

## Wilhelm Schmidt: A Closer Look

**Abstract.** — *It is sometimes said that Wilhelm Schmidt had no real theory of history, that he was opposed to certain schools of thought primarily because of his clerical background, and that, owing to his "Austrian mind," he failed to take certain elementary precautions in his attempt to define culture. The present article seeks to show that such interpretation of Schmidt and his work is historically untenable. This the author does (1) by distinguishing between theory and philosophy, (2) by pointing out the sources of Schmidt's theory, his various assumptions, and his reasons for his opposition to other schools of thought, and, finally, (3) by reminding the reader of the meaning of "culture circle" as understood by Schmidt. [History of Ethnology, Kulturkreislehre, W. Schmidt]*

It is sometimes said that Wilhelm Schmidt had no theory and that he was not doing history at all. Many of his premises, it is sometimes supposed, simply came from his having "an Austrian mind" and from the fact that he was a Catholic priest<sup>1</sup>. Such an interpretation of Schmidt and his work is historically untenable, as the following closer look at Schmidt, we hope, will show.

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<sup>1</sup> In an article published in *Man* (14.1979:133-144), Karin R. Andriolo stated that W. Schmidt did not have a theory of history with which he worked, that, indeed, he did not do history in his ethnological work at all. Why he did what he did in the way he did it came from the fact that he worked in the Austrian milieu. In addition she formulates some conclusions regarding Schmidt's concept, or lack thereof, of culture. In the process she draws some conclusions regarding Schmidt's mode of criticising others, especially monotheism and psychoanalysis.

In this article I would like to respond to these allegations, for the time being in a programmatic way. Obviously I think many of her strictures are wrong. Schmidt deserves critique, but not for the reasons Andriolo offers, as I hope to show here. In a later study these points will be addressed in greater detail.