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WHY THE WHITE GUY?¹

It was the summer of 1983 in Boulder, Colorado. I had decided to pursue a Ph.D. in the History of Religions because of the exciting collaborative work Professor David Carrasco was creating through his Meso-American archive. It was here I was introduced to the work of Professor Charles H. Long, who helped to found the History of Religions at the University of Chicago. He was one of the most electrifying intellectuals in African and African American Religions. Although I was excited by the prospect of such a career path, I was deeply intimidated.

Professor Long was visiting for a Meso-American Religions conference, which I had helped organize with Professor Carrasco. My fiancé, Sandy Bigtree, and I decided to invite Professor Long and his wife, Alice, to a Sunday brunch at the beautiful Chautauqua Park to discuss my concerns and trepidations of going forward in this field. I chose this location because of the backdrop of those beautiful Flatirons, where I'd spent many years ice-climbing and learning about myself in those mountains.

I asked Professor Long, "how could a 'white guy' like myself contribute to this discussion of colonialism and be taken seriously?"

Long replied, "If not you, then who else?"

I conveyed the difficulties of being a white guy and entering the area of Native American religions. Over the previous two years, I had become more and more invested in ancient Aztec ceremonial traditions around Tlaloc and had been captivated by Professor Long's presentation to the esteemed gathering of Mesoamericanists the day before our brunch. This scholarly grouping of archeologists, anthropologists, archeoastronomers, and ethnologists from Mexico and the United States had been brought to Boulder to discuss recent excavations of the Templo Mayor in Mexico City – the central temple of the Aztec city Tenochtitlan. I was the newly appointed undergraduate research

¹ This piece comes from the Introduction of *The Urgency of Indigenous Values and the Future of Religion* (Syracuse University Press, 2023).

assistant of the Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project founded by Professor David Carrasco.

Professor Long's presentation focused on the colonial-interpretive dimensions of religion beginning at first contact, carrying through to present day journalists and scholars who heavily-handedly defined Indigenous Peoples as heathens and, therefore, subordinates. In Long's view, both the colonizer and the scholars who came after them were employed in different forms of the same enterprise, i.e. to conquer and exploit the New World for their/our own ends and promote a settler-colonial worldview that perpetuated acts of conquest. Long argued, and I agreed, that colonizing attitudes still undergird our scholarly interpretations of Indigenous Peoples.²

My concern at Chautauqua was how a descendant of settler-colonial people (i.e., white guys like me) could effectively contribute to Indigenous studies given his criticism of scholarship. Professor Long's response was that it could be effective because settler-colonial people are the source of the problem. In order for this area of study to move forward, it is critical to acknowledge that a settler-colonial mentality is still at the root of the problem. Indigenous Peoples cannot do this work all by themselves without the collaboration of a wide variety of communities and worldviews that address these issues together and for their own reasons. Long said, "We can't simply declare that we are now in a post-colonial world! History of Religions requires us all to *crawl back through colonialism* and reassess together what it means to be human."

Since that day I have come to understand from Charles Long, David Carrasco, and many others that this is essentially the work of the History of Religions: a collaborative interaction with others from a wide variety of interpretive locations for the purpose of forming new ways of knowing the world and understanding what it means to be human.

Over the last 30 years, my primary audience in teaching, community engagement, and writing has been communicating Indigenous values to non-Indigenous, settler-colonial people – perhaps more commonly referred to as "white people." Many of these people, like myself, are descendants of settler-colonial

² The term "Indigenous Peoples" will appear in this text in capitalized form and with the pluralized "Peoples." This is a reference to their status under the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" that was passed on 13 September, 2007. This is the first time that Indigenous Peoples gained status as human beings under International Law and also acknowledges them as holding rights communally in distinction to the recognized rights of Individuals.

people who have little to no traditions of living in relationship with a living landscape, even after more than 500 years. However, for a variety of personal and cultural reasons, there is constant and tremendous interest in knowing more about these Indigenous traditions. My classes enroll to capacity, sometimes exceeding 350 students. Simultaneously, Native American and Indigenous Studies have experienced an exponential rise in the numbers of new faculty members who have come from Indigenous nations and communities. The changing demographics among faculty marks an important and critical element that defines the transformations currently going on at universities around the world. As a consequence, departments and programs in Native American and Indigenous Studies have become more successful through these collaborations between different ethnic and racial groups.

The deep and intractable problems that face Indigenous Peoples around the world today directly emanate from the “Age of Discovery.” Discovery and conquest are extensions of the European imagination regarding the organization of the world through their antagonistic relationship to non-Christians, beginning with 7th century Muslims. Christendom envisioned a New World Order, implemented through settler colonialism. These fantastically fictitious values of what is called “white supremacy” today justified the theft and commodification of land, environmental devastation, language extermination, loss of ceremonial knowledge, forced conversion, economic exploitation, etc., which exploded in 1492, and the effects are felt today.³

Problems of sexual violence, drug use, teenage suicide, and so forth, do not originate within Indigenous communities. They are, rather, the lasting effects from the continued assaults of the settler-colonial mindset that devalue Indigenous Peoples, their lifeways, their traditions, and their lands. This book directly addresses non-Indigenous, settler-colonial people and argues for

³ The power of the European religious imagination and its role in the conquest of the “New World,” its impact on Indigenous Peoples and the natural world has been discussed extensively. For example, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, (Translated by Richard Howard, Harper and Row, 1984 [1982]); Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (Yale University Press, 1994); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (Hill and Wang, 1983); Oren Lyons and John C. Mohawk (eds) *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations & the U.S. Constitution* (Clear Light Pub., 1998). For Vine Deloria, Jr. in *God is Red, A Native View of Religion*, (2nd edition, Fulcrum Press, 1994) and John C. Mohawk, in *Utopian Legacies: A History of Conquest and Oppression in the Western World* (Clear Light Pub., 2000) Christianity was used as a weapon against Indigenous Peoples around the world.

the urgency of our understanding the depth, causes, and lethal power of these problems that may jeopardize our collective human survival on this planet. Professor Long made this exact point all those years ago – that past and current issues regarding African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans in the US were the result of a colonizing worldview forced upon them through various instruments of coercion and deceptive persuasion.