

# Preface

Peter Jackson

Stockholm University, Sweden

The substance of this book grows out of a workshop on shamans and shamanism held in the Fall of 2013 to mark the 100th anniversary of the chair in History of Religions at Stockholm University. In considering an adequate theme for the workshop, we decided on the idea of engaging various theoretical and empirical approaches to a singular cultural matrix. We were also anxious to pick a theme that could be considered representative of the work of the department's most prolific scholars over the decades. The theme of shamanism eventually stood out as the most appropriate choice – not only because it recurs extensively in the department's publications, but also because shamanism has become such a multifarious category in contemporary scholarship. Like most other categories of its kind, it has been contested, reinterpreted, and engrafted into various jargons both within and outside the academic world.

As representatives of disciplines bordering on the history of religions, the three main contributors to the workshop (and to the ensuing publication) embody the spirit of comparativism and multidisciplinary without which the study of religion always runs the risk of relapsing into a sacred science (or a science of the sacred). They are all internationally acknowledged interlocutors within their fields of expertise: Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (Georgetown University) is a leading expert on contemporary Siberian shamanism, Jan Bremmer (University of Groningen) a prominent specialist on ancient Graeco-Roman religions, and Carlo Ginzburg (UCLA and the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa) one of the world's most renowned historians.

---

## How to cite this book chapter:

Jackson, P. 2016. Preface. In: Jackson, P. (ed.) *Horizons of Shamanism: A Triangular Approach to the History and Anthropology of Ecstatic Techniques*. Pp. vi–x. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16993/bag.a>. License: CC-BY 4.0

Balzer's contribution intertwines a series of hitherto ignored topics with regard to the formerly repressed shamans of post-Soviet Russia, Bremmer brings further light to the controversial status of "shamanism" in the study of ancient Greek religion, and Ginzburg revisits a theme first developed in his study from 1972 on the surprisingly shamanic traits of the so-called *benandanti* (the "well-goers"), a group of alleged heretics described in a 16th-century inquisition file from Friuli in northern Italy. In the introduction and afterword, associate professor Ulf Drobin (Stockholm University) discusses the three contributions against the backdrop of earlier and more recent trends in the study of shamanism. Drobin also engages in a critical dialogue with Bremmer and Ginzburg on the origin and geographical distribution of shamanistic techniques.

When the chair for the History of Religions was established in Stockholm in 1913 it was explicitly done in a spirit of secularism. The much older universities of Uppsala and Lund had offered theological teaching for centuries, but theology there usually meant the study of a specific religious tradition – its sacred history, canon, and institutions – *by, for, and from within itself*: its closest ally had been the Church and its major body of students consisted of future clergy. However, religiously informed scholarship was rapidly losing ground in 19th-century Europe. The gradual diminution of theology and religious teaching in the academic world corresponded inversely to an increasing sense of time depth and cultural complexity, fuelled by the study of ancient languages and civilizations, ethnography, geology, and evolutionary biology. A new story of humankind was unfolding, much more layered and detailed than the Biblical and antiquarian narratives of previous centuries. Of course, systematic comparative studies of religion had been pursued much earlier, but it was only during the latter half of the 19th-century that the secular study of religion emerged as a university discipline in its own right.

The establishment of the Stockholm chair clearly reflected this new university policy. The same trend had recently resulted in the creation of similar academic units elsewhere in Europe. The most significant measure in this regard was perhaps the creation, 27 years earlier, in 1886, of a new section for the religious sciences

at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (EPHE) in Paris. Along with the donation for the Stockholm chair came the donators' explicit wish to establish the study of religion as a contingent cultural phenomenon, whose change and diversity in time and space should be subjected to methodological ideals attuned to those of comparative linguistics and archaeology.

The first holder of the chair, Torgny Segerstedt, was a controversial figure in his time, provoking Swedish old-school theologians with his Uppsala dissertation on the origin of polytheism. Having left the Stockholm chair in 1917 to embark on a new career as a publicist, Segerstedt spent the last years of his life, between 1933 and 1945, attacking a new and much fiercer enemy to freedom of thought and critical scholarship than the Swedish conservative theologians of his early days: German Nazism.

If the secular study of religion had first emerged as an emancipation from the scholarly dictate of religion itself, an important step was taken during the latter half of the 20th-century to overcome the discipline's methodological restrictions. Historians of religions had not been expected to conduct their own field-work, but to stay at home with their texts and grammars, occasionally glancing through ethnographic reports. When the fourth holder of the chair in Stockholm, Åke Hultkrantz, began his field-work among the Shoshone people in Wyoming in the late 1940s, he was a pioneer in bringing the study of religion further beyond the religious heritage of its own past. The empirical framework of the history of religions was no longer restricted to the authority of scripture, but had widened its scope to include participant observation, and to the gathering of new data in the midst of action and conversation.

When I consider the research currently being carried out at the department, I gladly acknowledge a continued emphasis on both field-work and philological training. The impact from the social sciences on the study of religion has increased rapidly during the last decades. This is all fine and well, but if the confidence in this new asset grows too strong, it may give in to a trivialization and relativization of historical knowledge and serious philological research – a tendency felt in many areas of the humanities today. The past amounts to more than its modern reception and

construction, to more than an imaginary past imbued with patriotic, romantic, and orientalist infatuations. Philology is certainly not only a mossy thing *of the past*; on the contrary, it increases the student's theoretical alertness and incites critical reconsideration, not so much through the emulation of ingrained theoretical postures but through careful first-hand reading.

As historians of religions we are blessed and cursed by the fact that religion pops up everywhere. Cursed because a growing sense of detail may discourage the increasingly specialized scholar to search for general patterns. Blessed because we are still entitled to combine comparative analysis with the interrogation, development, and rectification of analytical categories (such as myth, ritual, the sacred, and so on) that may ensue from, and feed back into, the understanding of a specific historical datum. This circumstance brings me back to the topic of this volume, for the shaman, and the accompanying *-ism* added to this once local and emic concept, is precisely one of those analytical categories that historians of religions have grappled with in order to discover general patterns beyond the locally specific manifestations of singular cultures.<sup>1</sup> Traceable back to Ernst Arbman's work on ecstatic practices and conceptions of the soul, the theme runs neatly through the rich production of Åke Hultkrantz, Louise Bäckman, and the last holder of the Stockholm chair, Per-Arne Berglie.

It has been a stimulating task to plan the event that now finally comes into fruition in the form of a physical publication. This would not have happened without the moral and financial support of vice chancellors Kåre Bremer and Astrid Söderbergh Widding, for which I – also speaking on the behalf of my colleagues – remain deeply grateful. I also wish to thank Christina Lenz at Stockholm University Press for her patience and efficacy during the final stages of editing the book. Many thanks also go to Klas Wikström af Edholm for doing a great job in copyediting the manuscript as well as preparing an index.

## Notes

1. As demonstrated by Arnold van Gennep's 1903 paper "De l'emploi du mot 'chamanisme'" in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* (42:1), the

critique of the analytical category “shamanism” has a history nearly as long as the initial propagation of the category by the Russian scholar V. M. Mikhailovsky in the late 19th-century. In van Gennep’s view, Western scholars of religion had merely created confusion for themselves by inventing such concepts, including those of animism and totemism. The critique has been rehearsed on several occasions and from shifting angles, a recent example being Håkan Rydving’s 2011 essay *Le chamanisme aujourd’hui: Constructions et déconstructions d’une illusion scientifique* in *Études mongoles et Sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaine* (42), which received a critical response from Charles Stépanoff in the following issue of the same journal. Problems related to the construction of this occidental category are also touched upon in the 2015 overview monograph *Le chamanisme* by Roberte Hamayon. Åke Hultkrantz, while stressing the import of the term “shamanism”, insisted that it denoted a specific configuration of religious elements and not necessarily a religion (see, for instance, the article “A Definition of Shamanism” [Temenos 9 {1973}]).