Philip P. Arnold and Victor Taylor

Syracuse University

A CONVERSATION WITH PHILIP P. ARNOLD ON *THE URGENCY OF INDIGENOUS VALUES*

Victor Taylor: Thank you for doing this interview with the JCRT. As you know, the Journal was established in 1999, with faculty from several institutions. Charles E. Winquist, Syracuse, and Charles H. Long, UC Santa Barbara (formerly Syracuse), were instrumental. Could you talk about Charles Long's influence on you and the writing of *The Urgency of Indigenous Values*?[1]

Philip Arnold: In short, neither this book nor the Skä·noñh — Great Law of Peace Center would have been possible without the groundbreaking work of Charles Long and the History of Religions. My wife Sandy Bigtree and I were introduced to Professor Long in the early 1980s in Boulder, Colorado where I was working for Davíd Carrasco in the Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project. I was very young and enthusiastic, but Long put me on a path to working collaboratively with Indigenous peoples by using ideas like sacred space, hierophany, and ceremonial gift exchange. The difference between Mircea Eliade and Charles Long, however, was the important elements settler-colonialism that always frame and interject themselves into our academic methodologies.

First, this book addresses Long's ideas by integrating a collaborative method, which is derived from the first formal agreement between the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and European settlers called the Two Row Wampum. This was a co-habitation agreement between what we would now characterize as between Indigenous and settler-colonial people. It has been systematically violated since it was struck in Albany, New York in 1613. Second, "religion" is problematized as consistently used as a weapon against Indigenous Peoples. This is mapped with respect to the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, where a series of papal bulls from the Vatican are written between the 14th and 16th centuries to justify the enslavement, and seizure of lands and goods by Christian explorers when they encounter non-Christians.

---

[1] Philip P. Arnold, *The Urgency of Indigenous Values* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2023).

It was Charles Long who was able to weave a genuine respect for the traditions of the other with a deep critique of the abuses of the West. For me he brought together the disparate History of Religions approaches of Eliade and JZ Smith.

Victor Taylor: Early in the book you describe meeting Charles Long at a conference and having lunch with him, his spouse Alice, and your spouse Sandy Bigtree in Boulder, CO. You describe it as an intellectual crossroads and how he encouraged you to pursue your interest in the history of religions and indigenous studies. Could you say more about the importance of thinking in terms of a "collaborative methodology" informed by what you describe as a "urgent mutual concern"? For example, you recall Long saying that we need to ". . . crawl back through colonialism and reassess what it means to be human."

Philip Arnold: Charles Long taught us that the History of Religions was to be a transformative framework by engaging with the deepest human attributes through the "materiality of religion." He often reminded us that we had to 'crawl back through colonialism' to truly engage with one another. His demand was that we all needed to create an adequate methodology for engaging the 'other' such that a new knowledge could be created that was capable of transforming the world. How do we work together across settler-colonialism, missionization, extermination, and so many other traumas that have been attributed to the modern world? It isn't enough to just have a conversation with the Haudenosaunee (in my case) about abstract theological concepts. What drives an ongoing collaboration is to work on issues of "urgent mutual concern" like social justice, land back, environmental healing and so many other things. In that relationship one develops a strategy organized to accomplish specific issues. This requires a re-orientation of academic work and what counts as authentic research throughout the university.

What Long was calling me—really Sandy and me—to do so long ago, was an enormous challenge and one he did not shy away from throughout his life work. That is why it has taken me so long to write this book. I had to actually do collaborative work in order to develop this History of Religions methodology. It is what I teach my students.

Victor Taylor: You've reminded me that Charles Long was an extraordinary teacher. Charles Winquist would say that his "power was in his presence." Could you describe a few key insights in the book that came from teaching? That engagement and dialogue that can underscore both a sense of "urgency" and "mutual concern"?

Philip Arnold: That's exactly right, Victor. You had to experience Charles Long (as well as Charlie Winquist for that matter). Long has influenced my approach to teaching as well as research. He was a profoundly important figure to those who knew him and yet he is relatively unknown in Religious Studies.
From my perspective Long was way ahead of his time. The issues we are discussing now in the academic study of religion, as well as Native American and Indigenous Studies, are all around de-colonization. He was discussing these issues at least from the 1960s. His constant refrain was that academics need to create methodologies the enable our discipline to "crawl back through colonialism" to interrogate the meaning of the "new world." He was not a fan of the phrase "post-colonial" studies because, as an African American man, he had no experience of our overcoming the colonial structures of conquest and domination. My work in the Urgency of Indigenous Values is completely organized around the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, which is really informed by Long.

Of the primary figures in the History of Religions Chicago School—Wach, Long, Eliade, Kitagawa, and later on JZ Smith—it is Long (who was a student of Wach) that epitomized this method. He brought together Eliade and Smith in ways that students now don't seem to appreciate. Eliade famously expressed his profound sadness when Long left the University of Chicago. Years ago, I gave a talk at the University of Chicago Divinity School and to my surprise JZ Smith was in the audience. He asked me after the talk how the "real master of HR" was doing. He was referring to Charles Long. It was Davíd Carrasco who introduced me to Charles Long and I'm forever grateful that we were able to experience his brilliance over a nearly 40-year friendship. One of the privileges of my life was when my wife Sandy Bigtree and I were able to give him a tour of the Skä·noñh—Great Law of Peace Center in October of 2018, just before he passed away in 2020. He was in a wheelchair but spent 2 hours talking with us about the Haudenosaunee and the re-narration of the Jesuit story at Onondaga Lake. Even though he

was diminished physically he revealed so much to us that I continue to share with my graduate students today. From our numerous times together, his voice is still in my ears.

Victor Taylor: I couldn't agree more with your understanding of Long's ground-breaking contributions to the study of religion. He and Charles Winquist were my dissertation advisors, and both were thinking well ahead of their time and intellectual contexts, especially as various "posts" were dominating conversations. I think the "post" that Long challenged in the term "postcolonial" was related to the sense that we've moved past coloniality or coloniality has come to an historical end. De-coloniality, as developed by Walter Mignolo, emphasizes how this isn't possible as part of some evolving historical process.

Philip Arnold: I know we have had these conversations before, Victor. My sense is that a Charles Long approach to de-colonization would resonate with Mignolo, as you describe his work. Colonization, and its undoing, requires us to see it as more than a historical period, but a religious disposition. You are quite right about Long's sense of the postcolonial time frame. The entire settler colonial project is inspired and legitimized by a dream of Christendom—the Christian empire. This dream is still with us in the forms of Manifest Destiny, the Doctrine of Discovery (which underpins all property rights) and White Christian Nationalism. Decolonization requires us to find another "myth-history" of our origins. For Long this was why History of Religions is uniquely situated to make transformational adjustments to the meaning of the American project.

Victor Taylor: In the book, you emphasize and have a chapter on the concept of "paying attention" and this requires a willingness and opportunity to re-look at such discourses and practices underlying and driving the political and ideological results of Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery. Skä·noñh—Great Law of Peace Center is a call to "pay attention" and rethink the nation's founding narrative. How has that developed as a public humanities or civic humanities project? Different from what happens in academia?

Philip Arnold: In the chapter "Paying Attention" I tried to reflect on human survival strategies tied to Indigenous values. I use this commonsense idea to investigate how human beings engage the other—whether that is other people or other non-human people. Using the example of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)

"Thanksgiving Address," for example, there is a consistent emphasis for Indigenous peoples on giving thanks to others who are responsible for human survival. In some ways this is similar to Otto and Eliade's understanding of the "manifestation of the sacred" (hierophany) or the "holy other." However, the difference between the Indigenous and academic sensibility is that the 'sacred other' is that for the former, the sacred is an everyday occurrence rather than the burning bush in the desert—to use an analogy from the Bible. A commonsense understanding of the sacred other is what I'm trying to bring out in this chapter.

The Haudenosaunee shared their ideas from the Great Law of Peace—when human beings are in proper relationship with the natural world (Skä·noñh)—with the Founding Fathers of the United States during the 18th century. Onondaga leaders are called "loyani" or "men of the good mind" and were present at the 1744 Lancaster Treaty and 1755 Albany Plan of Union discussions for example. In 1987 a joint resolution of the U.S. Congress formally acknowledged that the "Iroquois" confederacy influenced the development of Western Democracy. In 2010 a U.S. 1 dollar coin was minted that commemorated this relationship. These are the hidden histories that we are focused on amplifying at the Skä·noñh—Great Law of Peace Center. But while the Founding Fathers adopted some of the democratic ideas of shared governance, they did not include women nor the natural world in their democratic system. In 2026 we are celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. We think that adopting the complete message of the Great Law of Peace will help our chances for surviving the climate crisis.

Victor Taylor: One of the benefits of being in the administration building here at SDSU is that it is a three-minute walk to the South Dakota Art Museum. One of the current exhibitions is "Creation Story" that blends Očhéthi Šakówiŋ oral traditions with the works of eighteen Lakota and Dakota artists. It is curated by contemporary artist Keith Braveheart (Oglála Lakota) and he includes one of his own paintings entitled "Maka" (Earth, Earth Spirit, or Grandmother of all things in Lakota). Could you talk about the importance of "indigeneity" in the chapter entitled Habitation and the concepts of reconnection and orientation, when you write:

What characterizes Indigenous values, therefore, is a religious orientation and connection to land itself. As I have shown previously,

religious orientation means knowing and reconnecting through the origin stories to help locate the regenerative "center" of the world, where humans gain access to ancestors and the Creator. The religious orientation to that land is what shapes and determines everyday life and ritual relationships for humans. Activities such as hunting, gathering, and farming are primarily based on these relationships. My work with the Haudenosaunee has shown me that evoking the category of Indigenous values implies a spiritual, even religious, connection to a particular inhabited landscape.[2]

Philip Arnold: That is very interesting, Victor. I don't know much about the specifics of the Lakota Creation story, but I think the points I'm trying to make in the book remain the same. All religious traditions have a Creation story. What I'm trying to say in this passage is that these stories impart values on how things came to be the way they are, or models for/of reality, as some theorists of myth have theorized. I'm thinking now of Charles Long's book *Alpha: Myths of Creation* for example. This implies that Creation stories are not about the past but are how human beings participate in the present and future worlds as well. They contain values of what it means to be a responsible person, living among other living non-human persons. Creation is an ongoing phenomenon. As the seasons turn there are new aspects of Creation that are modelled on these stories. Repeating these stories are not just about the past therefore, but about how the world works and how to live well in the homelands that they inhabit. That is why I'm interested in religion as habitation.
Of course, this is not a high priority for settler-colonial peoples, like me. I wasn't raised with this sort of awareness of how stories connect to the world as it appears. In my religious training the Creation story of Genesis was something that happened in the remote past and determined my Christian relationship to a remote and transcendent deity outside the world. This story defines our humanness as being in a state of sin and fallenness. In the book I try and highlight both the similarities and differences between Indigenous and settler-colonial modes of living as between "habitation" and "occupation"—being in one's home and being in someone else's home.

Victor Taylor: Maybe we can close with a discussion about the sacred and the future. In the epilogue you describe the significance of Onondaga Lake as a sacred place and its importance to the Skä·noñh. I recall as a kid in the 70s coming to Syracuse via 690 and passing under an enormous L-shaped pipe

[2] Arnold, 149.

that dumped by-product chemical waste directly into the water. As you note, it was the most polluted body of fresh water in North America. Over the decades, there have been many plans and attempts to mitigate the poisoning of Onondaga Lake and the land around it. "Oil City" was located at the south end –near the mall—and that was or perhaps still is a "brownfield" site. Even with all the "forever" heavy metals that contaminate it, Onondaga Lake always was and is still sacred, as you point out. Could you comment on the following passage and talk about the wider importance of "recovering the sacred" (like the Black Hills in South Dakota) and how it aligns with working toward a possible future in which the Earth and humanity can survive and thrive in a more equitable, just, and peaceful state of affairs?

Our survival depends on recovering a relationship with the Earth. When the world is reduced to a commodity, its only significance is as a natural resource for human beings, and, to use Eliade's oppositions, its only meaning is profane or chaotic. Recovering the sacred at Onondaga Lake in the middle of Syracuse, New York, is the purpose of the Skä·noñh—Great Law of Peace Center. In spite of the fact that Onondaga Lake was used as a dump for over one hundred years and is the most chemically polluted lake in the country, it is still sacred. It is still the place where the Peacemaker arrived in his white stone canoe to bring five warring nations together establishing the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee. The place still locates the Indigenous roots of Western democracy and the women's rights movement in the United States. Doesn't the sacred and profane—or the cosmos and chaos—that is exhibited in the history of Onondaga Lake act as a moral inducement for embracing Indigeneity and our future survival? The Skä·noñh Center is an example of changing the mythic narrative of the United States from a settler-colonial to an Indigenous one.[3]

Philip Arnold: Perhaps the most important urgency of all is how human beings continue to survive. The phrase "Value Change for Survival" was actually a report that was delivered by the United Nations Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival in 1991. This forum was charged to promote dialog between religious and political leaders to turn the tide of the growing environmental crisis. Forum conversations and deliberations were dedicated to the survival of the planet and future generations. This international group of religious and political leaders included the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Senator Al Gore and President Mikhail Gorbachev, to name a few. From 1985 to 1991

[3] Arnold, Philip P. *The Urgency of Indigenous Values,* 278-9

they met in New York, Moscow, Oxford and Tokyo. Representing Native America was Oren Lyons, Joaguisho, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation, which is the Central Fire of the Haudenosaunee and just a few miles south of Syracuse New York. Since the early 1970s Oren has been active in the UN to secure rights for Indigenous People and to advocate for environmental healing. Oren has said of the Global Forum's final meeting in Tokyo that the group was called upon by the Executive Coordinator, Akio Matsumura, to summarize their work. They agreed that all of their work could be distilled into four words: Value Change for Survival.

I conclude my book with this report because it is now more urgent than ever before. At the Skä·noñh—Great Law of Peace Center we have focused on how the development of the Haudenosaunee has influenced Western Democracy. What transpired at Onondaga Lake has had a profound impact on the world in many ways. Yet, excluded was the central role that women and the natural world need to have in a society that can sustain itself. In spite of the fact that we are re-narrating American myth-history to include the Indigenous values of the Haudenosaunee, it is clear that we must also go further and adopt a deeper understanding of Indigenous lifeways. If we are to survive then we must connect to the regenerative forces of the earth as have Indigenous peoples all over the world.