



## WIDENGREN, GEO

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(b. 24 April 1907; d. 28 January 1996; [Figure 1](#)), historian of religions, with particular emphasis on the ancient Near East and Iran.

Geo Widengren was born in Stockholm, Sweden, where he spent his childhood and youth. After he fulfilled his military service (1925-27), he entered the Military Academy Karlberg (1927) where he held the rank of ensign in the Swedish army reserve (1928; *Répertoires*, p. 540). He joined the Swedish contingent that fought with the Finnish army to defend Finland against the Soviet aggression in the so called ‘winter war’ in 1939-40.

Geo Widengren studied at first in Stockholm under the supervision of Tor Andrae (1885-1947), a well-known Swedish historian of religions and specialist in early Islamic studies, who was professor at the Stockholm University between 1927 and 1933. When Andrae left for Uppsala, Widengren followed him and in 1936 he defended his doctoral thesis, “The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents,” at the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala, and it was published in 1937. In 1936, he was appointed Lecturer at the University of Uppsala, where he worked until 1940 in the Chair of the History and Psychology of Religion in the Faculty of Theology. In 1940, he was appointed professor of history of religions at the same faculty when he was only 33 years old. He held this chair, the “Calsenius professoriate” established in 1754, until his retirement in 1973. He was Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Uppsala (1944-45, 1950-51 and 1964-71), and vice-president and then president of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) between 1950-60 and 1960-70 respectively. He helped establish the



international journal of the IAHR, *Numen*, first published in 1954 and still issued by the Association. Widengren served as the chairman of the Organizing Committee of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism in 1979 which represented a milestone in the study of apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East in Antiquity. He was awarded numerous degrees honoris causa from the universities of Amsterdam and Strasbourg (1961); Cardiff, Wales (1965); Rostock (1969); and Uppsala (1973).

Widengren had a reputation for mastering most of the languages of the Near East as well as the ancient languages of Iran. He studied Assyriology in Copenhagen with O. E. Ravn (1881-1952) and Semitic languages under [H. S. Nyberg](#) in Uppsala who also taught him Iranian languages, foremost among them Avestan and Pahlavi. In addition he was well versed in Greek, Latin, and Armenian.

Widengren's writings include some 300 titles and cover a wide variety of subjects, not only in the field of the history of religions but also in linguistics and political history. His vast knowledge of the languages and cultures of the Near East and Iran enabled him to perform comprehensive studies of the religions in that area and for that matter also in comparative religion. One may distinguish several topics of research with which he was particularly concerned and these are here treated in more detail.

Widengren devoted much energy to the comparative study of religions and the problems it raised, especially the phenomenology of religion, which was much in fashion during the first half of the 20th century. In spite of the hesitations expressed by Widengren himself about the possibility for one author to write a global phenomenology, his main comparative work *Religionens värld* from 1945, subsequently rewritten and expanded in 1953, and translated into German under the title *Religionsphänomenologie*, still remains one of the most useful general treatments of religious phenomena. Based on a wealth of material from a wide diversity of cultures, but with a certain emphasis on the Middle East, he combined the comparative method with a clear historical perspective which led to a better understanding of the religious phenomena studied. The "sacral kingship" was a favorite topic not only for Widengren but also for the "Uppsala school" of which he was the most prominent representative. He investigated mainly the Israelite and ancient Near Eastern traditions but addressed also the question of Iranian kingship in articles and chapters of his books on Iranian religions.



Another topic associated with the name of Widengren is the phenomenon of “high gods.” He made a thorough investigation of the idea of god in ancient Iran elucidating the “high god” character not only of [Ahura Mazdā](#), but also of [Mithra](#), [Vayu](#) and [Zurvan](#). He could show that the Iranian beliefs corresponded strikingly with those of indigenous African peoples. This typological concordance allowed the conclusion that the high gods of Africa were not the result of missionary influences but represented ancient inherited tradition.

In the early decades of the 20th century the origins of [gnosticism](#) was much debated. The “religionsgeschichtliche Schule” with Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920) and Richard Reitzenstein (1861-1931) argued for a strong Iranian component in the gnostic movements of Late Antiquity. Widengren aligned himself with these scholars, emphasizing the pre-Christian origins of Gnosticism as well as its Indo-Iranian background.

Widengren was much concerned with the question of the Iranian impact on western religions of antiquity. He concluded that Iranian religion exercised a decisive influence on early Judaism and Christianity, as well as on Gnosticism and [Mithraism](#). His argument was elaborated with skill and first-hand knowledge of all the relevant texts (1965, 1966, 1980). Subsequent scholarship addressing this problem has been more cautious, without denying the Iranian influence however (e.g., Hultgård; Grenet). Corollary to this was his interest in apocalypticism, a theme with which he occupied himself up to his last publications (Widengren, Hultgård, Philonenko, 1995). He maintained with fervor the ancient origins of the Iranian apocalyptic tradition and its pervasive influence on the corresponding Jewish and Christian traditions. In his argumentation for the priority of Iran he emphasized the conservative character of the Pahlavi literature, in particular its dependence on Avestan traditions, and the role played by the Zurvanite variant of Iranian religion (see [Zurvanism](#)).

Widengren also assumed the task of writing a general survey of Iranian religions, *Die Religionen Irans* which was published in 1965. This work is notable for its historical approach and for its broad perspective including chapters on the religion of the northern Iranian tribes (Scythians and Ossetes) as well as the eastern peoples (viz. the Sogdians). However, certain basic aspects of Widengren’s approach to the subject and the way he uses his source materials were subject to criticism (Shaked). He also wrote one of the best overviews of Israelite religion available (1969). Widengren’s textual oriented studies also resulted in the anthology *Iranische Geisteswelt* (1961) with



translations of predominantly Pahlavi texts. It was a most welcome publication since up to that time non-specialists had to rely only on West's translations in the [Sacred Books of the East](#) from the 1880s and 1890s.

Widengren's profile as a historian of religions is characterized by the thorough philological and historical approach he took to the study of religions and by the impressive knowledge he displayed of the cultures of the ancient Middle East.

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