



Åke Hultkrantz on Method: The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Publication of *Metodvägar inom den jämförande religionsforskningen*

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Introduction

In my research on the establishment of the History of Religion as an academic discipline in Sweden (Larsson 2022; 2023), I have more than once been surprised by the almost total lack of discussion of method. That said, I must also say that most studies of religions in Sweden until the early 1970s took little interest in the topics we would today call theory – that is, a systematic idea that we take as our premise for explaining how the world functions. There are of course exceptions (e.g. Professor Erland Ehnmark, 1903–1966, at Lund University had an explicit interest in methodological and theoretical religious questions), and most publications provided discussions of animism, evolutionism, phenomenology, and how to make comparisons, but few attempts were made to explain how a religious worldview played out in real life, or why humans had the capacity to label something as a religion or religious. Most studies used a comparative typological approach (often labelled a phenomenological or comparative method) and focused on the religions of the past.

In this text, however, I will turn my gaze from the first generations of Swedish Historians of Religions – scholars like Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), Tor Andræ (1885–1947), and Geo Widengren (1907–1996) – and focus on what I see as a shift that occurred in Sweden in the early 1970s. There are, of course, many ways to illustrate this change, but in this short article I will focus on the Swedish scholar Åke Hultkrantz (1920–2006), and on how his interest in methodological questions illustrates this turn.

Like many of his contemporaries, Hultkrantz studied to become a teacher of the History of Religions at Stockholm's Högskola. However, the History of Religions under the leadership of Professor Ernst Arbman (1891–1959)

was intriguing, and Hultkrantz became at once fascinated and inspired by the many ways of interpreting sources. The History of Religions was a topic that 'spoke to a person that was stimulated by fantasy and independent thinking', explained Hultkrantz (Minnen 2005, 134). It was especially the so-called primitive religions that caught Hultkrantz's interest. This was the area on which most of his studies focused, and in numerous publications he applied an ethnographic method to the study of rituals and religious lives among Indigenous populations, especially in North America. An example is his doctoral dissertation, *Conceptions of the Soul among North American Indians: A Study in Religious Ethnology* (Hultkrantz 1953). Only five years after the defence of his thesis Hultkrantz was appointed professor and chair of Comparative Religion at Stockholm University; he was then only 38 years old (Drobin 2008; *Minnen* 2005 contains some glimpses of Hultkrantz's early career and his formative years in academia). Despite several academic stints abroad, Hultkrantz remained loyal to Stockholm University and stayed in his position until his retirement in 1986.

The times they are a-changing

It is impossible within the limits of this short article to study if and to what extent Åke Hultkrantz actually had an impact on his contemporaries outside the Department of Comparative Religion at Stockholm University, but his publications demonstrate an international outlook, and it is fair to say that in Sweden at least he shifted the focus from the study of past (dead) religions to living religions among Indigenous populations. For example, in 1973, when Geo Widengren – the grand old Professor of the History of Religions at Uppsala University – retired from his chair, Stockholm's Professor Åke Hultkrantz published a textbook on methodological questions called *Metodvägar inom den jämförande religionsforskningen* ('Methodological paths within comparative religion research').¹ I believe this book marks a shift in the study of religions – at least in Sweden, but perhaps less so in the other Nordic countries (think of the ethnographic and folkloristic approaches applied by scholars like Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939), Lauri Honko (1932–2002), and Rafael Karsten (1879–1956) in Finland, for example). Whatever its impact on later scholars, it is now time to examine the book's content and structure, especially as this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of its publication. How did Hultkrantz envisage the study of religions, and what methods did he advocate in the early 1970s?

¹ The book was never translated, but some of the methodological questions that Hultkrantz raised in it were also addressed in other publications and articles (e.g. Hultkrantz 1970a; 1979b).

Methodological paths in comparative religion research

Turning to the content, *Metodvägar* consists of 227 densely written pages organized under four subheadings: 'The sources of religious studies and their analysis'; 'The problem of comparative research'; 'Descriptive and systematic religious research'; and 'Historical and evolutionary religious research'. The book's aim is thus to provide the reader – presumably a student – with an overview of the various methods that can be applied to so-called religious data. Whilst Hultkrantz stresses that method is an important aspect of all scientific research, there are no specific or unique methods for the study of religions. Scholars must therefore pick and choose from other academic disciplines when they approach religious traditions, he argues. Like many of his contemporaries, Hultkrantz also wishes to contribute to the general discussion and create an opportunity for debate. Most importantly, however, the awareness of methodological questions among scholars of religions must be raised to enhance the quality of their research. In Hultkrantz's words: 'Research that does not strive for objective truth is pointless' (p. VII). It is only with the aid of a solid knowledge of method and research design that this objective can be achieved.

According to Hultkrantz the basic method of all religious studies is philology, and on this point he resembles his predecessors. Compared, however, to ethnologists and social anthropologists, who are portrayed as having too strong an interest in methodological questions, religious scholars have mainly trusted their intuition and been guided by their own ideas, he argues. An intuition can at best help us set up hypotheses, but all hypotheses must be scrutinized according to a strict scientific protocol (i.e. a method) if scholars are to contribute to scientific progress.

In the first sections of *Metodvägar* Hultkrantz describes the various sources (written and oral sources, iconography, archaeological sources) that can be used in writing the history of religions, but he also stresses that sources can be analysed with the aid of a historical-critical approach. How to make comparisons and evaluate typological schemas (i.e. patterns) that previous anthropologists and phenomenologists have used (cf., for example, p. 82; several examples are also given in Larsson 2022) are presented and critically discussed. Hultkrantz also addresses problems with definitions and comparing different sources from different places and times. On this point, I suggest, Hultkrantz reminds us that as historians of religions we should pay more attention to the historical roots of our discipline. For Hultkrantz and his contemporaries, however, a source-critical approach was probably the obvious method, and the ambition of his book on method

was therefore to introduce other ways of conducting religious studies. This may be why Hultkrantz was so keen to introduce what he saw as new ways of doing religious studies, at least for his Swedish target audience. To do this, Hultkrantz argues, it is necessary to supplement written records with oral sources, ritual studies, and quantitative and statistical studies (in the book he even addresses the potential usefulness of computers, p. 93). He also advocates the promotion of archaeological and ecological approaches to the study of religions. The last aspect, ecological approaches – how the climate can influence different worldviews, rituals, and beliefs – was one of Hultkrantz's most cherished topics (e.g. Hultkrantz 1965; 1966; 1974a; 1974b, and 1979; in 1981 and 1982 Hultkrantz also gave the Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen on the topic 'The Veils of Religion: Religion in its Ecological Forms').

Unlike Widengren, for example, Hultkrantz was a generous tutor, and throughout the book he presents examples of his own failures and successes, especially regarding his own field studies among various Indigenous groups in North America. The reader is given practical examples of how to conduct interviews and participant observation, and the need to ask open questions, potential problems with gatekeepers and interpreters, surveys, and so on are also addressed. As a field researcher, the scholar must learn to live the life of their informants: 'They must socialize on an equal footing with those they examine, participate in their everyday life, preferably live with them' (p. 35). Besides practical tips, Hultkrantz also provides an overview of several different theoretical perspectives like behaviourism, functionalism, and structuralism and discusses how theoreticians like Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), to name only a few, made comparisons and explained the spread of religious ideas through evolutionism, positivism, diffusionism, parallelism, survivalism, syncretism/conversion, acculturation, and so on.

Some of these approaches can of course be criticized today, but it is fair to say that Hultkrantz was an innovative scholar, and that unlike many of his contemporaries, he was well read outside the discipline of religious studies. He even laments that many scholars suffer from a kind of silo thinking – that they seldom if ever read books or texts that stem from academic disciplines other than religious studies. 'Communication between different research fields is inadequate,' argues Hultkrantz (p. 24). As noted above, he is unafraid to reveal and discuss his own flaws and shortcomings during his own fieldwork.

Discussion and conclusions

Although some of the presentations and methods Hultkrantz promotes are outdated, his book remains important, as it gives us an opportunity to understand how earlier scholars – especially in Sweden – approached their material, and how they analysed their data. Compared to Widengren, for example, Hultkrantz gives the reader plenty of background information and presents the various methodological approaches in an unbiased way that enables the reader to access them and decide which method they wish to use. In other words, instead of presenting his preferred or most cherished ideas, Hultkrantz's textbook is a smorgasbord of different methods, and this broad presentation is helpful for any student or scholar wishing to grasp the subject matter and understand how different scholars have constructed and studied the phenomena that are labelled 'religion'. Yet although Hultkrantz's presentation is modern in the sense that he places great stress on oral material, his discussion of religion as a topic is somewhat outdated. Like most if not all his predecessors, Hultkrantz can be accused of seeing 'religion' as something distinct that can be separately viewed from the rest of society.

A religion may be very intertwined with social or material culture, or with ethnic ideology, but it expresses the belief in another, supernatural, reality, and beliefs form one or more systems of coherent ideas... (p. 12)

While as a scholar Hultkrantz was very interested in rituals, it is beliefs (i.e. dogma) that are the core of all religions (p. 13), and he sometimes even speaks of 'the essence of religion' (p. 124). This attitude towards religion resembles how earlier scholars (e.g. Widengren) have understood the subject matter, and it was only with the 'linguistic turn' and the criticisms of religious phenomenology that religion as something *sui generis* was brought into question. Instead of viewing religion as something distinct or separate, 'religion' came to be more explicitly associated with questions of power, ideology, constructions, and functions, for example (e.g. Martin 2012). The strong emphasis on the importance of language, definitions, and power structures has today been supplemented by scholars who adhere to the so-called cognitive study of religions and evolutionary psychology (see e.g. Larsson and Sorgenfrei 2019 for a general overview of and introduction to these debates), and who seek natural explanations for religious beliefs. This question is also included in Hultkrantz's overview, but like most scholars of his time (and like many contemporary critics of the cognitive study of

religions), he is sceptical concerning the possibility of establishing generalizable laws for human behaviour (p. 125).

Although Hultkrantz emphasizes that there are no special methods for the study of religion, he defends the position that the study of religions has an 'individuality' and 'uniqueness' that makes it a discipline in its own right. Without evaluating this claim the development of the study of religions is closely associated with internal and external factors rooted in both local and global society. For example, it is much easier to conduct field studies today, and globalization has changed the global religious landscape, but academia has also gained a new role and function today compared to the 1970s. Although it was impossible for Hultkrantz to foresee how the world would change in the coming decades (some negative predictions of the future, however, are found in an interview with Hultkrantz in *Minnen* 2005), it is interesting to see how he viewed the changes of the 1960s and 1970s in academia. For example, the humanities were divided at this time, and a Faculty of Social Sciences was established in 1964 in Sweden. Moreover, several reforms in the 1960s and 1970s changed the 'professor rule', after which the state had a much stronger hold on educational content. Instead of primarily providing *Bildung* and seeking knowledge for its own sake, the university was now to function as a provider of skilled workers and bureaucrats. Most northern and western European universities were at the same time influenced by socialist visions and the so-called 1968 movement. These changes are not addressed in *Metodvägar*, but in an interview published in 2005 Hultkrantz speaks negatively of these changes. He describes the 1968 movement as 'nasty', saying, 'in some way the joy and optimism that I had felt died within me' (quotation from *Minnen* 2005, 145). But to what extent did these changes influence the study of religion? Unfortunately, *Metodvägar* provides no answer to these and similar questions, but it is striking that Hultkrantz stresses, explicitly and implicitly, that the study of religions should provide general models for, or even explanations of, the phenomena that are labelled 'religion'. At least for me this position is interesting because one can argue that it differs from the tendency to provide merely descriptions instead of explanations or larger comparative models, a tendency that grew stronger with the linguistic turn and the critical study of religions.

Thus, I think Hultkrantz can still provide an example of how to think critically about religious studies, and how we can learn from earlier generations of scholars like him if we wish to develop and challenge the study of religion. In other words, the past provides a perspective, or maybe even a

corrective, for the future. For these and many other reasons it is important to highlight milestones in the study of the discipline that we call the History of Religions, and it is essential from this perspective both to address and critically scrutinize a textbook on method that was published fifty years ago.

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