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# Entering Wingren's Theological Life

This book deals with Gustaf Wingren (1910–2000), one of the most influential and creative Swedish theologians of the twentieth century. I became acquainted with him around 1980, after he had retired. I had known about Wingren before then, and attended several of his many public lectures during the latter half of the 1970s. At that time in Sweden, Wingren's name was on the lips of many, and at several of the public events at which he lectured I was given the opportunity to speak to him briefly. It was, however, not until I had left Gothenburg, where I had started my academic studies, and moved to Lund in January 1982 that I embarked on a more personal relationship with him.

My years in Lund came to have far-reaching effects on my worldview. The most important influence on my intellectual development during that period was not, however, the formal academic coursework. The opportunities for informal education and personal cultivation, which were still so much a part of the culture of that city and its university, had a far greater impact on me. I truly enjoyed the way that unexpected learning adventures could occur at almost any time or place in the ancient, spired city of Lund. I knew that I shared this experience with many others, but did not realize that even Wingren had once been overwhelmed by the same dizzying excitement for learning. Fifty-five years earlier, in 1927, at the tender age of sixteen, he had arrived in Lund on the night train one warm summer morning. He would remain there, in what he considered to be the spiritual capital of Sweden, for the rest of his life. As for me, I left after less than five years.

## Our Personal Beginnings

I do not remember exactly when it was, but sometime in January 1982, during my first few weeks in Lund, I was invited to the home of Gustaf Wingren and his second wife, Greta Hofsten (1927–96). Over time, their intellectual collaboration developed to such a degree that they were almost inseparable. The professor, who had retired five years earlier, wanted to discuss theology with me. He said it with an eagerness that should have piqued my curiosity about what awaited me, but I was a novice at the time. Nonetheless, I did prepare for our meeting by reading several of his most important works. I rode my bicycle through the cobblestoned streets of central Lund to the high-rise building at Warholms väg 6B, and climbed the narrow staircase to the second floor. Gustaf, in his characteristic knitted sweater, was already waiting at the top of the stairs. The apartment door stood ajar on the left side of the hallway behind him, as it would always be whenever I came to visit during my years in Lund. On this particular occasion, however, I entered a completely new and unknown environment for the first time.

As I entered the apartment, I was struck by the spartan furnishing and sparse decor. To the left of the main hallway were two bedrooms, where the Hofsten-Wingrens each had their own little cubbyhole, furnished in the same way with a narrow single bed, a bedside table, and, I believe, some sort of wardrobe. Greta's room also contained a small desk. Straight on down the hallway was the living room, where a pair of old beds had been made into a rather uncomfortable sitting area. Apart from that, the room was dominated by two substantial armchairs, both placed with their backs to the balcony windows to make use of the light for reading. On several tables, piles of books lay stacked one upon the other. Later I learned that the books were ordered in a sequence and that the order in which they lay would change according to the couple's shifting intellectual priorities and how their discussions had progressed. As soon as the books landed on their tables they were quickly devoured by the two voracious readers. It struck me that there was no television in the apartment; that probably guaranteed them the time for so much reading. The gracious warmth with which they received me made me feel welcome at once. However, in this cerebral home there was hardly any time for respite or rest.

Beyond the living room, at the back of the apartment, was another good-sized room, which served as Gustaf's study and library. His

collection of books had been decimated six years earlier in the divorce settlement with his first wife, Signhild. The kitchen was equally as spartan, but blue doors on the cabinets gave some color to the room, and the small table under the window seemed to invite guests to meals and conversation. During my nearly five years in Lund, I partook in numerous lunch and dinner discussions at that little kitchen table. These were never large or elaborate parties. I cannot remember that we were ever more than four people seated around that table, although when I look back at my journals from those years, I realize that there were exceptions. The meal always began with Gustaf saying grace in Latin. The food was simple and in traditional Swedish style, and was washed down with *aquavit*.

On the day in January 1982 when I was first invited to the Wingren home, I looked forward eagerly to the opportunity to discuss theology with the world-famous theologian. I remember how Gustaf told a number of animated stories to help explain what he meant. In order to follow his reasoning, you had to pay careful attention to the tiny details as well as to the drastic leaps in the string of stories that carried his presentation forward. I can still see the excitement in his eyes and hear the engagement in his voice from this first private meeting. Most of all, I remember the level of energy in our discussion.

As we talked, Gustaf gradually became quite agitated, even furious. For the life of me, I could not understand why my questions, simple objections, and opinions brought out such a remarkable mixture of anger and amusement in him. The longer we spoke, the more our discussion developed into what seemed a magnificent quarrel. Evening fell, the apartment darkened, and finally, our discussion came to an end. Gustaf's wife, Greta, said a few friendly words to me as I departed, but the entire escapade left me rather crestfallen. I left Warholms väg with the definite feeling that our new friendship had already reached its end.

Several days later, Gustaf telephoned me. To my great surprise, he told me that he was eager to see me again. He sounded enthusiastic. "We must continue our talk," he declared. He said that he had found our discussion especially refreshing. When could I come back? Perplexed, I stood in my dormitory hallway with the telephone receiver in my hand. Slowly, I began to realize what sort of person I was dealing with. Gustaf Wingren was the sort who found odd enjoyment in confrontation. If there were not yet any burning conflicts in which he could become involved, he would create them on his own. And when the confrontations were over, he wove dramatic stories about them. His rhetoric was

peppered with anecdotes that were as entertaining as they were pertinent, and he presented them carefully and painstakingly, one after the other. He seemed to use his stories as critical barbs to provoke and tease, in the hope of luring people into the arena of discourse. His use of narrative and his seeming desire to ridicule were inseparable. Through his fantastic tales about people and ideas in confrontation, Gustaf (and Greta, who after his retirement came to be his most important colleague, although she held no academic position) opened up a vast intellectual world for me—a world that in reality became my most important university during my years in Lund.[1]

I soon realized that the Gustaf Wingren with whom I had begun to socialize was in many respects a completely different person from the one earlier generations of Lund students and teachers had encountered as a professor, advisor, and colleague. Those who had attended the University in the 1960s always referred to their old teacher simply as "Wingren." When I met former students who had attended in the decades prior to the 1960s (and who were not much younger than their former advisor; several of them had by then become bishops in the Church of Sweden), they spoke of Professor Wingren. With few exceptions, members of both of these groups looked quite surprised when my contemporaries and I spoke about, and even addressed, their old professor simply as Gustaf. I now understand that I did not fully recognize the profound transformation the professor had undergone, personally as well as theologically. In the mid-1970s he shed his impeccable dark suit and carefully knotted

1. My confusing first encounter with the conflict-loving Wingren, including his surprising desire for continued contact after that, was not unique. Many others had similar experiences with him. Bengt Hallgren, one of his doctoral students who later became a bishop, relates a journal entry that he made on 30 April 1954: "I presented my essay on Luther and church discipline in the ethics seminar. Wingren said, 'Within Luther research, there is a lacuna, and it is church discipline. I know of no one who has been able to do research in this area, nor do present-day writers seem able to, either.' Discouraged, I went home to the traditional Walpurgis celebration at the Kalmar student association house." Yet, Hallgren then relates that three weeks later, he was summoned to Professor Wingren, who now wanted him to begin his dissertation work. Hallgren, "Käre Gustaf!," 101. In a similar way, former Archbishop of Sweden Bertil Werkström, who had also been one of Wingren's doctoral students, tells of how he once was invited together with a group of former doctoral students to meet with their old teacher. During the lively debate that took place that evening, Werkström took a rather passive role, and listened with interest to what the others had to say. The next morning, the group met for breakfast at the hotel. Wingren went straight to Werkström and said, "Bertil, you are a man without passion!" Werkström, "Minnesbilder," 106.

necktie for an outdoor hiking jacket, a knitted sweater, and practical, soft-soled shoes. In this new uniform, he bounded through the city on protest marches and other progressive events, which often had a strong presence of young people. Professor Wingren had undergone a metamorphosis and become Gustaf. This afforded me the opportunity to come into closer contact with him, but at the same time, I believe this also obscured my perception of him, so that I was not really aware of the discontinuities in his life and the complications that were characteristic of his earlier personal history. As a result, I underestimated the importance of the transformation his theology had undergone from the 1970s onward, when he had recontextualized the entirety of his theological system and transformed it into a critique of society. An innovative hermeneutical approach allowed him to recycle the theological sources and concepts that he had developed in an *academic* context by reconfiguring them according to a *social* frame of reference. Thus he generated an entire new series of books. This hermeneutical transformation is the focal point of this biography.

How did this happen? What were his personal and intellectual resources that made this transformation possible? The prerequisites for change may have lain dormant as a potential resource and seem to have intensified over a long period of time. Today, with the historical distance gained from a half-century of theoretical considerations, it is easier for us to realize that the changes that occurred in Wingren's theological agenda in the late 1940s were in fact integral parts of a more general *turn toward practical wisdom*, a scientific reorientation that also characterized the changes that occured in other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences during that period. For this study, I have taken my point of departure in an understanding of hermeneutics as a practical philosophy, inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), where interpretation is defined not as a pure theoretical method, but as *always already application* in concrete situations. This frame of reference makes it possible to place the practical turn that occurred in Wingren's theological agenda around 1950, and that was first made evident in his composite and challenging book *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church* (1949/1960), into a broader philosophical context. In this work, he elaborated on not only a *theological hermeneutics* (that is, an interpretation theory for theology) but also a *hermeneutical theology* (a hermeneutically conveyed and contextually anchored comprehension of the phenomenon

we refer to as Christianity).[2] I hold that it is in this particular book that we may identify the roots of two paradoxical lines of thought that were of profound importance for Wingren's interpretation of Christianity. These were the driving forces behind his extensive process of theological recontextualization during the 1970s and 1980s. First, he gained the insight that the continuity of the Christian faith can only be maintained through change (a theological hermeneutics); and second, the idea that the distinct character of this faith is inextricably bound to the capacity to manifest its radical openness toward creation (a hermeneutic theology). For this reason, it is no coincidence that the very concepts of *change* and *continuity*, together with the concepts of *openness* and *distinctness*, served as fundamental themes in the two books in which he manifested his process of theological recontextualization.[3] Moreover, this was not a matter of a compromise or a balancing act, but instead we are confronted with a radically dialectic figure of thought: the continuity of what we refer to as Christian faith can only be maintained *by* change, and the distinctness of this faith can only be maintained *through* openness.

Among the unique and essential sources of inspiration behind Wingren's theological path, there is one in particular that has been entirely overlooked in all of the literature about him. The fact is that the major inspiration for his theology of social critique that he started to develop from the age of sixty, and which became the theological program of the remaining decades of his life, emanated from a source outside of both academia and theology, namely, Greta Hofsten, his new life partner. Long before anyone else, she recognized the latent potential for social criticism embedded in Wingren's hermeneutically informed creation theology. Consequently, she also recognized the possibility of taking the theological texts he had originally developed within the academic sphere and rewriting them so that they could be applied in a new context, that of society.

I have thus chosen to structure this presentation from the perspective of how an *academic* frame of reference, which was the primary context of Wingren's theological work until the 1960s, was gradually replaced by a theology in which *social* contextualization became the primary

2. I use these concepts as they are presented by Jeanrond in *Theological Hermeneutics*.

3. Cf. the Swedish titles of Wingren's books *Continuity and Change* (*Växling och kontinuitet*, 1972) and *Creation and Gospel* (*Öppenhet och egenart*, 1979/1979, which means "Openness and Distinctness").

defining factor of his work. The question then follows as to how the third public sphere of theology, namely, that of the church, features in this description.[4] According to the conventional understanding of Wingren's theology, it might be considered somewhat provocative that I have left the issue of the church until last. However, against this prevalent view, I maintain that it is a misconception to characterize Wingren as a man of the church, whose primary and sole ambition was to deliver edification to communities of pious believers. In order to develop a comprehensive view of Wingren, we need to define him according to a broader intellectual view. Only if we recognize Wingren as a theologian who felt completely at home initially in an academic public sphere, and later in a social public sphere, will we be able to recognize the important contribution he made to a church that for long periods of his life he found it difficult to embrace. This is what I hope to make clear in chapter 8 of this book. Thus, not until the last chapter will I pose the critical question, what was Wingren's relationship to the church? Those with the patience to read that far will find an answer.

## Narratives and Confrontations

Gustaf Wingren often stated, "For every situation in life, there is a story"—after which he would immediately begin to tell one. His intention with all of these stories was to cast new and unexpected light on particular contemporary situations. Throughout his life he delighted in tall stories, yarns, and academic anecdotes that combined the comic and burlesque with the deeply serious. Yet storytelling held a value that for him went far beyond entertainment or the purely didactical. Narrative was not a neutral medium filled with an already fixed and predetermined content, or a mere illustration of something already recognized. Instead, he was convinced that the stories themselves generate their own message. In narratives, the form and the content are inextricably bound together. Quite simply, there are things that are expressed best, or perhaps only, through storytelling. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) argued convincingly that there is a basic ontological relationship between human identity and narrative: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful

4. In my presentation, I elaborate on the three publics of theology (society, academy, church), in accordance with Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*.

to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience."[5] As human beings we would probably not be able to communicate, or even recognize who we are, without stories. The fundamental importance of narrative in Wingren's theology stretches from the meaning he ascribed to the parables of the *gospels* to the grand story of salvation history, which on a macro level configured his view of the Christian creed as well as the biblical canon. I would assert that Wingren was grounded in the firm and fundamental conviction that we cannot comprehend or talk about the Christian faith without telling stories.

During my years of intense conversations with Wingren, I heard many stories from his lips, but I also experienced the rise of a number of new stories *about* him as well as *by* him. I have included many of these stories in this book, not first and foremost because they are entertaining, but rather because I am convinced that they are of extraordinary importance if we want to understand the hermeneutical creation theology that Wingren developed, as well as his own intellectual temperament.

Wingren had a good sense of humor. Humor was, in fact, an integral part of his theology.[6] With delight he would quote Karl Barth (1886–1968), who once discovered that in a new, well-received book, Bishop John T. A. Robinson had actually copied the works of several German theologians. Thus, Barth stated crassly, "Here comes a man who scrapes the foam off three glasses of beer, splashes the drops into a fourth glass, and then sells it as the water of life."[7] When Wingren recounted this story, he relished each and every word: "three glasses of beer," of course, represent three important German theologians, "foam" emphasizes the superficiality of Robinson's analysis, "the water of life" is a double entendre, hinting both at its strong theological overtones and the cosmetic superficiality inherent in these false claims, and so on. Wingren recited such formulations with obvious delight. He enjoyed the force of each twist and turn in the story. Not even his fundamental theological disagreement with Barth (whom he so often mentioned in extraordinarily critical ways) obscured the admiration he felt for anyone who could achieve such a precise and subtle narrative configuration.

Once, on a train to Stockholm together with three colleagues from the Faculty of Theology at Lund University, Wingren and an older

5. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1, 3.

6. Cf. Karlsson's discussion of the significance of humor in the theology of Wingren in *Predikans samtal,* 158–63.

7. Wingren, *Mina fem universitet* (1991), 88.

colleague spent a long time regaling each other with amusing stories about various faculty members. Finally, Wingren leaned toward his two younger travel companions and said, "No one will ever tell any funny stories about you two." The two younger colleagues proceeded to refute this insult to their perceived honor with long-winded accounts of all of the important tasks and duties they were managing: ". . . and while you've been out fooling around, we have been at our desks, taking care of our work!" Wingren sat quietly, listening, until they finished speaking. When they were finally silent, he leaned forward again and said, "*Now* I have got another funny story to tell!"

Whether or not this story is true, it demonstrates the narrative culture that Wingren propagated, as well as the quick wit (bordering on spitefulness) that often accompanied it and which he enjoyed. It must also be noted that he avoided administrative duties like the plague and tried to unload them onto his department colleagues. When his department's rotational duties nonetheless forced him to serve as chair of the department and faculty, the secretary had to work extremely hard to keep his administrative tasks under control. Nevertheless, in this anecdote about the train ride to Stockholm, he used a story to ensnare his colleagues, and then he incorporated multiple stories into one another like Russian *matryoshka* dolls: an event in which his colleagues are involved in telling stories becomes the starting point for a new story, which in turn becomes part of the story he is telling at the moment.

Understanding the point of such stories requires the listener to pay attention to the intrigue and the details subtly incorporated into the drama, and the listener must also be familiar with the cast of characters. Despite his humble background, knowing who the public characters were was something that had captivated Wingren's interest from his early boyhood. In his family home in the small town of Valdemarsvik, there had been no books, but there was a daily newspaper and yearly almanacs, to which he devoted great attention. "Already as a teenager, I could name all of the members of the Swedish parliament and their various political parties, all the members of the Swedish Academy and the Royal Academy of Science, all county governors, members of the Cabinet, and bishops."[8] Through dedicated study of personnel listings, the young reader of almanacs soon learned the intricate patterns of the most wide-ranging networks and root systems in the church as well as the academic world. This

8. Wingren, "Bredden gick förlorad" (1991), 123.

also provided him with the rare ability to predict imminent collisions between different agendas and positions. I remember how thrilled he was in a particular situation, when he had put two family trees, both of which he was quite familiar with, into juxtaposition, and suddenly realized that the person in question must be a direct descendant of Charles Darwin![9]

There is a close connection between Wingren's culture of narration and his pronounced appetite for intrigues in the broadest sense of the word. This interest was frequently focused on the complex interplay associated with various academic appointments. He took careful note of how the "players" moved and positioned themselves as the "game" proceeded. Like a football coach, he registered carefully all changes in the game and made observations from the field in his notebooks. His interest in the drama of the academic playing field is evident in these notebooks. For example, in the mid-1960s, he noted, "Ebeling has accepted Tübingen . . . Trilhaas has refused Munich . . . Possible that Gärtner would rather have . . . the Oslo faculty sought by . . . area experts . . ."[10] His great interest in strategic and tactical operations, evidenced by these sorts of notes, must be taken seriously in the reading of his publications and his actions as well. Nothing he said or wrote seems to have been done on a whim. Everything seems to have been consciously positioned in a dramatic context.

Wingren had a well-developed ability to interpret what was happening on the playing field, and his interest in the intrigue, which sustains the narrative function of stories, was melded together with what he himself described as an almost fanatical interest in the drama of real football matches. In his memoirs, he relates visiting the Grundtvig Højskole, a community college (*folkhøjskole*) in Hillerød, Denmark, to present a lecture. During his visit he snuck away from his host, Rector and Professor Ole Jensen, to the student lounge to enjoy a World Cup football match on television. He explained his actions in this way: "I take

9. The person in question was Lars Haikola, assistant professor of philosophy of religion at Lund University, later an academic leader at several institutions of higher learning, and University Chancellor in Sweden from 2010 to 2014. Haikola himself has confirmed that Wingren's conclusion was in fact true, with one modification. Haikola's maternal grandfather, Charles Earnest Overton, who also had Darwin as one of his Christian names, and Lars Haikola are in fact related to the more famous Charles Darwin, but through his "maternal grandfather's paternal grandfather's cousin—more or less."

10. Personal notebooks from the mid-1960s preserved in Gustaf Wingren's uncatalogued personal archives in the Lund University Library.

an almost pathological interest in such things."[11] In another section of his memoirs, he systematically employs football metaphors to describe the logic in academic interplay. He likens the appointments of university professors to "league finals" and speaks of "matches" that can be won or lost. When the "final whistle" has been blown on the "playing field," the "spectators" voice their reactions, sometimes even uttering accusations of "referee error." He even used these metaphors to describe his own experience and career. Unable to hide his disappointment, he states, "For a footballer to have to hear such a dressing-down about a victorious final play again and again, the gold medal—that is, the professorship—can be a bit heavy to wear."[12] His particular choice of football as metaphor is not by coincidence. More than once, Wingren bought a copy of the newspaper *Aftonbladet* (Evening News), flipped immediately to the sports pages, cut out the scores for the Swedish football league *Allsvenskan*—and then threw away the newspaper. Besides theology, football was the only thing of interest to him. Hence, for him, theology was like football—but without a ball. Wingren, of course, shared this great interest in football with many others, including many intellectuals. In his later years, philosopher and Nobel Prize–winning author Albert Camus (1913–60) is said to have surprised his intellectual friends by telling them he was grateful to football for teaching him the most about the difficult questions of life: battle, coincidence, and interaction on the field.[13]

Wingren's attraction to drama and narrative was also tied to his lifelong work with issues of exegetics and biblical theology. In particular, inspiration gained from biblical scholar Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1891–1956) and the form-critical school of exegesis helped him place the parables of the *gospel*s at the heart of his interest in exegesis. Like a string of pearls, these short stories repeatedly show how Jesus acted, with comments added to explain the meaning. Often, these parables contain a critical moment of surprise in which Jesus suddenly turns the listener's expectations upside down. However, the narrative basis of Wingren's theological

11. Wingren, *Mina fem universitet* (1991), 153. In his private notebooks from his later years, Wingren departed from his otherwise strict focus on work-related notes and took it upon himself to write more about everyday diversions. When he did so, it was in particular his crazy interest in football that often was recorded, as for example during the World Cup matches of 1990, when he noted evening after evening: "TV night at ANNA's place (Scotland vs. Sweden in Genoa) . . . TV night at ANNA's (Costa Rica vs. Sweden in Genoa) . . . We visited Anna (TV, Cameroon vs. England) . . ."

12. Wingren, *Mina fem universitet* (1991), 25ff.

13. Eklund, "Bokkrönikan."

reflections, with its focus on drama and symbolism, also associated him with another theologian, Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977), by whom he had been strongly influenced but to whom he seldom referred, and against whom he never directed any serious criticism.[14]

Wingren's interest in narrative, drama, intrigue, and confrontation has also influenced his own written depictions of himself. In works such as *Creation and Gospel: The New Situation in European Theology* (1979/1979) and *My Five Universities: Memories* (1991), the narrative voice is evident when he presents his own theological position. Yet it must be kept in mind that in these autobiographical depictions Wingren's presentation is marked by a strong need to configure the story in his own particular way. Thus, anyone who attempts to write about Wingren faces the challenge of capturing Wingren together with the act of his storytelling—without being captured by his own story.

Wingren's interest in narrative and dramatic structure was also present in the particular way he wrote his books. First, he devoted considerable time to thinking through the overarching structure. When this was completed, he pinned the outline to the door of his office, where it thereafter served as a strategic map of the operations he was planning. He would then alternately think and write, chapter after chapter, following his outline to the letter, even down to the exact number of pages he had indicated for each section of the book. In the text that emerged, written by hand in his characteristic style (which resulted from his deformed right hand), he would add only those corrections that would fit on the pages of the manuscript, or on notes pasted onto the edges of the pages; then, finally, he would send it off to a secretary to have it typed.[15] As

14. In addition to Gustaf Aulén, there is evidence of noteworthy ties to other theologians, which Wingren himself mentioned only seldom, and then only fleetingly, such as Arvid Runestam and Torsten Bohlin. Göran Bexell has illustrated these ties in his *Teologisk etik i Sverige sedan 1920-talet*, 173–77.

15. Wingren never used a typewriter, and due to his difficult-to-read handwriting, he was dependent on help from others. During most of his marriage to his first wife, Signhild, she seems to have rewritten all of his manuscripts, in any case, during the years from 1942 to 1960. Toward the end of the 1960s, however, this task seems to have been transferred to the departmental secretaries, and the thanks that he made to them in the acknowledgment sections of his books were almost an art in themselves. In one book from 1968 we can read the following words: "Finally, the willing staff of the Theologicum: Mrs. Ylva Norrman, Mrs. Karin Wernant and Miss Ingrid Bengtsson—typed the final version of my manuscript. To them, I now say thank you." Wingren, *Einar Billing* (1968), 6, not included in the English translation. These formulations sound nonetheless subdued compared to the praises he directed toward Miss

a result, Wingren's books are usually very well organized. I would even posit that a good deal of their content and message is to be found in the very structure of the tables of contents. Yet anyone who develops a close familiarity with any of Wingren's works soon realizes that various sections often seem to have been placed under the wrong headings. Brilliant formulations, sometimes of an aphoristic nature, as well as analysis, along with summaries of central themes, seem to lie strewn arbitrarily throughout the text without any relation to the basic order of the book. In contrast to the table of contents, the actual content of the different sections of the book is not ordered in a particularly systematic way. It is as if the contents had been gathered together like a series of arguments, aphorisms, and narratives, and then placed arbitrarily, relatively independent of the overall order, in a way that in fact may resemble the manner in which the parables are ordered, and which vary considerably in the four gospels.

When Wingren attempted to defend himself in the debate that followed his book *The Silent Interpreter: What Theology Is and What It Ought to Be* (1981), he candidly confessed that his work certainly contained repetitions and unclear points, but then frenetically referred to the table of contents and the index as the most important keys for readers seeking to understand what he was trying to convey: "It took me days of work to assemble this index . . . Along with the table of contents, it is one of the book's most important sections."[16] The care that Wingren invested in the indexes of his books is indicative of the strategic attention with which he conceived them. Nothing mentioned in the indexes is there by chance. Moreover, from the 1940s onward all of his books, with very few

Bengtsson, who had now become Mrs. Lilliehöök, in, for example a book from 1972: "Among my assistants, Mrs. Ingrid Lilliehöök is in a class by herself. She is attention to detail personified, an invaluable resource for someone who must deliver a useable book manuscript and who himself writes only by hand. My thanks go to all involved, but especially to her." Wingren, *Växling och kontinuitet* (1972), 10. Two years later he wrote the following in a foreword: "And finally, as usual, Mrs. Lilliehöök. She typed up my final manuscript, and she always sees through and understands my corrections to my own text—often one correction on top of another, sometimes a third on top of the previous two. I do not know how she does it but I want her to know how much I appreciate her and her work." Wingren, *Credo* (1974/1981), 15.

16. Wingren, "Pensionärer och avlidna" (1982), 5. His personal journal shows that for two entire weeks (June 19–July 2), he worked with the index of *The Silent Interpreter* (1981), but there is also a note that this time it was Greta Hofsten who typed up the final index on July 6–7, and then the entire manuscript was sent to the publisher in Stockholm the following day.

exceptions, have three indexes: one index for names, another for subjects, and a third a register of Bible quotations cited in the text. It is there, at the end of his books, that the reader finds the list of characters, the plot, and the sources of the drama Wingren places on the stage.

The second major characteristic of Wingren's intellectual style is his focus on conflict. It is no exaggeration to claim that he loved confrontations and found much of his intellectual nourishment and inspiration in these confrontations. The many conflicts that peppered his academic career are almost unequalled on the Swedish university scene, and it is in and through these battles that Wingren's own position becomes evident. To use an idea posited by Associate Professor Edgar Almén, it is as if Wingren, by staging such confrontations, was trying to hunt down the basic precepts of thought present in various arguments.[17]

During my time in Lund, I witnessed firsthand a number of Wingren's unusually vehement confrontations, which often revolved around the issue of women's right to serve as ordained ministers in the Church of Sweden. When he once challenged Bishop Bertil Gärtner to a debate in the Petersgården Church in Lund on ordination of women as ministers, the two clerics shouted indignantly at one another, faces bright red, until those of us in attendance truly feared they would come to blows. Seldom have I seen such aggression in a debate. On another occasion, 13 May 1982, I was visiting Uppsala and found myself at a gathering where the entire group of Uppsala's theology professors were to debate Wingren on the theme of "Science, Interpretation, Proclamation." This proved to be a marathon debate that began at 7:15 p.m. and continued until 10:40 that evening. Author Lars Andersson was also there. Many years later he remembered the smoldering atmosphere of the event in this way:

> That evening I went to the University. In Room 10, Gustaf Wingren was raging against Uppsala and everything that it stood for. Exegete Lars Hartman, dogmatician Anders Jeffner, and practical theologian Åke Andrén sat with him, all at the same podium. One after the other they rose, made their case, were flayed alive by Wingren as they stood, and then sank back into their chairs, on Wingren's left and right.[18]

Swedish theology has not witnessed a similarly spectacular event (which, I should add, was not an isolated one) since Wingren's departure from the

17. Almén, "Wingrens teologiska argument," 15.

18. Andersson, "Kväll i maj," 53–54.

scene. In some ways this may be a relief, but there may well be many who, like me, miss the kind of intensity and sense of engagement that Wingren brought to our theological discourse.

Without a doubt, one of the major characteristics of Wingren's intellectual method was that he developed his theological ideas through confrontation and conflict. He himself hinted that he had been something of a troublemaker during his youth in the town of Valdemarsvik. Similarly, as a professor of theology, he was drawn to conflict. His expressions of appreciation for those who chose to confront him must be understood in light of this background. He regarded it almost as a form of dueling, which became obvious to all—in the early 1980s, for example, he wrote in a letter, "I am very happy that at least Jeffner chooses the path of confrontation. He and I will meet at the Theological Society in Lund on February 3, 1982."[19]

There are stories from faculty meetings at which his suggestions evoked no discussion, since they were met with general approval, and were quickly voted into effect. In such situations, Wingren could quickly lose his composure and become visibly disappointed. Many who did not know him well underappreciated his predisposition for conflict, and furthermore, did not understand that he in fact *wanted* to be met with resistance. Professor Carl-Gustaf Andrén, a longtime colleague, later president of the University and national university chancellor in Sweden, tells of a faculty meeting at which his colleague Wingren was especially unpleasant. As the meeting broke up, Andrén brutally grabbed Wingren in the doorway and gave him a sound scolding before dismissing him with the words, "Now you may leave!" It became clear that Wingren appreciated and respected this sort of heavy-handed treatment, for at the next faculty meeting he was in a wonderful mood, and to the great surprise of his colleagues offered to take on a number of tasks.[20] It seems to me that he actually respected those who confronted him. It was as if he sought mutual recognition through these conflicts: they served as a way for him to discover other people's positions on issues and allowed him to calibrate his arguments. However, as Associate Professor Lars-Olle Armgard, Wingren's former doctoral student, commented, "You never quite knew whether he wanted *everyone* to think the way he did, or *no one*."[21]

19. Wingren to Per Erik Persson, 28 September 1981.
20. Interview with Carl-Gustaf Andrén, 21 January 2010.
21. Interview with Lars-Olle Armgard, 18 January 2010.

Author Tim Adams describes a similar mindset in his book about the tennis player John McEnroe. In a long series of matches against his archrival, Björn Borg, McEnroe reached the heightened feeling of euphoria that he needed in order to play at the top of his game and that, in an odd way, made him whole. Great tennis players, like great chess players or great boxers, cannot exist in isolation: they require a rivalry, an equal, to allow them to discover what they really might be capable of.[22]

In his love of conflict, Wingren's intellectual style resembled that of another author to whom he devoted many years of detailed study, the reformer Martin Luther. With the exception of his two catechisms, Luther was almost incapable of writing systematic texts. Luther's work consists mostly of polemic, even in the instances when he wrote Bible commentaries. Wingren also shared Luther's enjoyment of everyday things such as food and drink, earthy discussions, and a humor that was equally as uplifting as it was burlesque.[23]

Confrontation was also vital to Wingren's understanding of the Christian faith itself. Conflict served a decisive theological function for him, since he believed that the phenomenon to which we refer as Christianity (a word that does not exist in biblical vocabulary) does not become evident until it is confronted by something that threatens to negate this belief. In keeping with the theological importance he ascribed to stories, he maintained that without taking these conflicts seriously, it was not possible to understand what Christianity is. Not until Christian faith is confronted by something that threatens it does it become necessary to articulate what otherwise remains embedded in the life of faith as tacit knowledge. In his book *Change and Continuity: Theological Criteria* (1972), Wingren expounded his most systematic presentation of the "analysis of confrontation" that was so vital to his methodology. Here he stresses, "*Confrontations* play an extraordinary role in the unbiased, objective analysis of continuity and change throughout the history of Christianity."[24] In Wingren's hermeneutics, this analysis of confrontation determines the criteria for judging how change and continuity relate to one another in every contextual interpretation of Christian faith. This basic perspective is also found in the work of a Swedish professor of an

22. Adams, *On Being John McEnroe*.

23. Cf. Kedidjan: "But if, like him, one has read through Luther's collected texts in black-letter type, and found significant pleasure and enjoyment in it, perhaps one cannot avoid becoming a little like Luther in his ways." "Griftetal" [eulogy], 3.

24. Wingren, *Växling och kontinuitet* (1972), 8.

earlier generation, Einar Billing (1871–1939), who strongly influenced Wingren. In one instance, Wingren demonstrated how the universal elements in Billing's work were to be found as "silent prerequisites" for his reasoning: "Only when these universal elements were *threatened* did Billing try to articulate these presuppositions, which up to that time he had assumed as self-evident."[25]

It is easy to recognize the potential strengths and advantages of this conflictual methodology, particularly in regard to the development of Wingren's own theological work. Through it he was able to bring together productively a number of conflicts that moved his thinking forward in a way that otherwise might not have been possible. As with storytelling, confrontations served as a way for him to define and cultivate his own position. In general, there seems to be a close connection between creativity and the occurrence of conflict. New and unexpected ideas often originate from collisions between differing, extant phenomena.

Yet, this approach also has a darker side, and carries risks. As a matter of fact, the incessant confrontations often created an unhealthy work environment at Lund University. The greatest conflict in Wingren's life was with his own predecessor, Anders Nygren. This conflict (which will be revisited many times throughout this study) came more or less as a complete surprise to Wingren's contemporaries. Furthermore, over time, it became increasingly passionate and irreconcilable. Some of the risks inherent in a perspective based on conflict include the difficulty of maintaining an open, inquisitive attitude toward complex issues and the loss of nuance in debate, as well as loss of openness toward the convictions and arguments of others. Confrontation can also significantly deteriorate to the extent that it short-circuits academic dialogue and transforms discussion into a violent and destructive battleground. In an individual who may be already too categorical, a lack of willingness to negotiate and compromise may make it difficult to take responsibility for, or manage, an institution or organization. In environments in which people are already fearful of conflict, such inflexibility also risks destroying personal relationships. During an anniversary conference held in honor of the then eighty-five-year-old Wingren, his one-time Associate Professor Gunnar Hillerdal pointed out that Wingren's refusal to compromise and his constant provocations and attacks created an unbearable atmosphere among the faculty, which also affected his students:

25. Wingren, *Exodus Theology* (1968/1969), 156.

> You made it difficult for us students sometimes, and perhaps even more difficult for yourself, by refusing to compromise. Today, almost half a century later, I really think the climate in Lund after 1950 could have been a little better if you had listened and reasoned more concerning various possibilities. Differing viewpoints can in fact complement one another.[26]

It seems that others became inadvertently caught up in these battles and also suffered from them. Clearly, the man who crafted one of the most important and creative achievements of twentieth-century Swedish theology was not without his shortcomings. Yet, what appears to be a person's greatest weakness can often, if used creatively, become his greatest strength. Gaining an understanding of Wingren's theology requires us to take his particular intellectual style seriously: the mixture of humor and earnestness, warmth and provocation, which characterized his narrative way of thinking and his many conflicts. His use of stories and confrontations brought both advantages and disadvantages. This was probably also rooted in Wingren's working-class background, and was itself a phenomenon of the folk culture in which he grew up. As he mingled with the cultured sons of the state church clergy in the halls of Lund, this tanner's boy from the small town of Valdemarsvik never truly felt at ease.

Wingren enjoyed and had a great interest in people. There are many who witnessed his capacity to recognize and receive the most widely varied personalities with genuine curiosity, graciousness, and warmth. Yet he also felt that he needed to "pinpoint" people, as he put it, by telling a story or coaxing forth something controversial from them, which might serve as a point of departure for discussion. In order to approach the soul of Wingren as constructive theologian, then, it is necessary to focus not only on storytelling but also on his many confrontations—without becoming involved and transformed into a combatant in the trench warfare of his many academic battles. To do so successfully requires that we not only read the text carefully but also understand the context.

## Contextualization

This book is comprised of a series of contextualizations that I have employed, partly to place the theology of Gustaf Wingren into a historical context for the purpose of making it accessible, and partly to show

26. Hillerdal, "Det teologiska klimatet i Lund omkring 1950," 38.

how his capacity to decontextualize and recontextualize his theological sources may be considered one of the great innovations in his theological project.

When presented in terms of simple biographical data, most people's lives may seem somewhat trivial, or in the worst case, so repetitive that they become lost in obscurity. Yet, life is in reality lived in the spaces between the fixed coordinates, and what we find there is what makes a difference. Thus, in order to understand our lives in a comprehensive way, narration is a necessity. Only when narrated will the meaning of our lives be disclosed.

Gustaf Fredrik Wingren was born on 29 November 1910, in the journeyman's cottage at the tannery at Tryserum, in Kalmar County, on the border between the provinces of Småland and Östergötland, on the Swedish east coast. For most of his childhood he lived in the small town of Valdemarsvik. His parents had recently moved to the area and upon their arrival the previous year they lost their firstborn child. Gustaf's father originated from Laholm, in the province of Halland, and his mother from the Roslagen district north of Stockholm. Aside from a short stay in the village of Floda, outside of Gothenburg, in 1914–15, and half a year spent in Gälevad, outside of Örnsköldsvik in Norrland, Gustaf spent his first seventeen years in Valdemarsvik. Later, he also spent many summers and shorter visits there, and in fact even served as pastor there in 1940. His mother, Engla Theresia (née Sundman), gave birth to five children who survived, in 1910, 1912, 1914, 1916, and 1919. The last birth was a difficult one from which she never fully recovered. The following year she was admitted to the hospital in Söderby, and in March 1921 she died at the young age of thirty-four, when her youngest child was only two and a half years old. The tragic loss of their mother plunged the then ten-year-old Gustaf and his younger siblings into a chaotic home life. In this critical situation, the family was rescued by Engla Theresia's sisters; both were Methodists. Many years later, in 1971, Gustaf Wingren wrote a few words in an obituary for his aunt Signe, the saving angel:

> When her sister Teresia Wingren died in 1921, leaving five young children—of whom I was one—she entered our home and managed it until we all had left the nest. For a quarter-century, from 1922 to 1947, we lived in a place which today shines with light—the workers' quarters at the Norrbacka leather factory in Valdemarsvik.[27]

27. Wingren, "Signe Sundman. In Memoriam," *Norrköpings Tidningar*, 30 December 1971.

The children's father, Gustaf Fabian, was a tanner who changed jobs often in pursuit of independence, driven by dreams of establishing his own enterprise. He eventually settled down as a foreman at Karl Lundberg's tannery in Valdemarsvik. A child who grew up in such a working-class environment was expected to learn an "honest" trade so that he would be able to "walk through the gates of the factory, become a worker, and be paid wages like a real man."[28] To his father's sorrow, this was not to be the case with Gustaf, who was born with a congenital defect. His right hand was deformed, and he had only three and a half fingers. It seems that Gustaf's own greatest regret about his disability was that it limited his abilities as a football goalkeeper. However, it also meant that he would be the only one of the five children permitted to pursue an education, and he exhibited a remarkable gift for studies.

It is clear that the experience of having a physical disability had a great impact on Gustaf's perception of himself, as well as on his intellectual project. Later in life, when he had started his own family, he never spoke of his hand. When photographs were taken, he always hid it in his pocket, under a coat, or behind his back. His attempts to hide his deformed hand meant, paradoxically, that those closest to him were all the more aware of it. In his youth, Gustaf had abruptly ended a romantic relationship after being told that "people like him" were not allowed to marry and have children. In my investigations, I have found only one instance when he deliberately showed his right hand in public. When his name had been mentioned as a possible candidate for a bishopric in the diocese of Växjö, a senior master from Kalmar publicly argued that according to biblical tradition, a person with a *corpus defectus* could not be considered for the position. Wingren was at that moment already a professor in Lund and had no desire to become a bishop, yet his reaction to this statement was outrage. In the heat of the discussion, Wingren is said to have raised his right hand, shaking with anger.

German philosopher and social thinker Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) also lives with a disability. Late in life, he related how the theory based upon the rationally motivated agreement of communicative action that he developed into a major theory of the communicative conditions inherent to democracy was inspired by his own early experiences as a schoolboy. Due to the congenital defect of a cleft palate, his speech was nasal and distorted. His classmates had difficulty understanding him,

28. Wingren, *Mina fem universitet* (1991), 25.

and even avoided him. It was this particular experience of not being taken seriously due to a disability that later served as inspiration for his lifelong investigation of the conditions and possibilities of communication.[29] It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider the importance Wingren's deformed right hand, which limited his ability to perform manual labor, may have had for his theological work, if we recognize its basis in the conviction that a human being is a living body, and the recognition of the ordinary vocational life as a gift from God. It cannot be a coincidence that a person who was himself unable to perform physical work chose to write his doctoral dissertation on Martin Luther's understanding of everyday labor as a calling ordained by God, yet God remains hidden as if concealed by a mask. It is also of significance that if it had not been for his hand, Wingren would rather have become a goalkeeper for the Åtvidaberg Football Club. He did all that he could to hide his deformed right hand, yet anyone who shook hands with him immediately became aware of it. In Valdemarsvik, his hand relegated him to the role of a cripple—yet it also provided him with the opportunity for further education and a research career. In the academic life at Lund University, Wingren's right hand served as a constant reminder of his roots, while at the same time it forever separated him from what would have been his natural community and career in Valdemarsvik.

Even as a young boy attending the Swedish Lutheran Church in his hometown, Gustaf nourished ideas of studying theology and becoming a pastor. In his memoirs he claims that his life's adventure did not really begin until he arrived in Lund on 10 July 1927. Even after his graduation from a private upper secondary school in Lund (the Spyken School), he still exhibited signs of debilitating homesickness. However, in the autumn term of 1929 he entered Lund University, and from that moment Lund was to become the fixed point around which his life would revolve for the rest of his days. It is generally known that educational institutions can take on a particularly important role in the lives of those who have not grown up in a tradition of higher learning, and for Wingren, entering Lund University was indeed a sort of homecoming.

After Wingren had fulfilled the basic requirements and was ready to select a specialization, it was far from clear which theological discipline he would choose. The newly appointed professor in New Testament exegetics, Hugo Odeberg (1898–1973) befriended Wingren. Odeberg

29. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 13–17.

recognized his student's great talent for research and saw in him a future professor. Despite this, by the middle of the 1930s, Wingren was drawn to another newly appointed professor, Ragnar Bring (1895–1988), who occupied the chair in systematic theology, with responsibility for instruction and examination in Christian dogmatics and symbolism. Bring had studied at Uppsala, and after several years at Åbo Akademi University (1931–34) had come to Lund as Aulén's successor and would remain there for the rest of his life. Bring, too, had great hopes for the young student and encouraged Wingren to focus his primary research on the early church fathers. If he had not been brutally interrupted by the outbreak of World War II in 1939, he might have maintained his focus on that subject. Sadly, the realities of the war closed off all possibility of visiting archives and major research establishments on the Continent. Initially, Wingren seems to have planned for *Irenaeus and Marcion: Studies on the Concept of Creation* (1939) to be a project for a complete book. In the end, it resulted only in an unpublished licentiate thesis, produced by the simplest means possible, but which nonetheless gained Wingren the highest academic grade. The same autumn that the war broke out, Wingren decided to enroll in the practical theological course in order to pursue ordination in the Church of Sweden. Yet the gigantic confrontation between good and evil that came to be a dominant grand narrative of the twentieth century dramatically changed the fundamental working conditions for Wingren. He was forced to make other plans and radically redirect his research interests. Instead of the early church fathers, he began to study a subject almost one and a half millennia younger than his previous area of interest, and with which he was quite unfamiliar at that time: Martin Luther and the theology of the Reformation. Thus, during the years that followed, he alternated research and study with service as an ordained pastor in the Church of Sweden, and in 1942, during one of the darkest periods of the war, he defended his dissertation, *Luther on Vocation* (1942/1957).

Nine years later, in 1951, he assumed a professorship in systematic theology, with responsibility for instruction and examination in theological ethics. Thus, at the age of forty-one, he began what would prove to be a long and extraordinarily successful career as a professor at Lund University. Despite a number of offers of professorships at leading international universities, including Basel, Göttingen, and Tübingen, and rather regularly being named as a candidate for bishoprics in various Swedish dioceses, he remained in Lund and was faithful to his

professorship through the years. For the next twenty-six years, he would be almost completely consumed by academic activities.

His private life during these years seems to have followed a rather normal course of events without any dramatic changes. In 1943 he married Signhild Carlsson (1913–2000). With Signhild, whose father was a marine engineer at the Svea Shipping Company in Valdemarsvik and who had herself been trained as a nurse in the tradition of the Swedish Sophia Sisters in Stockholm, Gustaf had two children: Anna, born in 1946, and Anders, born in 1949. The family lived at several addresses in Lund—first on Studentgatan, then on Pålsjövägen, and then in an apartment at Vintergatan 2E. Some years later, they moved into a larger apartment at 2C in the same building. Despite the seemingly comfortable details of his family life, Wingren was interested in little other than theology. In many respects, he lived and worked on another plane of existence. He was often absent from the home but was nonetheless extremely interested in his children and their friends, and could be lively, pleasant, and funny. Nils-Gunnar Nilsson, a well-known culture editor for the newspaper *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, who worked with Wingren for many years, relates that the first time he ascended the spiral staircase to the office in the professor's home, he was surprised to see that not only were the walls of the room filled with books from floor to ceiling, but the entire floor was covered by his son's extensive model train track.[30] Nevertheless, the University, with which he had a somewhat grudging love-hate relationship, was the real focal point of his existence. Signhild Wingren often defended her husband and sought to justify his absence from home and his long working hours by saying, "Gustaf works for humanity." One of his early doctoral students, Harry Aronson, later associate professor and then school administrator, relates one of his first encounters with his teacher:

> It is the early 1950s, and I am walking toward Lund Cathedral, and suddenly realize that I am on a collision course with Gustaf Wingren. His somewhat heavy frame moves onward toward Sandgatan [where the Faculty of Theology was located]. He is middle-aged, a relatively new professor, and carries a thin briefcase under his arm. His gaze is directed upward through round eyeglasses which had been out of fashion for quite a while, toward the steeples surrounding Lundagård Park. As a new licentiate student, I am unsure of myself at this unexpected meeting with the world of ideas, for I understand that this is

30. Interview with Nils-Gunnar Nilsson, 26 May 2010.

> not just a person I am meeting, but a person who inhabits a theological universe, with which he assumes I, too, am familiar. The professor, of course, is privileged to speak first, and I can be expected to engage in a theological discourse . . . How can I manage a reply that will not sound too crazy . . . Finally, we are face to face. As expected, he immediately utters a statement about the current theological situation: "Barth is the most important theological thinker of our day—who thinks wrongly!" How should one reply to something like that?[31]

Wingren's work as a theologian consumed him. When young Harry Aronson met the professor on the street, he was well aware that he was meeting not only a person but a living, walking world of ideas, "a person who inhabits a theological universe." Wingren was a well-known public figure in Sweden at that time, and his work took him on many long journeys abroad. Indeed, his most important academic contacts were in the international arena. He seems to have kept his home life in Lund private, although his students and their families were regularly invited to gatherings and receptions in the Wingren home. Signhild Wingren often showered affection upon his doctoral students, as if they were a group of adopted sons.

The biographical data shows that by the mid-1970s winds of change had begun to whirl into the professor's life. In 1974 he suddenly withdrew his ordination as pastor in the Church of Sweden. Two years later he divorced his wife and married Greta Hofsten. He retired in 1977. As will be seen, these dramatic changes in his personal situation played a decisive role in his *turn toward society*, which appeared in his theological work from the 1970s and onward.

Gustaf Wingren died on 1 November 2000, less than one month before his ninetieth birthday. Probably he felt some measure of relief at having avoided the hypocrisy he associated with celebrations and speeches given on landmark birthdays. He often recalled an event that occurred early in his career during a celebration for a colleague. After having poured superlatives over the celebrant, the speaker of the day positioned himself at the back of the crowd, and exclaimed loudly, "It just makes me want to throw up!" Although Gustaf Wingren reveled in polemics and conflict, he hated this sort of hypocrisy (feeling that it was more honest to engage in open battle), which probably helped maintain the relative social isolation he already experienced at the University due to

31. Aronson, "Minnesbilder," 95.

the experiences he underwent when he migrated from the journeyman's cottage to academe. He kept his love of academic conflict and infighting alive until the end. In his very last interview, which he gave on 17 June 2000, he burst out, "When I served as a professor and was scolded every day—that was a wonderful time!"[32]

## Engaging with Wingren's Works

The author is dead, but his many texts remain and endure, open for all to read. How should we today read and interpret these texts? As of his eighty-fifth birthday, Gustaf Wingren's bibliography encompassed over 750 publications.[33] However, he also wrote a number of articles after that, and his books continue to be released in new editions and translations even after his death. In addition, he also penned innumerable small articles, essays, and commentaries for newspapers and magazines. Altogether, the list of publications is impressive. In my presentation, I have limited myself to Wingren's major works, those that may be considered landmarks and "game pieces" that he constructed and used in his strategic operations on the theological playing field. Articles and individual chapters from books have been added only in those instances where they provide something new and different. Moreover, archive materials and other unpublished sources, as well as interviews, have been of significant importance for my investigations. First and foremost, however, Wingren constructed his theological system and his self-understanding through his major books, which, in chronological order, may be listed as follows:

1942/1957 *Luthers lära om kallelsen* / *Luther on Vocation*

1947/1959 *Människan och inkarnationen enligt Irenaeus* / *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*

1949/1960 *Predikan: En principiell studie* / *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*

1954/1958 *Teologiens metodfråga* / *Theology in Conflict: Nygren, Barth, Bultmann*

1958/1961 *Skapelsen och lagen* / *Creation and Law*

32. Wingren in Gierdi, "Tolken som ikke tier," 7.

33. Ledin et al., "Gustaf Wingrens tryckta skrifter, 1933–1995."

| | |
|---|---|
| 1960/1964 | *Evangeliet och kyrkan* / *Gospel and Church* |
| 1968/1969 | *Einar Billing: En studie i svensk teologi före 1920* / *An Exodus Theology: Einar Billing and the Development of Modern Swedish Theology* |
| 1972 | *Växling och kontinuitet: Teologiska kriterier* / *Change and Continuity: Theological Criteria** |
| 1974/1981 | *Credo: Den kristna tros- och livsåskådningen* / *Credo: The Christian View of Faith and Life* |
| 1979/1979 | *Öppenhet och egenart: Evangeliet i världen* / *Creation and Gospel: The New Situation in European Theology* |
| 1981 | *Tolken som tiger: Vad teologin är och vad den borde vara* / *The Silent Interpreter: What Theology Is and What It Ought to Be** |
| 1983 | *En liten katekes* / *A Small Catechism** (coauthored with Greta Hofsten) |
| 1983 | *Människa och kristen: En bok om Irenaeus* / *Man and Christian: A Book on Irenaeus** |
| 1985 | *Gamla vägar framåt: Kyrkans uppgift i Sverige* / *Going Forth on Ancient Roads: The Mission of the Church in Sweden** |
| 1989 | *Texten talar: Trettio predikningar* / *The Text Is Speaking: Thirteen Sermons** |
| 1991 | *Tyngd och nåd i svensk skönlitteratur* / *Gravity and Grace in Swedish Literature** |
| 1991 | *Mina fem universitet: Minnen* / *My Five Universities: Memories** |

(Titles marked with an asterisk [*] have not been published in English.)

This lengthy list of titles may seem daunting to the uninitiated. How can we engage with, read, understand, order, and contextualize this authorship? One way is to sort Wingren's books into different categories. From this perspective, we may first identify a group of books that disclose the historical sources of Wingren's theological thinking: *Luther on Vocation*

(1942/1957), *Man and Incarnation* (1947/1959), *An Exodus Theology* (1968/1969), *A Small Catechism* (1983), *Human and Christian* (1983), and *Gravity and Grace in Swedish Literature* (1991).

The second group consists of those books in which Wingren deals with issues of theological methodology, with a special focus on the problems of hermeneutics: *Theology in Conflict* (1954/1958), *Change and Continuity* (1972), and *The Silent Interpreter* (1981).

A third grouping is comprised of the books in which Wingren presents his attempts at a systematic presentation of the major components of the Christian faith: *Creation and Law* (1958/1961), *Gospel and Church* (1960/1964), and *Credo* (1974/1981).

Fourth and final are the two books that deal with and are directed more specifically toward the church: *Going Forth on Ancient Roads* (1985) and *The Text Is Speaking* (1989). It is notable that both of these books were published after Wingren's retirement. Today, however, after the publication of the Swedish edition of this book, we may add the posthumous *Homilies: Gustaf Wingren Preaches* (only in Swedish: *Postilla: Gustaf Wingren predikar*, 2010).

In addition, there are two books in which Wingren sought to tell his own story, providing an overview of his own authorship and placing it in context. Both of these books he also wrote after his retirement: *Creation and Gospel* (1979/1979) and his intellectual autobiography, *My Five Universities* (1991).

Lastly, over and above these groupings, we have to deal with a book that seems to defy classification: *The Living Word* (1949/1960). This is Wingren's most controversial book, and it has been the object of the most widely varied judgments. It was dismissed at its initial publication as nothing more than a piece of proclamatory preaching and has been declared unscholarly, bizarre, and rubbish. This did not stop the author himself from giving it his highest praise; in his later years, he spoke of it as "the best work I have ever written."[34] Indeed, the book is really remarkable, an almost volcanic book that was controversial from its first publication and has remained so ever since. I maintain that judgments passed on it by critics and enthusiasts, as well as the author himself, are rife with confusion, which must be dealt with by anyone wishing to gain an understanding of Wingren's theology.

34. Wingren, *Mina fem universitet* (1991), 118.

At first glance, it may appear that the books that Wingren published during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were mere repeats of his early publications. However, a closer examination reveals that his works from those later decades actually were the result of a new theological direction he had begun to pursue. One of the basic assumptions I have made in this intellectual biography is that Wingren's thinking underwent a dramatic change from the 1970s onward, during a period of time in which he staged a personal metamorphosis and recontextualized his entire system of theology. After having worked primarily in the *academic* sphere, he redirected his theological path toward a critique of civilization by placing his theological reflection mainly in a *social* context. Wingren's works may thus be clearly divided into two major periods, and according to this periodization his second wave of books may be recognized as creative revisitations and recontextualizations of the theological system he had actually completed already by 1960. In effect, *Luther on Vocation* (1942/1957) is recast as social criticism in *A Small Catechism* (1983, written in collaboration with Greta Hofsten according to a model that the pair would use for several books in which their respective contributions were interspersed with one another). He reconsidered Irenaeus in *Man and Incarnation* (1947/1959) in a social context and offered an ideologically critical twist in *Human and Christian* (1983). He revisited the battles he waged in his 1954/1958 *Theology in Conflict*, and in a new guise focused on the social role of theology in *The Silent Interpreter* (1981). In the same way, his first systematic theological presentation of the Christian faith that had been released as two books due to the limitations of the original publisher, *Creation and Law* (1958/1961) and *Gospel and Church* (1960/1964), were reconfigured using the same basic structure, but with the aim of achieving a social recontextualization in *Credo* (1974/1981). However, as mentioned above, Wingren's book *The Living Word* (1949/1960) stands on its own outside any groupings of his other works, and is difficult to place. I ascribe to this book a unique, decisive role in Wingren's authorship, but I do so for reasons other than those the author himself indicated. In particular, some historical distance from the subject makes it easier to see that *The Living Word* can in fact be considered as the vital component in his *turn toward practical wisdom*.[35]

35. Bexell has previously argued that it is possible to identify three periods in the authorship of Wingren. Bexell, *Teologisk etik i Sverige sedan 1920-talet*, 144ff. To a large extent, I concur with this statement, even though my interpretation of these periods looks somewhat different. In addition, it has been my ambition to understand the inner logic of this developmental process.

Finally, before the story begins, we may ask the following question: Why publish a book about Wingren today? I am convinced that there are a number of good reasons for doing so. The very fact that Wingren has, in recent years, become a more or less unknown figure in the public theological discourse in Sweden and that today, only a decade after his death, hardly any of his texts are being used in current Swedish theological instruction provides a strong reason to call attention to his work. From having been a household name among theologians for nearly half a century, Wingren and his works are suddenly almost forgotten, even among those with a high degree of theological education. In this respect, he is only one of a number of theological giants who have been forgotten all too quickly, and this has resulted in the need for contemporary theologians to reinvent the wheel time and time again, or to be unnecessarily taken aback by challenges that could have been dealt with in a more constructive way had there been greater knowledge of the theological resources available.

It should be remembered that Sweden was a significant contributor to the international field of systematic theology during the middle decades of the previous century.[36] With no disrespect for the value of the initiatives being undertaken by contemporary Swedish theologians, it must be stated that no current systematic theologian in Sweden today measures up to the renown held by half a dozen theologians during the "golden age," from Nathan Söderblom and Gustaf Aulén to Anders Nygren and Gustaf Wingren. The silence is all the more remarkable because of these perspectives. By no means do I wish for unexamined acceptance, but I claim that twentieth-century Swedish theology truly deserves to be taken seriously and honored academically in the best way through the most stringent criticism and examination possible. Constructive reinterpretations of the works of these theologians must also by necessity be critical interpretations. However, to make this possible at all, we must revitalize this tradition and immerse ourselves anew in the works and thoughts of these theologians.

A second reason for writing a book about Wingren is that the year 2010 marked the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, which was celebrated by conferences at Lund University and other places. The world

36. Of course, Swedish researchers in other areas of theology also found international acceptance. For example, in the field of New Testament exegesis, Swedish names such as Anton Friedrichsen, Harald Riesenfeld, Krister Stendahl, and others are well known.

that he entered on 29 November 1910 was very different compared to the world we experience today. This was before the two world wars that left Europe and many other parts of the world in ruins, and also before the Cold War, which would leave its mark on the later decades of the twentieth century. The Swedish welfare state had not yet been created, and automobiles had not yet provided easy mobility for ordinary people. The Church of Sweden and the Swedish state were still firmly intertwined with one another at the top of a more or less authoritarian social order, in which the actions taken by local pastors and their bishops were regarded as affairs of the state. Sweden was in fact not yet a democracy in the modern sense of the word, and had scarcely begun the remarkably rapid process of industrialization and modernization that would eventually give the country one of the highest standards of living in the world. In 1910, the everyday reality for the vast majority of the Swedish people was that of an impoverished and largely rural society. For the family of Fabian Wingren, the tanner, as for most other Swedish families of the day, higher education was not an option. Only one of the Wingren children had the opportunity to pursue advanced studies: Gustaf. The other children—Maj, Lage, Harry, and Valborg—were dedicated to work that did not require higher education. When sixteen-year-old Gustaf arrived in Lund on 10 July 1927, he had never made a telephone call or used a flush toilet.

To write about the career of this gifted young man is also to tell part of the history of the twentieth century. When the story begins, Sweden was entering a process of industrialization, and when it ends, the halcyon days of Swedish industry were already over. It seems to me that this transformation of Swedish society must have influenced Wingren's theological endeavors. In a corresponding manner, the social transformation that we are experiencing today will bring dramatic changes in living conditions and contribute to the rise of new philosophical interpretations of the human condition. Given such a situation, a theology that allows itself to be transformed by the dynamic forces of a changing context, and which has, at the same time, actively embraced the possibilities it offers, has undoubtedly an important contribution to make. With Gustaf Wingren, this extraordinary capacity for recontextualization is grounded in a grain-of-wheat theology, a concept that we shall return to later on, and which implies that we can only effect change when we ourselves are prepared to be changed and that it is only by losing ourselves that we can find ourselves.

A further reason for writing this book is the theological implications of Gustaf Wingren's relationship with his second wife, Greta Hofsten. It is a matter of fact that as a leading theologian in Sweden, Wingren counted among his most important sources of inspiration a person who with time became his wife and life partner, but whose main institutional basis and competence was neither academic nor theological. At the time of their most intensive collaboration, Greta Hofsten was working as a postman. It is remarkable that, in all previous literature on Wingren, her influence on his theological thinking has been neglected. I myself maintain that it is not possible to gain an understanding of Wingren's theology in its entirety if we ignore the vital role Hofsten played in the second half of Wingren's authorship. An intellectual biographical presentation is required in order to capture the voices and personalities of this dynamic partnership. Otherwise, Hofsten will be neither seen nor heard—and one of the most important inspirations for Wingren's theology will remain invisible.

The collaboration between Greta Hofsten and Gustaf Wingren brought together two widely divergent networks that otherwise had few connections. Two worlds met in a conversation, the results of which stretch across important portions of twentieth-century Swedish intellectual history. In order to do justice to this more comprehensive picture, I have considered it a necessity to transcend the borders separating standard disciplines and break with traditional academic prose. It is my hope that a theological biography may give voice to the broader context that is necessary in order to understand Wingren's texts. Hence, it is obvious that a book about the life and work of Gustaf Wingren must also be in part a book about Greta Hofsten.

For me, the process of writing this book has also been a profound personal experience. During several formative years of my life I became acquainted with and was befriended by Gustaf Wingren and Greta Hofsten. However, for a long period of time I did not believe that I had sufficient distance for a critical and constructive awareness of his theological project. Only now have I been able to remove myself from the story that Wingren himself crafted so carefully, and thus been able to discover my own path through his writings as well as my own variant of the story of his life.

The final and most important reason for writing about Wingren is, of course, his theology. I am convinced that the hermeneutical theology of creation Wingren developed can make significant contributions today.

There are good reasons for putting this theology into effect in the current world, not as a nostalgic memorialization or as an attempt to defend some immovable conviction but as a creative new interpretation of Wingren's thinking, with the aim of inscribing his writings into the postliberal context that is ours today. In Wingren's work we face a theological endeavor full of themes highly pertinent to society, academia, and the church, as well as resources for theological thinking in the contemporary world. Late in his life, Wingren himself presented several attempts to explain the cohesion of his theology, but these attempts to put everything in the right order in the story of his life and his theology have not made things easier for anyone wishing to write about him. As a biographer, it has been necessary to be on my guard to avoid merely repeating his formulations and stories—and confrontations.[37] More than anything else, what has helped me create the necessary distance in order to discover new perspectives is the course of time itself.



37. To a great degree, this can be said to be the case with the studies that make a collective presentation of Wingren's theological project, such as Vander Goot, "The Fundamentality of Creation in the Theology of Gustaf Wingren" (1976); Øjestad, *Studie i Gustaf Wingrens teologi med særlig henblikk på hans forståelse av evangeliet og sosialetiken* (1975); Reilly, *Law and Gospel in the Theology of Gustaf Wingren* (1974); and Petrén, *Skapelse och frihet* (1995). The monumental (and failed) dissertation *Tigern som tolkar* (2004) by Stefánsson is in general difficult to approach. To a lesser degree, it could be said that this characterizes the presentations in which the theology of Wingren is part of a larger examination and the perspectives taken are more independently original, as is the case with Bexell, *Teologisk etik i Sverige sedan 1920-talet* (1981); Sigurdson, *Karl Barth som den andre* (1996); Sandahl, *Folk och kyrka* (1986); Anderson, *Gustaf Wingren and the Swedish Lutheran Renaissance* (2006); and the closing chapter of my own dissertation, *Kommunikation på bristningsgränsen* (1994). I would like to point out Karlsson, *Predikans samtal* (2000), and Håkansson, *Vardagens kyrka* (2001), as the most important contributions to research in this area, as they apply independent thinking regarding materials and perspectives.