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**An Arche of His Own:  
Charles H. Long as Consummate and Constant Teacher**

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I begin (and end) anecdotally with a tellingly clear recollection of the first time that saw Charles H. Long in the flesh, as it were. That occasion was a 1983 conference at the University of Chicago Divinity School, organized primarily by Joseph M. Kitagawa as an occasion to summon “a series of reflections by leading scholars and practioners of the discipline [of the history of religions] regarding the significance of its scholarly tradition and its problems.”<sup>1</sup> Among the luminaries, Mircea Eliade, who was introduced by Jonathan Z. Smith, delivered a special lecture, among the last of his career, as did Paul Ricoeur, who was introduced by Bernard McGinn. Scholars who were at the time more junior such as Lawrence Sullivan, Diana Eck, David Carrasco, Alf Hiltebeitel, Bruce Lincoln and Joanne Punzo Waghorne were among the respondents to presentations by Michel Meslin of the Sorbonne, Italian historian of religions Ugo Bianchi, and Ninian Smart. Willard Oxtoby, Judith Berling and Benjamin Ray were charged with responding to the final presentation, a lecture by Charles H. Long that was subsequently published as “A Look at the Chicago Tradition in the History of Religions: Retrospect and Future.”<sup>2</sup>

The whole affair, vintage academic theater orchestrated beneath the carved wooden angels in the third floor lecture space of Swift Hall, was heady stuff for a new

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<sup>1</sup> *The History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Joseph M. Kitagawa, with an afterword by Gregory D. Alles and the editor (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), xi. This volume includes versions of the papers and responses delivered at this 1983 conference. A full enumeration of the participants appears on page xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Long, “A Look at the Chicago Tradition in the History of Religions: Retrospect and Future,” in *ibid.*, 87-104.



graduate student now faced with a throng of walking and talking scholars that he had previously encountered only in print. But, for me, CHL's lecture was the runaway highlight. I can, in fact, recall precisely where I was sitting, on the left-hand side of the room, when I received my initial exposure to his style of oratory; and I remember especially two arcs in his talk: The first observation, which he accentuated even more emphatically in the post-lecture discussion (and which I would subsequently hear him revisit time and again in other contexts), was a pointed tension wherein, he opined, in his characteristically inimitable way, that what is the best and most appealing about the disciplinary orientation of the "history of religions" owes to its Western Enlightenment heritage and, at the same time, what is most problematic and troubling about the history of religions likewise owes to that Enlightenment heritage. He observed, in other words, that the aspirations to "a science of religion"—which, though long anticipated, has never been accomplished—reflected, on the one hand, compelling Enlightenment commitments to tolerance, objectivity, critical judgment and a version of humanitarianism; but, on the other hand, construing the academic study of religion in that modernist way was also predicated on a kind of hegemonic and limiting correlation between the idea of the human and the notion of reason.<sup>3</sup> As he framed the double-edged debt to the so-termed Age of Reason and thus his ambivalence about a "science" of religion,

"The study of the Other as a science is a modern preoccupation of the West. The origins of these disciplines are in the Western Enlightenment. Although all human beings and societies do not express the same quality or modality of reason, reason is still the norm as capacity and potentiality."<sup>4</sup>

The other most memorable lines came at the very end of his lecture and did not survive in the written version. Laying aside his prepared text, CHL, at that time on the faculty of the University of North Carolina, ended his remarks by taking issue with Thomas Wolfe's famous title to venture that, where the University of Chicago is

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<sup>3</sup> The written version of this arc of this comments appears in Long, "A Look at the Chicago Tradition in the History of Religions," 99ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 99. In lieu of a "science of religion," Long, *ibid.*, 100-102, argues for a "discourse about religion." Note that he revisits that proposal, among other places, in Charles H. Long, "Towards a Post-Colonial Method in the Study of Religion," *Religious Studies News*, vol. 3, no. 2 (May 1995): 4-5.



concerned, "you *can* come home again." Both moved and moving, CHL used the occasion of a return to his former institution to acknowledge his deep attachment to the tradition of scholarship on which he was commenting critically and, by doing so, offered some well-timed inspiration to an unassured student like myself who was tarrying at the gate that apparently led into the variously famous or infamous Chicago School. His combination of style and substance, exuberance and unmistakable sincerity made him the consummate ambassador for the Chicago way of construing the field as something wonderful and worthy of the sacrifices that such a career trajectory would apparently entail.

Following the lecture, serendipitously enough, I found myself exiting the building and walking across campus nearly shoulder-to-shoulder with Professor Long. Inspired but also silenced by the comingled display of erudition and passion, I could summon neither a question nor a self-introduction, and instead contented myself to synchronize my stride with his. Reminded, in my downward gaze, of those cargo cult contexts in which the natives imagine there is some as-yet-unknown secret required to call home the payload of goods, I entertained the absurdity that CHL gained some privileged insight into the history of religions via his well-shined black wingtips. Perhaps the secret of his impassioned insight was in the shoes.

But as I subsequently came to appreciate, the real example to aspiring students of *Religionswissenschaft* that CHL had demonstrated that May afternoon was, of course, not about footwear choices. Instead it was an admonishment that the hallmark of the so-termed Chicago School was *not*, as some critics maintain, the utilization of particular categories nor an oath of allegiance to the conceptions of religion promulgated by Joachim Wach or Mircea Eliade. Alternatively, as he phrased the more crucial criterion of affiliation in the introduction to that 1983 conference paper: "Schools of thought [e.g., the Chicago School of the history of religions] and methodological discourse are not the expressions of the desire for ideological purity but rather *a concern for self-conscious reflection about what one is doing and why*."<sup>5</sup> The hallmark of the Chicago School was, in other words, as I understood him, neither adherence to a unified approach nor embeddedness in a particular bibliographic canon, but rather a commitment to clarity and

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<sup>5</sup> Long, "A Look at the Chicago Tradition in the History of Religions," 87; italics added.



self-consciousness about one's assumptions, procedures and investments, in his phrase, "the intense concern for method."<sup>6</sup>

The personal impact of that initial encounter notwithstanding, this essay is autobiographical only insofar as my decades-long interactions with CHL are typical, unexceptional because they are reechoed by so many who have chosen the study of religion(s) as a career path. No one I know has inspired and supported more students of religion. Though never officially a matriculant in one of his classes, I, like countless others, experienced his always-teacherly presence at myriad meetings, most notably at numerous formative and leisurely-paced summer conferences of the Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project at the University of Colorado in Boulder during the 1980s. In those always-edifying, never-rushed meetings, which were instigated and orchestrated by the Archive's director, David Carrasco, the formal sessions with presentations by leading scholars from the US and Mexico, excellent as they were, often served as preludes to the even more fabulous learning sessions on the balcony of the Hotel Boulderado where CHL held court in the evenings. Lob him an ill-formed query about Malcolm X, the Pope, American Indians, Wilhelm Dilthey, Aztecs, Africans or scholar-athletes, and Teacher Long would hold forth with an artful mix of patience and impatience; candor, geniality and occasional rage; theoretics and theatrics; deep seriousness and always humor. Nowhere were laughter and learning cinched more tightly.

As every contributor to this volume can testify, CHL extended the classroom to all contexts. And if he is the exemplary teacher, I am simply one example among the several generations of students who came under his instructional influence. That in mind, I will discuss briefly four successive ways, or four roughly chronologic sorts of moments, in which so many of us have experienced—and benefitted beyond measure from—the work and presence of CHL, each of which speaks both to a different stage in our respective careers and a different aspect of his pedagogic profile.

### **I. Long as Inspiration and Ambassador for the History of Religions: Beyond Beliefs, Churches and Doctrines**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 93.



First, for students completely unfamiliar with the field—say, undergraduates still in search of a major—the work of CHL has provided a means of conceiving the academic study of religion so that it appeals, perhaps irresistibly, to those for whom the topic of “religion” previously had no particular allure, either personal or professional. Unwilling to pretend that things are simpler than they are, CHL utilizes a style of writing that is, for beginning students, dense, indirect, sometimes cryptic. As he explains in the Introduction to *Significations*,

“The essays presented in this volume explore the possibilities of form of thought that is rooted in the experience of black traditions. In one sense, these essays are, in Rudolf Otto’s language, ideograms—those forms of meaning which lie between experience and category. This is the exploratory range. In another sense, the essays may be seen as exercises in stylistics. I mean by this to indicate the *shape* of thought, or better, the emerging *shape* of thought. The concern represented by this geometric metaphor has to do with the change in the structure of thought itself.”<sup>7</sup>

Ambitious and compelling as these “exercises in stylistics” may be, they hardly issue in essays that seem amenable to the undergraduate classroom. I suspect that many of us who have utilized his work in that context have faced the sort of baffled students who require us to act as translators and interpreters of CHL’s arguments and “ideograms.” On more than one occasion I have, at some point in the class, lamented my inclusion of his writing among my course readings—for instance, the utilization of his “Conquest and Cultural Contact in the New World” in a course on American Indian Religions—only to discover by the end of the term that this 15-page article has proven to be the most impactful piece on the syllabus.<sup>8</sup>

To what, then, do we attribute these seemingly unlikely pedagogical successes? I would wager that they depend in large part on the atypical way in which CHL construes the object of his scholarly attentions—namely, “religion”—and thus what is at issue in studying religion. To quote again from the same Introduction, “As a historian of

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<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 8-9; italics his.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Long, “Conquest and Cultural Contact in the New World;” in Long, *Significations*, 97-113.



religions I have not defined religion in conventional terms. To be sure, the church is one place one looks for religion... But even more than this, the church was not the only context for the meaning of religion..."<sup>9</sup> And then come those famous lines, "*For my purposes, religion will mean orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world.*"<sup>10</sup> By linking "religion" to existential and experiential "orientation," not unlike Eliade's conception of religion as "a mode of being in the world," CHL disrupts the commonplace (modernist and tacitly Protestant) assumption that religion, albeit a matter of enormous importance, is principally about beliefs, ideas and adherence to doctrinal prescriptions: "The religion of any people is more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms. Its first and fundamental expression is not on the level of thought."<sup>11</sup>

CHL thereby undermines the familiar undergraduate expectation that religion is strictly, or even primarily, a churchly affair; and, even more importantly, he dislodges any presumption that scholars of religion are, of necessity, church-going, church-minded advocates for some faith stance. Following his lead, the academic study of religion is critical rather than confessional; irrespective of his estimable respect for persons and communities of faith, the academic agenda that he presents is neither the reverent nor the self-disclosing undertaking that many college students expect religious studies to be. But then he replaces those sophomore suppositions with a broader and much deeper sense of the foci of historians' attentions.

In "Conquest and Cultural Contact in the New World," for instance, he urges students to appreciate how the so-termed discovery of America constituted a catastrophic challenge, of course, to the "religious orientations" of native peoples.<sup>12</sup> That pre-Columbian Americans had beliefs and practices deserving of the label "religion," and that colonialist contact had "a tragic effect" on those indigenous populations are, at this point,

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<sup>9</sup> Long, Introduction to *Significations*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; italics added.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Charles. H. Long, "Conquest and Cultural Contact in the New World," in *Significations*, 97-113.



predictable if important observations.<sup>13</sup> Students are, however, rather more surprised that CHL's first priority in this article has less to do with rehabilitating our image of Indians (not an unimportant incentive) than with forcing to attention the much less obvious sense in which the engagement with the New World also constituted a profoundly vexing "religious" problem for Europeans. He teaches us, in other words, that the European encounter with the New World—and the surprised awareness of "other lands" and "other peoples"—in addition to posing dire challenges for native communities, also threatened and subverted Europeans' previously tried-and-true "orientations to the world."<sup>14</sup> In the wake of the confidence-shattering realization that they occupied a world much larger and very different from the one they had previously imagined, Old World populations too were compelled to undertake a radical "re-fashioning" of their sense of place and ultimate significance in the world. In the "contact zone," which was CHL's career-long preoccupation, no one escapes profound reassessment. According to him, the discovery of America is, in short, a "religious crisis" of enormous proportions for Indians and Europeans alike.

In sum, then, CHL, in writing and in person, while invariably raising profoundly ethical-moral questions, and thereby enhancing the urgency of studying religion—indeed, for CHL, the academic study of religion is always a consequential matter—emits a kind of honesty, candor and, yes, irreverence, at least concerning that which is routinely associated with Sunday school religion. Especially notable, even shocking, to the beginning student is the way that he dismantles expectations that the study of religion ought to be primarily, and perhaps in its entirety, the study of churches, institutions and theology. In that way, the boundaries of the discipline's relevancy—and for lots of us, its appeal—are blasted wide open. To be a historian of religions of the sort that CHL instantiates not only relieves one of the specters of sanctimoniousness, it, moreover, enables those scholars to comment on all sorts of contexts, topics and circumstances that might not strike most people as matters of religion. Instead of holding a focus on churchly affairs, doctrinal beliefs or questions of morality, he presents the history of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller exposition of these ideas, see Charles H. Long, "New Space, New Time: Disjunctions and Context for New World Religions," in *Criterion* (a publication of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago), vol. 24, no. 1 (winter 1985): 3-7.



religions as a route—perhaps the very best route!—to understand and appreciate the human condition, a means to ask “so what?” in every situation. And that surprised realization has sparked the initial interest of countless future scholars, myself among them.

## **II. Long as Methodological Guide for the History of Religions: Colonialism, Materiality and Religion**

Second, for more advanced students learning the contours and methods of the field—say, those in graduate school from the 1970s forward—CHL, by anticipating many insights of the eventually high-profile perspective of “post-colonial studies,” provided a singularly powerful, politically sensitive and forward-looking alternative to mainstream religious studies. Where genealogies of post-colonial theory routinely invoke the likes of Frantz Fanon, Edward Saïd, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and maybe Dipesh Chakrabarty as the most notable theoreticians, CHL, too infrequently mentioned in historical reviews of that field, had already begun in the 1960s to articulate his own sustained and nuanced observations about the enduring and insidious legacies of colonialism and imperialism. And thus for graduate students of religion in search of progressive methodological models, his version of the history of religions had a relevance, urgency and rigorous skepticism—a querulous, often angry edge—that made it an appealing compliment to the arguably over-generous “creative hermeneutics” of Mircea Eliade.

Apart from the efforts of CHL, students of religion and commentators on colonialism operated for too long in largely non-intersecting orbits. In one direction, religious studies is deserving of widespread complaints about a distressingly slow engagement of matters of race, class and gender, even after that triumvirate of issues had become the dominant concerns in the emergent fields of cultural studies and post-colonial studies during the 1980s and 1990s. And, in the other direction, theorists working from those more explicitly politicized scholarly perspectives, while interrogating the circumstances of colonialism in relation to a host of topics ranging from “orientalist” representation to nationalism, syncretism and/or hybridity, ethnicity, language, feminism,



the body and performance, production and consumption, etc., were strikingly neglectful of religion as a topic of explicit consideration. Note, for instance, the near absence of explicit discussions of religion in the most prominent anthologies of both cultural studies and post-colonial studies.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, students of religion well into the 1990s, especially those not directly preoccupied with indigenous peoples, might well have had the impression that this vigorous conversation about postcoloniality and "orientalism" was one that they could, in good conscience, ignore.

Beginning at least two decades earlier, CHL, however, was a uniquely strident and consistent voice in driving home the irrefutable connection between colonialism and the ways that *all* of us conceptualize "religion." In his restlessly polemical view—wherein he interrogates "the play of the slash" that makes distinctions between "primitive" and "civilized" and, via sustained attention to the logic of cargo cults and fetishism, forces to attention the crucial connections between religious ideas and "materiality"<sup>16</sup>—CHL argued that essentially all modern studies of religion have been implicitly colonialist. And thus no serious student of religion could justifiably omit the processes of colonialism from one's theoretical considerations.

CHL's proposal for a corrective "post-colonial method in the study of religion"—which was developed and elaborated in a whole series of articles including "Cargo Cults as Cultural Historical Phenomena" (1974); "Human Centers: An Essay on Method in the History of Religions" (1978); and "Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of the Problem" (1980)—depended upon redirecting the scholarly focus from one sort of historical

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<sup>15</sup> Religion is, for instance, a notable absence in both original and subsequent editions of the ostensibly overviews works, *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) and *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> On his continuing preoccupations with "the play of the slash" that makes distinctions between primitive and civilized, see, among numerous examples, Charles H. Long, "The Study of Religion: Its Nature and Its Discourse," (Inaugural Lecture of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder; October 7, 1980), 12. For a mature articulation of his views on cargo cults and fetishism, see, Charles H. Long, "Religion, Discourse, and Hermeneutics: New Approaches in the Study of Religion," 5-8.



context to another, or, more specifically, from the supposedly "archaic" contexts of tribal communities to an alternate "Enlightenment arche."<sup>17</sup>

With respect to the first option, CHL repeatedly observed that the approach to studying religion that grew out of the Enlightenment sciences was based on "evidence" generated from two new sources: the "primitives" and the "religions of the East," that is to say, two bodies of "data" that, not inconsequentially, emerged from voyages of discovery undertaken by the maritime nations of Western Europe or, in other words, from the processes of colonialism.<sup>18</sup> He concurred that these ostensibly "archaic" contexts are deserving of intensive scholarly investigation, not least because they reveal such decidedly non-Western religious orientations; they provide a crucial destabilization of Eurocentric perspectives. But he took issue with the pervasive notion that the "origins" or "essence of religion" could be found among the "primitives" that had preoccupied the likes of Tylor, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss and Eliade. Alternatively, he made the then-radical proposal that we must instead focus our attention on the historical context, dynamics and legacy of the Western Enlightenment in order to discern the more salient origins of *the category of* "religion." The Enlightenment context—wherein Europeans embarked on a host of "voyages of discovery," and thus entered into a host of new relationships with cultures in every part of the globe—according to CHL, "gave rise to a different understanding of both 'the human' and the meaning of religion."<sup>19</sup> This context of unprecedented global interactions had given way to "new notions of matter, materiality, and its exchanges," which in turn provided the impetus for new ways of thinking about religion.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, it is this wider ambience of global expansion and the formation of "the new mercantilism,"<sup>21</sup> not the more limited frame of ostensibly isolated and pristine tribal cultures, that ought to be the primary focus of historians of

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<sup>17</sup> All three of these articles were subsequently reprinted in Long, *Significations*. Additionally, for a clear and concise summary of this proposal, see Charles H. Long, "Towards a Post-Colonial Method in the Study of Religion," in *Religious Studies News* (published by the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature), vol. 3, no. 2 (May 1995): 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Long, "Religion, Discourse, and Hermeneutics: New Approaches in the Study of Religion," 3.

<sup>21</sup> Long, "Towards a Post-Colonial Method in the Study of Religion," 5.



religions' critical attentions. It is, in short, to the Enlightenment context and to the dynamics of imperialism and colonialism that we ought to look for the "arche," starting point or "conditions of possibility" that gave rise to the origin or, more properly, the "constitution" of (the modern conception of) religion.

In sum, then, well in advance of vogue for post-colonial studies and deep reservations about "orientalism," CHL argued strenuously for an approach to the study of religion that brought to the fore the forces of European colonialism and global expansion. He was, for many of us, the first and most forceful to illumine the now-familiar notion that academic study of religion, hardly the innocent undertaking that it is usually presumed to be, was, in large measure, born of, and thus implicated in, the colonialist adventuring of Europeans. Moreover, in addition to raising consciousness about the colonialist entanglements of religious studies, he presented and then put into practice constructive alternatives. While never abandoning the search after the different ways of knowing and acting—indeed, as I'll note momentarily, he would remain a great advocate for serious attention to non-Western contexts and thus cross-cultural comparison—CHL transformed the so-termed "history of religions" into something more like the *history of ideas about the category of "religion."* And in so doing, he had a profoundly transformative effective on graduate students who were just beginning to shape their own scholarly profiles and research agendas.

### **III. Long as Colleague, Confidant and Mentor for Historians of Religions: Continuity, Comparison and Inspiration**

Third, for those in the early stages of a scholarly career—say, those who, after securing a teaching position in the field, encounter CHL only sporadically at national meetings—he has provided a completely reliable, ever-encouraging source of replenishment and "re-centering" insofar as each of those rendezvous draws one back to the large and central questions that sustain the history of religions as a distinctive undertaking. Indeed, when the vicissitudes of the classroom, local departmental politics, tenure processes, and colleagues of very different academic persuasions engender doubt about this approach to studying religion, an encounter with CHL at a conference can



work like nothing short of an elixir. For all that changes in his work, and for all the myriad topics with which he has dealt over the past several decades, CHL—like an athlete or musician whose improvisations thrive on steadfast fundamentals—invariably brings to the fore an abiding set of core issues; and in that way, he constantly reminds younger colleagues of what it was that attracted them to this field in the first place.

Among those core issues, four stand out, all of which are characteristic of the Chicago School insofar as they are generally consistent with the respective agendas of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade, but to each of which CHL adds his own nuance and adjustment. The first—an inheritance of Wach's contentions about the sort of academic discipline that can attend properly to what he termed "specifically religious experience" and what Eliade framed as the "irreducibility of religion"<sup>22</sup>—involves the distinctive, arguably privileged perspective of those who are formally trained as historians of religions. If, as Wach and Eliade maintained, religion is *sui generis*, then, by their logic, it was crucial that the study of religion be designed in ways that respect and acknowledge that distinctiveness. Though seemingly less insistent than those scholars that, in order to honor the supposed uniqueness and "autonomy" of religion, the history of religions must be configured as an autonomous academic (non-normative, non-confessional) discipline, CHL nevertheless continues to make—and to exemplify—the proposition that scholars whose primary, not ancillary, preoccupation is religion, do indeed have a unique and worthy contribution to make.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, though less inclined than his predecessors to wave the old banner of irreducibility, and perhaps moderating somewhat Wach's exuberant claims that *Religionswissenschaft* is uniquely prepared to recover that which matters most about human being, namely "the religious dimension of human experience," CHL does nonetheless remind us, time and again, that his choice of disciplinary affiliations was

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<sup>22</sup> Regarding Wach's criteria of "specifically religious experience," see Joachim Wach, *Types of Religious Experience Christian and Non-Christian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 31-33. The foremost of Eliade's recurrent arguments for the "irreducibility" of religion appear in Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>23</sup> Of innumerable venues in which CHL reflects upon the special potential (and problems) of academic units devoted first and foremost to the study of religion, see Long, "The Study of Religion: Its Nature and Its Discourse."



studied rather than incidental. No other discipline, he concluded early on, could serve as well to provide the sort of answers about the human condition that he sought.<sup>24</sup> The necessity of interdisciplinarity and cross-traffic across various approaches to the study of religion notwithstanding, CHL, like Wach and Eliade, remains unpersuaded that any other perspective delivers analyses of religion that are quite so well informed or edifying; all commentators on matters of religion are not equal. While everyone can snap photographs, some of which may emerge as fortuitously artful, we amateur shutterbugs have to concede the superiority of the images produced by professional photographers. And, by the same token, while scholars of many disciplinary persuasions, and even non-scholars, certainly have valuable insights into religion, the presentations and interventions of CHL invariably confirm that professionalized scholars who have devoted themselves first and foremost to the disciplined study of religion will contribute in special ways to the conversation. Steeped in that *Religionswissenschaft* tradition, he has a distinctive pattern of questioning and thus, as all who experience his lectures know, always delivers observations and insights that others do not.

The second issue involves an enduring, if unfashionable support for the arguments in favor of generalization, including theorizing about the general phenomenon of religion, that one encounters in the works of Wach and Eliade. Wach, for instance, aspired to a "vision of the whole" via cross-disciplinary exchange and methodological eclecticism; in his relentlessly optimistic view, beyond insight into particular historical events and people, the final goal of a hermeneutical history of religions ought to be an "integral understanding" of the meaning and essence of religion (in general) and human nature (in general), "a broad desire for truth."<sup>25</sup> Even more famously, Eliade, in his proposal for a

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<sup>24</sup> In an uncharacteristically self-disclosing phrase, Long, "A Look at the Chicago Tradition," 98, explains, "It is the world of the *homo religious* that has attracted students and researchers to the discipline [of the history of religions]; it has attracted me, for I had tired of the banal sociological and historical studies of the 'unofficial groups' in Western society put forth by the conventional 'classical' disciplines devoted to their interpretation..."

<sup>25</sup> See Joachim Wach, "The Meaning and Task of the History of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*)" [originally 1935], in *The History of Religions: Essays on the Problem of Understanding*, edited by Joseph Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967), 2; or Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Studies of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 11ff.



"total hermeneutics" that could address the trans-cultural, trans-historical, ostensibly "irreducible" nature of religion, argued that while area specialists might be content with specific insights, for historians of religions, the most rewarding conclusions are always general, possibly universal.<sup>26</sup>

When, by the 1980s, these large aspirations increasingly gave way to anxieties about essentialism and advocacy for a version of rigor that only narrowly focused specialization and philological expertise could sustain, CHL's way of operating in a sense held the Chicago School line. While reechoing Wach's and Eliade's insistence that responsible research begins with careful empirical observation, he also shared their view that the study of specific historical religious phenomena is important primarily as the basis appreciating more generalized insights into the nature of religion. As Joseph Kitagawa once remarked to me in the mid-1980s, "Charles Long is, these days, more interested in [the broad conception of] 'religion' than [specific] religions. And that too is something that we very much need..."<sup>27</sup> Where the inquiries of Indologists, Egyptologists or Mesoamericanists ended, those of historians of religions, to the dismay of their critics, continued on to another order of abstraction and generalization.

A closely related third point of continuity entails CHL's continued enthusiasm for cross-cultural, cross-tradition and, to that extent, non-historical (or trans-historical) comparison. Eliade's ceaseless exercises in morphology and the elucidation of cross-cultural patterns and structures are, of course, the very quintessence of this aggressively comparative initiative, which is a hallmark of the Chicago School. Likewise in Wach's partitioning of *Religionswissenschaft* into two branches—the historical and the "systematic"—the former, which entails careful, particularistic empirical description, the "what happened" if you will, is the crucial starting point; but the latter branch, which entails the search after "the meaning of what happened," involves the more venturesome interpretive tasks of cross-cultural comparison and the pursuit of structures, patterns and

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<sup>26</sup> Eliade, *The Quest*, 57-59.

<sup>27</sup> It is noteworthy, for instance, that, though both were equally committed to following through with the agenda for Joachim Wach's agenda for the discipline, CHL has been inclined to drop the 's' on "history of religions" that Kitagawa always retained.



types.<sup>28</sup> The historical branch, then, is the non-controversial component of *Religionswissenschaft*, which, in the opinion of many, ought to be the sum total of an academic, non-confessional study of religion.<sup>29</sup> But CHL joins Wach and Eliade in contending that it is those systematizing, generalizing and comparative activities that provide the discipline's unique and greatest rewards. For CHL, like his predecessors, historian of religions' research projects ought not be content with observations that are solely relevant to one religious tradition.

Accordingly, while at one point in his career, CHL was focused on the religions of East Africa and his is, moreover, a leading specialist on African American religions, always his primary academic affiliation is that of a historian of religion, a scholarly identity that has allowed him to be both an inspiration and top-tier conversation partner with researchers whose attentions are trained on regions and traditions for which he himself would claim no deep expertise. In the 1980s, for instance, he collaborated with Marilyn Waldman's running initiative on Islam; for years he interacted very closely with Japanese historian of religions Michio Araki and his students in their work on numerous Asian traditions; and he has been an informing voice in David Carrasco's Mesoamerican Archive from the onset of that research initiative in the late 1970s through the present. Though he makes no claim to command the particulars of Islam, Asian religions or Aztec history, his productive involvement in all of those projects, and countless others, is, in large part, a consequence of his facility for exploring themes that are relevant in many contexts and traditions, but confined to none. His continued commitment to cross-cultural comparison and to a version of theorizing that only cross-tradition explorations enable has made him a versatile and valued collaborator of the highest order.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Regarding Wach's arguments for the necessity of comparison, see, for instance Wach, "The Meaning and Task of the History of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*)", 4; Wach, *Types of Religious Experience Christian and Non-Christian*, especially chapters 2 and 3; and Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion*, 3-26.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance, Kurt Rudolph, "The Foundations of the History of Religions and its Future Task," in *The History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Kitagawa, 105-120, for a more narrowly defined conception of the discipline that, in Rudolph's view, more successfully avoids "the dangerous waters of theology and philosophy" (*ibid.*, 111).

<sup>30</sup> Regarding the very wide diversity of scholars who acknowledge an important debt to CHL, see, for example, *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of*



Fourth and perhaps most importantly, in every encounter, CHL perpetuates another component of the Chicago School agenda insofar as he applauds—and exemplifies—scholars' disciplined imagination and/or creative intuition in the interpretation of religion(s). In some particularly poetic phrasings, Wach argued that only those fortunate and gifted scholars with an "inner affinity," a "sympathetic imagination," an "inner aliveness and broadness," or "a sense (*Organ*) for religion" are capable of truly understanding others' religions.<sup>31</sup> And in a similarly expansive tone, Eliade, who located the study of religion within the arts and humanities rather than the social sciences, maintained that "creative hermeneutics" is more than instruction; it is a "spiritual technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself."<sup>32</sup> But then, like Wach, he suggested that such interpretive accomplishments require a certain religio-artistic temperament that only some particularly perceptive people have. For better or worse, this tradition of scholarship led aspiring students to believe, and thus to worry that, the best historians of religions, like the most accomplished artists and musicians, were born not made.

CHL, in his own way, also implied—but even more demonstrated by his own impassioned style of delivery—that the history of religions is more than a job or profession; it is an art-like undertaking, maybe a vocation or calling, which entails self-exploration, self-understanding and personal growth. He may stop short of Wach's ebullient contentions that the hermeneutical history of religions serves "a higher purpose," namely, to broaden and deepen the *sensus numinous* of the researcher. And CHL may moderate somewhat Eliade's similarly rhapsodic rhetoric about the "royal road" of the history of religions and hermeneutics that can both transform the individual scholar and, eventually, improve the contemporary world by mitigating "cultural

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*Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, edited by Jennifer I. M. Reid (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Wach, "The Meaning and Task of the History of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*)," 4, 13-14; or Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 12, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Eliade, *The Quest*, 62. In the same vein, Eliade, *ibid.*, iii, contends, "... a considerable enrichment of consciousness results from the hermeneutical effort of deciphering the meaning of myths, symbols, and other traditional religious structures; in a sense, one can speak of the inner transformation of the researcher and, hopefully, of the sympathetic reader."



provincialism" and facilitating a "New Humanism."<sup>33</sup> But nonetheless, for CHL, passion, imagination and personal investments, not less than discipline and philological preparation, are requirements rather than obstacles to praiseworthy interpretations of religion. As I learned from him, hermeneutics is crisis-driven;<sup>34</sup> its success depends upon undertaking the sort of interpretive practices that work to solve an important problem or resolve an urgent existential dilemma. Mere curiosity, cleverness and cautious disinterest in one's topics of study are never sufficient to accomplish important work in CHL's version of the history of religions. In brief, that he has cared so deeply, and in such profoundly sincere ways, about his scholarly work, and about the field to which he devoted his professional life, inspires younger scholars to do the same.<sup>35</sup>

#### **IV. Long as Antidote to Criticism of the History of Religions: Methodological Clarity and Self-Consciousness**

Finally, for those of us who endure to a more seasoned status in the profession—particularly through an era in which the history of religions has weathered such persistent attack—CHL's mentorly roles are intensified rather than diminished. The preponderant influence of Chicago-informed approaches in the religious studies journals, classrooms and textbooks of the 1970s and 1980s faced, inevitably enough, mounting competition and criticism. By the 1990s, academic fashions had changed and pendulums had begun to swing back toward the tendencies that had made the Chicago School such an appealing alternative. Hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches were accused of being inordinately intuitive, empathetic and perhaps covertly theological; preoccupations with ostensibly religious "meanings" were supplanted by greater attention to the political and

<sup>33</sup> See Eliade, "A New Humanism," in *The Quest*, 1-11.

<sup>34</sup> On the way and extent to which hermeneutics is "crisis-driven," an insight derived especially from CHL, see Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), vol. I, chap. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Note, for instance, the continuity between Wach's and Eliade's large claims for rewards of doing the history of religion and those expressed by CHL: "Hermeneutics then described the connection that these phenomena had to life. In this sense it served a reintegrative function; understanding should change the cultural life and situation of the interpreter." Long "A Look at the Chicago Tradition," 96.



economic forces at work in both religion and the study of religion; and the search after cross-cultural patterns and similarities was challenged by calls to foreground the differences among religious traditions. Indeed all versions of comparison and generalization were made suspect by demands for more narrowly pointed particularity, and broad theorizing was much curtailed by anxieties about essentialism and/or Eurocentric totalization.

The mounting rhetoric of multicultural tolerance notwithstanding, many serious scholars felt compelled to avoid the adulatory generosity toward "other religions" that one observes in the work of Wach and Eliade by focusing instead on the seemingly darker side of religion. Neo-romantic optimism about the truth that supposedly resides in all faith traditions may have matched the sensibilities of the late 1960s through the mid-1980s; but in the next couple decades, those charitable inclinations were reassessed, often from Foucauldian and neo-Marxist perspectives, as insufficiently attentive to the misrepresentations, coercions and manipulations that religion invariably entails. Wach's profile and influence waned, except among those who had some direct genealogical connection to his charismatic presence;<sup>36</sup> and, as everyone knows, Eliade's enormous oeuvre and influence was matched by a similarly huge raft of criticism and invective. Disclosures about their personal lives and affiliations, especially in Eliade's case, became, for some critics, insurmountable obstacles to espousing their academic contributions. Others, despite the prevailing influence of its teachers and students for over two decades, even began to doubt that "a Chicago School encompassing both Wach and Eliade" had ever really existed.<sup>37</sup>

Troublingly, the loudest detractors tended simply to equate the Chicago School with Eliade, who was frequently attacked primarily on the basis of his early-life political

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<sup>36</sup> While numerous contributors to *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*, edited by Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger (Oxford University Press, 2010), comment on the much diminished influence of Joachim Wach (see, for example, note 4, p. 22) scholars familiar with his work might see his continuing influence, albeit indirect (and for better or worse), in the conceptualization of nearly all of the abundant textbooks designed for use in undergraduate courses on comparative religion.

<sup>37</sup> Wedemeyer, "Introduction I: Two Scholars, a 'School,' and a Conference," in *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions*, edited by Wedemeyer and Doniger, xix.



affiliations, without ever engaging, usually without even acknowledging, the work of CHL. Why CHL's voice has been much less prominent than it should be in assessments of the Chicago School, and why the drove of Eliade-detractors (along with a smaller swarm of Wach-critics) virtually never address the work of Eliade's arguably most well-informed interpreter, is subject of some debate. Not inclined to polemical defenses of Eliade's person or work—except via demonstration of the continued utility of his insights—CHL is a notable absence from the abundant, still-accumulating collections of essays debating the merits and deficiencies of Eliade's legacy. Moreover, owing, it seems, to a kind of non-careerist approach that is both refreshing and sometimes distressing, many of CHL's most important commentaries, aside from those that reappear in his widely read *Significations*, remain either unpublished or strewn in venues that make it difficult even for interested readers to locate them; one hopes that this present volume can do much to rectify that situation. Furthermore, as his audiences know, the famously commanding (and entertaining) lecture presentations of CHL translate only imperfectly into written articles, which may also help to explain his underrepresentation. Or, if we entertain more disquieting explanations for the oversight, it is plausible that for those intent on accentuating the defects—indeed, the purported obsolescence—of Eliade's approach to the study of religion, and by extension the demise of the Chicago School, the continued productivity of one of its preeminent spokespersons is, to put it much too mildly, inconvenient. And thus his work may have been deliberately ignored.

Serious engagement of CHL's sustained line of argument demonstrates, however, either its immunity from—or, ironically enough, its vigorous support for—nearly all of the most prevalent charges against the more conspicuous protagonists of the Chicago School. If, for instance, the principal complaints are the alleged ramifications of Eliade's (still-disputed) political entanglements or Wach's personal history, these are not factors that transfer, except in very indirect ways, onto the Arkansas-born CHL. If the objection is either some supposedly covert theological point of departure—say, an ostensible requirement that one believe in the ontological standing of "the Sacred"—or some penchant for prescriptive recommendations about the future directions of society, CHL avoids these as well. To the contrary, his conception of *Religionswissenschaft*, not infrequently to the chagrin of more vigorously theological and activist supporters of his



work, requires a scrupulous restraint with respect to philosophical presuppositions, value judgments and/or normative prescriptions. Still working in a broadly phenomenological tradition, for him, the connections between religious studies scholarship and political action are crucial but indirect.

Likewise, if the dissatisfaction is with the inordinately idealized conceptions of religion promulgated by Wach and Eliade, CHL has again long been, as discussed earlier, a leading voice for due consideration of the insidiousness of both religious ideas and ideas about religion, especially in connection with colonialism and racism; his is by no means a rose-colored approach to religion. While never acquiescing to bluntly Marxist approaches, his sustained preoccupations with cargo cults and fetishism, for instance, reflect his explicit insistence that we hold in the fore the economic and material entailments that always accompany religious conceptions and institutions. Additionally, if the accusations are aimed either at the reified conceptions of religion that appear in Wach and Eliade or at their incautious reliance on unexamined assumptions, CHL would again have much more in common with the accusers than the implicated. As noted, he anticipated—indeed, he was way out in front of—the now well-worked conversation about the Eurocentric “construction” or “invention” of the category of religion; and as I maintained at the outset of this article, quite possibly the dominant theme of his prolific career is what he termed, “the intense concern for method.”<sup>38</sup> His abiding investments in the so-termed Chicago School have been based not on a unified approach nor fidelity to some dogma about how to study religion, but rather, as he explains, “a concern for self-conscious reflection about what one is doing and why.”<sup>39</sup>

To be sure, then, challenged by an incessant refrain that the Chicago School way of construing the study of religion is not only outmoded, it marked an unfortunate episode from which progressive and responsible scholars of religion must distance themselves, CHL again bolsters our confidence. In fact, at a time in which so many critics offer reified readings of Mircea Eliade and then, on the basis of those tendentious views, dismiss the entire Chicago School, his work is more salient, more relevant and

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<sup>38</sup> Long, “A Look at the Chicago Tradition,” 93.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



more important than ever.<sup>40</sup> Masterfully effective in evoking the initial interest of beginning students, in charting a progressive methodological course for scholars in the making, and in reassuring young professionals, CHL, moreover, with his remarkable endurance and consistency, sustains many of us for the full durations of our careers. By that reiterative relevance, he makes himself, to use one of his own apt terms, an "arche," a kind of source and resource that worked not only as a starting pointing but, furthermore, to which many of us return time, again and again. No first reading of *Significations* will suffice; no isolated CHL lecture or article captures the force of his ongoing argumentation; no first attempt at teaching his work to students exhausts the potential utility of his writings. Passionate but not sentimental, inimitably amusing but also profound, relentlessly critical but never sanctimonious, he is, in short, a consummate and constant teacher. No, the secret to Charles H. Long's insight into the study of religion definitely does not reside in his shoes.

THE END

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<sup>40</sup> On reified readings of Mircea Eliade, see, for example, "Revalorizing Mircea Eliade's Notion of Revalorization: Reflections on the Present-day Reuses of Mesoamerica's Pre-Columbian Sites and Architectures"; special issue on the theme of "Remembering/Rethinking/Revalorizing Mircea Eliade," guest editors Norman Girardot and Bryan Rennie; *Archaevs: Studies in the History of Religions* XV (2011): 119ff.