A. Bonnier, 1922-1927).

18) Prominent works by Norström include *Grunddragen af Herbert Spencers Sedelära* (Uppsala: E. Berling, 1889); *Religion und Gedanke*, translated into German by Ernst Alfred Meyer and Axel Lagerwall (with an Introduction by Elof Åkesson), (Lund: Borelum, 1932); and *Hvad innebär en Modern Standpunkt i Filosofien?* (Göteborg: Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift, Bd. 4, 1895).

arly, in his quest for accessibility to objects distinct from mind, Hägerström gave some credence to the kinds of mental distinctions that Kant focussed upon when talking about the categories and about forms of intuition. But eventually even these sorts of distinctions couldn't give Hägerström the flexibility he needed in distinguishing objects of knowledge from subjective determinations. The final break with Boströmian subjectivist epistemology came for Hägerström, as for Phalen, through the recognition that reality, which is not reducible to consciousness, is given in cognition.

It was an epistemological innovation that bore extensive implications for metaphysics. Hägerström rejected completely the notion of an undifferentiable, unspecifiable, indeterminate metaphysical *ding an sich*. With this rejection, the idealist conception of an absolute—or, more precisely, the idealist understanding of absolute Being—is also foreclosed. And implicit in that foreclosure is the disavowal of all religious and theological positions which depend upon conventional metaphysical supports. Hägerström concludes that every declaration that flows from „*Geisteswissenschaft*—whether it concerns the self, society, the state, morality, or religion—is only an intellectual play with expressions of feeling, as if something real were designated thereby.” Thus, in hoping to destroy metaphysics, Hägerström worked too to demolish the Boströmian idealist subjectivism which had all but been synonymous with Swedish philosophy for almost an entire century. Boströmianism was gone forever, and with it the religious and theological conveniences implicit in subjective idealism.

I must emphasize that I am not contending that to Geo Widengren's *religionswissenschaftliche* programmatic was prompted or inspired by the positivistic philosophical critique of metaphysical idealism. Rather, I am calling attention to the fact that Hägerström's and Phalen's contentions were in the air, so to speak, and could not be prevented from influencing developments within a large number of academic fields, not least the history of religions. Remember that we are talking about the development of traditions of scholarship. This doesn't make Geo Widengren a Hägerströmian, a Phalenian, or even an anti-Boströmian thinker necessarily. On the contrary, were we attempting a strict genetic account of the development of his thought we would pay close attention to the influence of his teachers in *Religionsgeschichte*

and Semitic languages, Tor Andrae¹⁹) and H. S. Nyberg²⁰), to name but two of the more obvious examples. And the genetic account would also refer to certain students with whom Widengren has worked in concert. Certainly Widengren did not calculate his methodology to invoke the sanction of the philosophical analyst; nor is there evidence that he paid very much attention to them²¹). At the same time, *the morphology of that intent in the history of religions is in fundamental agreement with the new direction given philosophy through the "new Uppsala" influence*. I am proposing that the way in which Uppsala-conceived history of religion (and, more specifically, the methodology of Geo Widengren) is construed is consistent with commitments which contemporary Scandinavian philosophers exercise under positivistic influence. The philosophers might sometimes contend with the historians of religion on fundamental philosophical questions regarding the validity of religious experience, but they can hardly fault them

19) Tor Andrae is noted for such works as *Mohammed. The Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), and also published as a Harper Torchbook; *Die Frage der Religiösen Anlage* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1932); *Världsreligionerna* (Stockholm: 1944); *Kristendomen den fullkomliga religionen?* (Stockholm: Religionsvetenskapliga Skrifter 6, 1922); and *Det Osynligas Värld* (Uppsala, 1933). In „Die Religionswissenschaftliche Forschung in Skandinavien in den letzten zwanzig Jahren“, *op. cit.*, Widengren credits Andrae with great contributions to Islamic studies, valuable explorations in the psychology of religion, a significant and decisive break with “evolutionism” as a methodological category in the history of religions—cf. Widengren’s “Evolutionism and the Problem of the Origin of Religion,” in *Ethnos*. Vol. X, Nos. 2-3, 1945, reprinted in part in Walter H. Capps, ed., *Ways of Understanding Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 119-126—and for overcoming the tension between religion-as-theology and religion-as-a-humanistic-discipline in favor of the science of *Religionswissenschaft*.

See Widengren’s book *Tor Andrae* (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1947), and his commemorative pieces, „Gnostikern Stagnelius (Till Tor Andrae på 60-Arsdagen),” in *Sammlaren*. Vol. XXV (1944), pp. 115-178, and „Tor Andrae. In Memoriam,” *Vår Lösen*. Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3 (1947), pp. 87-93.

20) Hendrik Samuel Nyberg wrote *Irans Forntida Religioner* (Uppsala: Olaus-Petri-Föreläsningar, 1937) which was also published in German translation, *Die Religionen des alten Iran*, trans. H. H. Schaeder (Leipzig, 1938).

21) In private conversation, Professor Widengren informed me that the philosopher at the University of Stockholm under whose training he was influenced most was Dr. Hellström who might have been appointed successor to Phalén had he not died just prior to the appointment. In his philosophical studies, Widengren was particularly interested in logic and the history of ideas.

on the way in which they approach their craft and the methodological claims which they bring to it. For example, the disciplines that belong to Religious Studies in Uppsala are conspicuously devoid of ontological commitment, and refrain from providing commentary on topics like “the nature of religion” or “man’s religious experience generally conceived.” In fact, one of the chief marks which differentiates Swedish approaches to Religious Studies is the strict economy of its interpretations and claims. The Occamist contention that “what can be explained on fewer principles is explained needlessly by more”²²) is honored throughout by the Uppsala historians of religion. The sophistication of their approach is expressed more in the multiplicity of linguistic and philological tools which they control than in the preponderance of conclusions they tend to propose. Very self-consciously, they avoid postulating unverifiable entities to account for what can be explained more simply and directly. And this, too, is a characteristic Hägerströmian, nominalistic, even positivistic ploy. To recognize its expression in the writings of specific Swedish historians of religion is not to argue that all of them are nominalistic, positivistic or anything worse. Rather it is simply to note that this is a history of religions conceived along similar structural lines, with similar stresses and omissions, because there are parallel methodological commitments. And, to bring our discussion to the point at which it began, one can expect this climate of thought to become more and more explicit when a spokesman for the Uppsala approach is asked to apply his skills to an analysis of “religious syncretism”.

It is evident that the kind of intellectual background we have been sketching will not prompt those committed to it to give full attention to syncretistic features, regardless of the subject field in which they are working. This is not the theoretical milieu that prompts or promotes the unification or synthesizing of data. Neither does it regard the disclosure of coherence as the highest possible objective. This is not the methodological translation of neo-Platonic plays in which the premium

22) William of Ockham, *pluralites non est ponenda sine necessitate* (“multiplicity ought not to be posited without necessity”) and *frustra fit per plura quod potest fieri per pauciora* (“what can be explained by the assumption of fewer things is vainly explained by the assumption of more things”), and *entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate* (“entities must not be multiplied without necessity”).

is placed upon a recognition of priorities in the hierarchy of knowledge, and priority is usually given to the *One* that is entailed by the *many*. Instead of being syncretistic, the Uppsala methodology gives sanction to atomistic endeavors. It tends to treat each thing in its place, in its concreteness, in its particularity and specificity, and then when it ventures out onto synthetic grounds it does so grudgingly and with extreme caution, almost as though such ventures are doomed in advance to unwarranted excesses. By virtue of its reaction against subjective idealism, and because of its devotion to techniques of empirical research, the Uppsala approach will never be caught with epistemological and metaphysical over-commitments. The haunting fear of that scares all practitioners of the method into secondmindfulness when religious syncretism is being considered.

All of the remarks made so far can be registered without a pre-judgment as to whether the Uppsala practitioners should be regarded as heroes or villains. It is enough for awhile to list some of the things Uppsala philosophy doesn't intend to do and some of the issues it wants to elide or transcend. Then it is sufficient to point out that the same disposition cannot be expected to warm to a topic like "syncretism" without suspecting first that this is a topic that probably ought to be submitted to conceptual, analytical catharsis. There is widespread recognition that "syncretism" tends to invite mistaken metaphysical treatments and precisely because of its inferential capacities. When left unexamined, "syncretism" allows many allusions to lurk unchallenged. Next, it must be said that the Uppsala practitioners offer this judgment on behalf of clarity in thought, adding that it is virtuous to work for clarity. Finally, still without prejudging the virtues of the case, it must be observed that Geo Widengren's methodological propensities are in fundamental keeping with the dominant tendencies of the controlling philosophical orientation. For example, he sees no need to pay homage to the idealist framework of the nineteenth century upon which framework a number of prominent approaches to the field continue to remain dependent. His attitude doesn't invoke the conventional metaphysical supports. Thus it cannot be assaulted philosophically for the typical kinds of methodological excesses. Neither will it fall victim to the kinds of charges E. E. Evans-Pritchard makes when he contends that the long quest for the origin of religion, for example, is based upon the perpetuation of

a massive logical error. Or, to put the suggestion more dramatically: many of the presuppositions on which the quest for religious syncretism is based turn out to be conceptually and semantically indefensible when pressed into the positivist's screen. Of course, there is recourse to leaving such presuppositions in their original framework. But such an alternative is not open to the scholar who distrusts that framework. Furthermore, it puts the proponents of that alternative in the awkward position of having to argue on behalf of syncretism. From the positivist side, it will always be inappropriate to lend advocacy to syncretism. When advocacy occurs, it simply indicates that appeal is being made to other sorts of interests and appetites. Such appeals have no force unless meta-historical, extra-territorial ranges are invoked and tapped. And this runs directly counter to the methodological principles from which the Uppsala approach has gained distinction. In Uppsala terms, it is appropriate to detect instances and examples of religious syncretism, but having these, it becomes superfluous to make a case for them.

Looked at in these terms, Widengren's attitude is to approach a phenomenon with an interest in its specific manner of determinateness. He is not interested initially in the coherence that can be applied to everything within his perspective, nor does he want to demonstrate that there are repetitions of the same phenomenon in several different historical and cultural locations. Neither is he vexed by the problematic Robert Bellah has described recently when he writes about religions ²³).

23) Cf. Robert Bellah, "Religion in the University: Changing Consciousness, Changing Structures," in Claude Welch, *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum. An Analysis and Interpretation* (Washington, D. C.: Association of American Colleges, 1972), pp. 13-18, esp. p. 14, and Bellah, "Christianity and Symbolic Realism," in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vol. IX, no. 2 (Summer, 1970), pp. 89-115 (includes comments by Samuel Z. Klausner and Benjamin Nelson). Bellah includes syncretism in his typology of religious pluralism. Then, with reference to those who take religious symbolism seriously and can therefore attribute validity to more than one religion, Bellah writes, "This means neither syncretism nor relativism... But the entire range of man's spiritual experiences, for such people, is personally, existentially, available" (in *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum, op. cit.*, p. 14). Bellah has hold of the problematic, it seems, to which much current discussion of syncretism refers.

Scandinavian opinions on the subject are reflected in S. S. Hartman, *Syncretism*, papers read at the symposium on Cultural Contact, Meeting of Religions, and Syncretism, held at Åbo, Finland, September 8-10, 1966 (Stockholm: Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, 1969), No. 3.

That is, Widengren does not appear to be worried about how it can be that several religions can claim exclusive rights to religious truth simultaneously. Thus, he is not contending for an interpretation of the religions that ascribes validity to each one because all (or most) of them can be made to fit a more comprehensive, overarching meaning scheme. Instead, his compelling interest is in penetrating to the precise manner of determinateness of very specific objects of historical, textual, and philological inquiry. Thus, he proceeds by fixing his attention upon the particular phenomenon under scrutiny; he places it within its proper context of meaning; then he probes, explores, describes, cross-references, and explains each item as fully, specifically, and minutely as the data allows. Then, should it appear that a particular context of meaning gives indication of having been influenced by another context—or, should it seem that something within the context may have originated in another locale—Widengren can go on to talk very appropriately about borrowings, interaction, contact, influence, continuity, and even religious syncretism. But then these are categories that both emerge from and can be treated within specific contexts of meaning²⁴). They have definite location and need not be treated in the abstract. Furthermore, if appeal must be made to something outside the context, it is because something inside stretches that far. But this is the exception rather than the rule. The rule is that one can treat the phenomenon by understanding where it stands, without transforming it, without reaching for some higher level of generality, and without making it ingredient in something else. Widengren cannot feel very comfortable with generalities, for his interest is in the specific rather than the generic. There is resistance to the generic unless it is forced by the specific. But this is the way of logical consistency: it is only a recognition of genera that allows one to differentiate between genus and species. And, it is only when a

24) I admit that I have played on the phrase “context of meaning” to describe Widengren’s methodological tendencies recognizing full well that the phrase occurred to me after I had read Anders Nygren’s explication of it. See his “From Atomism to Contexts of Meaning in Philosophy,” in *Philosophical Essays Dedicated to Gunnar Aspelin* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1963), pp. 122-136. I confess that I find the phrase apt too with respect to Widengren’s manner of analyzing historical data, and, beyond that, that the motif-research that is fostered in the one case is methodologically and structurally similar to the thematic analyses found appropriate in the second case.

higher level of generalization is brought into play that subordinate or dependent levels are identified. Without the higher levels of generalization, indeed, outside the conceptual dynamics of generalization itself, what genera calls species is not really species but phenomena that haven't yet been graded. This is not to say that they cannot be graded or even that they resist being graded or measured. Nor is it to suggest that they are falsified when they are measured or graded. It is simply to recognize that phenomena can be apprehended without being inserted into special meaning schemes which function by differentiating between genus and species, classes, and kinds. Widengren knows that every particle need not be made party to genus/species classification or transformed into an ingredient in some higher form of unification.

An excellent example of this tendency in Widengren's approach is provided in his comment in his symposium about the birth of his interest in sacred kingship. He noted that when he studied sacred kingship in the Psalms, his goal "was not to demonstrate any influence but in the first place to analyze the institution and ideas connected with sacred kingship." He goes on to say that his "intention was to study kingship in Iran, Mesopotamia, and Israel, each religion apart." Two aspects of this statement are worthy of comment. First, Widengren makes it apparent that he attempted to study sacred kingship in its particularity, that is, in its typical manner of portrayal. He did not employ sacred kingship as a means of testing historical influence or cultural continuity. In the second place, the statement calls particular attention to the three words, "each religion apart". Once again the emphasis is upon concreteness and particularity. He did not begin with the notion of religion and then work toward the specific religions. Nor was his interest in discovering those elements which all religions may have in common. Rather, the religion of Iran, Mesopotamia, and Israel are treated as distinct institutions and according to the same manner of approach by which sacred kingship is analyzed. They are not regarded as species. They are not treated as examples; they are not constructed into components for some higher or larger synthesis. Rather, the emphasis is upon understanding of phenomena within its proper sphere of meaning, regardless of the phenomenon which one attempts to understand.

Another good example of the same tendency is provided in Widen-

gren's classic work, *Religionsphänomenologie* 25). A mere scrutiny of the book's table of contents will indicate that the book is full of information from the history of religions on many of the standard topics within phenomenology of religion. Furthermore, the book is arranged to consist of a series of essays on selected topics that are regarded as being crucial to the content and configuration of religion. The several topics are explored in both minute and almost encyclopedic detail. But the book exhibits no interest in showing that these many topics are manifestly interrelated. It is even difficult to know on what basis Widengren made his selection of topics, perhaps on precedent, perhaps on others' authority, perhaps because he had done more work on some of these themes than on others. In short, the selection cannot escape the hint of being arbitrary; at the same time, it is manifestly defensible, but on grounds Widengren senses no great responsibility to articulate. Furthermore, the book gives prominence to the word "phenomenology" in its title. As the title indicates, the book is offered as a "phenomenology of religion." Widengren intends that it be classified that way and that it serve that function despite the fact that the book begins without introduction, and, unlike standard philosophical phenomenologies, without prolegomena of any sort 26). In strictly philosophical terms it is probably not phenomenology at all, for it testifies to little if any dependence upon the discussions that have become part of the "phenomenological" traditions inspired and fed by the writings of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alfred Schütz, Roman Ingarden, Max Scheler, Paul Ricoeur, and the others 27). Widengren knows

25) Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969).

26) When Widengren does engage in the writing of "prolegomena", as, for example, in his essay "Prolegomena. The Value of Source-Criticism as Illustrated by the Biographical Dates of the Great Founders," in *Historia Religionum*. Vol. I, edited by C. Jouco Bleeker (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), p. 1-22, he has something very much different from essays on phenomenology and hermeneutics in mind.

27) Similarly, when Widengren recounts the chronicle of the development of phenomenology of religion, he begins not with its philosophical fathers but with prominent historians of religion—Chantepie de la Saussaye, G. van der Leeuw, etc.—who concentrated on phenomena. See Widengren's essay, "Some Remarks on the Methods of the Phenomenology of Religion," in *Universitet Och Forskningen* (Festschrift for Torgny T. Segerstedt), (Uppsala, Almqvist and Wiksell, 1968), pp. 250-260, and reprinted in part in Capps, *Ways of Understanding Religion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-151.

this material; in fact, he knows it well—at one time he had immersed himself in Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*. But his repeated pointings to the tradition inaugurated by Chantepie de la Saussaye indicate that his own "phenomenology" stems from a departure of a different sort. In the more prominent sense, Widengren's book does not pretend to be phenomenological analysis at all. It makes no attempt to demonstrate, for example, that the ingredients in its table of contents are necessary components of phenomenological portrayal nor that there is some deeper tie, presumably ontological, between all of its constituents parts. Furthermore, the book gives no evidence whatsoever of any interest in preparing the way for a science of a new field of experience, namely, transcendental subjectivity. Its intention, interests, language, and *modus operandi* are not those of phenomenology usually philosophically conceived. Clearly, it is a book of another sort. Consequently, while the book attempts to be comprehensive, it approaches this in such fashion that it cannot be faulted for leaving a chapter out. Neither, as has been noted, is its comprehensiveness articulated in such fashion that it implies or entails necessary connections between the items comprehended. Instead, Widengren's compelling interests run in another direction. He insists, for example, that phenomenologies of religion should not be attempted until after a scholar has done detailed, mastering work within very specific fields. It is as though one engages in phenomenological tasks after he has passed preliminary tests. One must be qualified, and qualification must be tested in specific contexts. The student does not begin his training in the history of religion by studying phenomenology. Rather, phenomenological training is taken up after one has demonstrated his ability in the necessary preliminary fields. These provisions must be implicit in the temperament which understands comprehensive projects to be engaged in after one has passed through the sort of preliminary initiation rites that strip one of those baser appetites which, left to follow their own devices, might have led to easy, excessive, and premature syntheses. As we have noted, it is to the simplistic, the excessive, and the intemperant synthesis that the Uppsala school takes exception. For that reason, Widengren can carry through on his project to write a "phenomenology of religion" without offering schemes by which ingredients become components and cumulative evidence produces more generalized conclusions.

It is in keeping with this general tendency that, when talking about religious syncretism, Widengren is prone to discuss Manichaeism²⁸). The choice of topics is provided for by the same rationale. Manichaeism is an instance of “unmistakable religious syncretism”. It is deliberately syncretistic for the very particular and historical reason that its founder, Mani, believed that in him was the summation of all previous religious wisdom. In talking about religious syncretism by referring to Machaeism, Widengren is simply giving one more illustration of the characteristic methodological tendency. He does not proceed by fitting instances to types, nor is his ultimate intention the correlation of types. Instead, the interpretive categories are created in order to treat very specific phenomena. Manichaeism is deliberate religious syncretism. To call it that is to acknowledge its own understanding of itself, and this is to refer it to the frame of reference within which it can be treated. This manner of approach does not give one the opportunity to talk about how it is possible that religions can become syncretistic. It does not even afford an occasion to speculate about the limits of some syncretistic religious range. Instead, all Widengren has done is to focus in upon a particular pattern of religious determinateness and to call it by its proper name.

But this must be part of the genius of his approach. By virtue of the methodological framework to which he is committed, Geo Widengren is disposed toward treating syncretism as a dynamic process of fusion, union, or coalescence which sometimes occurs when a variety of religious themes interact or when one or more religious traditions join together. In Widengren’s view, the syncretistic process is traceable; its ingredients can be distinguished and sorted; the dynamism of the phenomenon can be penetrated, or at least partially. But treating syncretism as a regulative principle of interpretation does not give one the right to make extraterritorial inferences. The process of syncretism is inaccessible apart from the concrete instances in which it has occurred. Widengren would not want his position to be defined

28) Cf. Widengren’s *Mani and Manichaeism*, trans. from German edition by Charles Kessler and revised by the author (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965). The original work, *Mani und der Manichäismus* was published in Stuttgart in 1961. See also Widengren’s *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism. Studies in Manichean, Mondean, and Syrian-Gnostic Religion*, *op. cit.* See also Jes P. Asmussen, “Manichaeism,” in *Historia Religionum. op. cit.*, pp. 580-610.

in terms of its opposition to other orientations which build on metaphysical claims and purport to be able to unveil ontological realities. It is rather that he has embarked on another program, congruent with the contentions of the philosophical school in which he was trained, which program is designed to identify the specific features of determination of given phenomena wherever these are found. When syncretism registers as one of those features, or when it functions in the formation of phenomena, it is accessible. Under these conditions it can be treated, analyzed, and discussed. But it must enter a context of inquiry to which the scholar has rightful access. Widengren knows that religious syncretism is different from cultural contact, and that these two are different from cultural influence and cultural continuity. Syncretism has a very specific meaning, and does not refer roughly to all sorts of religious and cultural interaction. Syncretism takes on a contextual meaning; one can detect and describe it when it occurs. To go on from there to talk about the meaning of the context, or about transformations of the context, is to expand the discussion into other kinds of concerns. This Geo Widengren is unwilling ordinarily to do, not because he lacks talent for it, but because its extrapolations demand that cases and contexts be considered as species. And this tends to imply that the more general is the more real, that contingency implies necessity, or that the higher the level of abstraction the greater the hold on truth. Furthermore, Widengren knows, as Wittgenstein attested, that there can be a succession of contexts (games) with manifest family likenesses, though what the several contexts share with each other need not be the same, nor must the likenesses be identical in every case. Context A may have a resemblance to Context B; Context B may own some linkage with Context C; C may have likenesses with D, D with E, or even A with C and/or D and/or E, and so on. But the several contexts, related to each other in this fashion, need not be related (or interrelated) on the same grounds.

As we have indicated, Widengren finds "reality" in the specific and the concrete. For him, one has gotten hold of truth when he is able to describe the contours of a particular disposition. Thus, his career, has consisted of a sustained series of attempts to comprehend and describe the manner of determinateness of specific, historical institutions, "each religion apart" first. It is a tribute to the consistency of his craftsmanship that he can present a full description of religious

syncretism, always concretely based, with example upon example, without ever violating the methodological principles which are characteristic of the Uppsala school. The irony is that this is an approach that makes generalizations on syncretism meaningful even though it is calculated to resist such generalizations or to avoid making them prematurely. And, if statistical evidence counts for anything, there is something to be said for the fact that alternative approaches are often forced to find refuge in methodological postures professional philosophers frequently have difficulty taking seriously.