

America's Americas

The Brown Millennium, Three Archés, and the Ecumenopolis

DAVÍD CARRASCO

Princeton University

WHEN ASKED TO present my reflections in 20 minutes on “new trends in religious studies” I quickly went to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* in search of guidance on the definition of the word “trends.” The definition of “general direction and tendency (esp. of events, fashion or opinion, etc.)” didn’t grasp, in my mind, the significances hoped for at this 58th anniversary meeting of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, also marking the 50th anniversary of Nanzan University and the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. These several complex numbers, distinguished institutions, academic place-names and themes combined a resonance of origins, beginnings, and the past with a spirit of trajectories, futures, and hopes, all of which led me to look into another resource book about “trends,” namely Munroe Edmonson’s *The Ancient Future of the Itzá: The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimín* (*Chilam Balam=Spokesman of the Jaguar*). Edmonson’s *The Ancient Future of the Itzá* is a translation of a Yucatecan Maya treasure house of historic and ethnographic information (with Spanish Christian influences), guided by a vision of how the future is linked inextricably with the past. In the Maya view, history, and specifically trends which lead into the future are directed by a sense of cyclical repetition and the belief that the reading of the significance of numbers and signs in the calendar will enable priests to predict and read the future—know the trends—and participate in their unfolding.

I do not practice the Maya style of divination but I am committed to the idea that new trends in religious studies can best be discerned within a dialogue about the past, and for my purposes today, within a dialogue about the recent past, say, the past as experienced within the time frame of these sacred numbers: 25, 50, 58, 99, Heisei 11. In this essay I would like to argue that new trends and trajectories, *at least in the study of American religions*, must be considered in relation to two other forces: (1) the force of the *arché* from which each trend emerges, and (2) the major

cultural trend of the Latinoization of U.S. society and religion—what I call the Brown Millennium.

By Brown Millennium, I mean on the one hand the major demographic shift of Latinos, Latino Americanos surpassing African Americans to become the largest and most creative minority in the U.S. Do you realize that within the lifetime of any 20-year old student in the U.S., we will all live in a society where no one ethnic group, including whites of European descent, will comprise a majority of that nation's people? I mean the fact that in cities like Miami and Los Angeles, 75% of the people speak languages other than English at home, and there is a growing awareness that Spanish has been spoken longer than English in the Americas AND in the United States of America and that there are strong indications that Spanish will continue to be a major public language. I'm referring not only to the Latinoization of American religions, politics, music and cuisine, but also to the impact of African, Asian, Latin peoples who together are bringing and celebrating their gods, ancestors, and spirits and mixing them with the official religious realities of the U.S.

These people who make up America's Americas and their gods will transform the overall hue of cultures into a solid bronze, brown. The trend we are facing in the U.S. as students of religion and culture is well stated in the recent CD *Barrio Ritmos and Blues* by Dr. Loco and the Rockin' Jalapeño Band, when one voice belonging to a person who had lived in the Mission District in San Francisco, but who has now died and gone to heaven, recites:

I'm in Heaven
I'm in Heaven
With Neanderthal, Samurai and Wives
When I died there was such an unraveling of consciousness
The sound of the gun exploding was sustained throughout time
But who was I while I was alive
Was I a Man
Was I a Woman
Was I a Cop
I don't remember
I said to myself, I'm an American
And in that same precious moment I said
What is an American
I don't remember
The population of heaven is young and brown
Does not speak English
I found very few Americans here
In fact everyone here seemed to be black, Latino or Chinese
So I guess heaven was like Earth
And the Mission District was becoming more like heaven every day.

By Brown Millennium, which may be a trend to watch in other parts of the world as well, I mean that more than demography and language changes. Three important trends of the Brown Millennium that will impact the study of religion and religious creativity will include (1) a revitalization of the aesthetic imagination, (2) a sustained critique of the discourse on religious and racial change, syncretism, and hybridity, and (3) the browning of the invisible city, the Ecumenopolis.

But remembering the concept of the ancient future of the Maya, I claim that these three transformations of the American cultural and religious landscape have deeper roots, are lodged, in part, in three *archés*. The *arché* of cosmic nature, the *arché* of colonialism and the *arché* of the city. By *arché*, I mean simply the idea of the “original form,” that origins *cue* structures and innovations. By *arché* I mean in a more complex formulation the original but also recurrent orders of meaning and symbols which grow to constitute our material and mental environment and which become the stuff of what we mold, renew, and struggle to depart from. In what follows I will outline the three *archés* and new trends that have emerged from them, namely:

1. Mircea Eliade’s *arché* of cosmic patterns of nature and the impressive renovation of this model in Lawrence Sullivan’s magisterial *Icanchu’s Drum*. One trend which Sullivan insists upon, relevant to the Brown Millennium, is a revitalization of aesthetics through an aesthetic dialogue between South American religions and creative artists everywhere.
2. Charles Long’s new *arché* of colonialism and the interpretive trend beyond syncretism in the monumental work by William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priest and Parishioner in Eighteenth Century Mexico*.
3. Italo Calvino’s *arché* of the Invisible City and the worldwide trend toward the Ecumenopolis, a universal city as described by Paul Wheatley. The Ecumenopolis finds some of its most impressive examples in the borderland cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Mexico City, and perhaps Tokyo—all cities of the Brown Millennium.

These trends mean that hermeneutically we are in situations of change away from comfortable dichotomies into an engagement with the nuances, spectrums, and shades of history, meanings, symbols, and power as articulated by the German poet Paul Celan when he wrote:

Speak
But Keep your Yes and No Unsplit
And give your Say this Meaning
Give it the Shade

We will all have to give more *shades* to our study of religion, race, and culture.

The Cosmic Arché

Studying the religions of South America... parallels, for example the study of the history of the Protestant experience in Europe since Luther's reform. (Sullivan, p. 5)

The first *arché* which has had enormous, though waning, influence in religious studies over the last century was the "cosmic *arché*" of nature, the idea that the internal ordering of human consciousness and the shape of the human imagination emerged through rigorous interaction with something other than itself, mainly the given, natural forms of the world including the sky, earth, moon, sun, rocks, trees, water. Among the most vivid expressions of this *arché* were Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, Joseph Kitagawa's *Religion in Japanese History*, and Charles H. Long's *Alpha: Myths of Creation*. In all these works, the cosmic patterns of nature, interpreted through creation mythology, provide the background and context for thinking about daily life, ethics, sexuality, child rearing, warfare—indeed, every aspect of life.

The most powerful renovation of this model, focused on one of America's Americas is Lawrence Sullivan's *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions*. Sullivan's work is both a baroque legitimation and creative departure from the "cosmic *arché*" trend. Sullivan's 1000-page achievement takes up the urgent task of criticizing the tortured images of South American peoples that have persisted since the Age of Discovery and more importantly of revealing the religious creativity and religious imagination of a wide range of South American peoples. He skillfully maneuvers around the trendy categories of geography and language as ineffective ways to contain the meanings of religions. And he settles squarely on myth and morphology as the focus and method of this work. He writes:

In treading our way between historical circumstances and the general religious condition of humanity, myth is key. Myth not only shapes and explains social, economic and political orders, but, above all, it reveals the imagination itself, the human ability to draw together disparate experiences into one imagic reality, a world of relations, apprehension, emotion, speculation, reproduction and judgment. (p. 18)

While Sullivan organizes the book with traditional categories of exploring cosmology, a close reading shows that the author is actually using a method he calls "an argument of images" to give new agency to the *arché of imagination*, the role of imagination in the creation of myth and *the vital creative relationships between humans and their world*. As he puts it:

Myth is the imagination beholding its own reality and plumbing the sources of its own creativity as it relates to creativity in every form (plant and planetary life, animal fertility, intelligence, art). Myth reveals the sacred foundations and religious character of the imagination. (p. 22)

Sullivan's *arché* of the South American imagination is innovative in at least two ways—first, he insists on a bold range of comparisons; and second, he initiates a new dialogic focus for scholars of religion. Both are founded on his critique of the image that South American religions reflect some *chronological archaic period* of religious imagination. This project about calendars, violence of feasts, beings filled with fire, sonic imagery, shamans, and eschatology reveals the lives and imaginations of South American people *since* the 16th century and thus people who have lived parallel to and in interaction with the rise of the modern world. As he states in the introduction, *Icanchu's Drum* “parallels, for example, the study of the history of the Protestant experience in Europe since Luther's reform.”

But the most important trend of the method is Sullivan's thorough commitment to a new aesthetic dialogue. From start to finish *Icanchu's Drum* is addressed to creative artists “who have discovered that South American religious life is a worthy subject and stimulus for literature, music, drama, visual design” (p. 4). He does not seek a dialogue primarily with scholars of religion about spiritual values or patterns in myths. Instead he strives to communicate with musicians, designers, dancers, painters, and writers who will be renewed by aesthetic interaction with the religious contexts of South American creativity. As Brian Fagan has said about *Icanchu's Drum*, “there are gems on every page.”

The Arché of Colonialism

Syncretism is not even a teachable proposition because we are not faced with a creative mixing of divergent traditions but with the inexactability of a profoundly different way of conceptualizing the world and man's place within it.

—“Ways to the Sacred: Reconstructing ‘Religion’ in Sixteenth-Century Mexico” Inga Clendinnen

The second major trend, stemming from an *arché*, is the study of religious change. The most significant book I know of in this area is William B. Taylor's *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priest and Parishioner in Eighteenth Century Mexico*. Taylor's book on colonial Mexican religion explores a wide range of issues, including competing interpretations of religious dogma and beliefs, questions of practical ethics and daily behavior, the texture of social and authority relations in rural community, and how all these things changed over time and over place, and in relation to

reforms instituted by the state. At the theoretical level, this work makes a major contribution to the issues of local religion within a critique of the category of syncretism in relation to the painful and profound experience of conquest and colonialism in central Mexico. In a section entitled “Beyond Syncretism,” in which he criticizes incompatible sets of mechanical and organic metaphors to describe religious change and process—welding, blending, fusion, synthesis, amalgamation, and hybridization—he lauds the work of Inga Clendinnen:

In an ingenious essay that posits ways of experiencing the sacred as the key to the Indians’ ability to retain their local religions under colonial rule, Inga Clendinnen likewise avoids the confusing metaphors attached to syncretism in Mesoamerican studies. She finds colonial Indians of central Mexico shaping their local religion and “appropriating” the Virgin Mary and human representation in their sacred art while accepting Christian forms and the idea of being Christian. Focusing on religion as practiced rather than religion as belief, and studying the Indians’ “loosely scripted” public performances, she reaches a conclusion similar to Elizabeth Wilder Weismann’s in her studies of colonial sculpture—*that habits of conceiving the sacred continued while various practices and beliefs changed. Indians in central Mexico adopted a whole series of Christian practices that were familiar or readily understandable to them, such as attendance at mass, penitence by flagellation, pilgrimage, liturgical theatre, sacred dancing, and other form of worshipful movement but carried them far beyond what the priests regarded as decorous and reverent conduct.* (Taylor, p. 60; italics mine)

This trend of appreciating what is beyond syncretism emerges from the study of another *arché*—what the historian of religions Charles H. Long calls the “new arché of colonialism,” the worldwide destructive process of colonial social and symbolic constructions beginning with the Voyages of Discovery in the 15th century. In his *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* Long admits that religious studies is a child of the Enlightenment but also fingers another parental figure of our disciplines—the modern period of Imperialism and Colonialism. Impressed with Eliade’s previous insistence that the internal ordering of the human imagination *always* resulted from interactions with pervasive *environments*, Long perceives the history of the voyages of discovery with its worldwide invasions, violence, conquest, and trade as constituting a new archaic structure, a new total environment for the formation of human thought and the study of religion.

I shall attempt to raise the issue of the constitution of religion and human consciousness, but instead of seeking for an arena of primordiality I shall locate this arena within the time and space of the formation of the new extra-European cultures, the new mercantilism and the ensuing relationships that took place during

the modern period of imperialism and colonialism. (*Toward a Theory of a Post-Colonial Study of Religion*)

Long calls for a new positioning of the interpreters of religion. We are not only faced with *new opportunities to imagine religion* as J. Z. Smith has argued, nor with a prodigious set of hierophanies to decipher as Eliade claimed, but also with the “*dynamics of concealment*,” that is “the history of significations reflected in the delayed and distorted appearance of the colonized, the signified, the ‘others’ in our epistemology.”

Because the dynamics of concealment are so layered with linguistic, symbolic, and political history, Long claims that interpreters of these changes have to locate themselves *within* what he calls the slash, the in-between space of the grand dichotomy he designates as “primitive/civilized.” One interpreter who has done this with extraordinary courage and creative result is the Mexican American Gloria Anzaldúa in her bilingual *Borderlands/La Frontera*. As one writer notes:

Anzaldúa’s great theoretical contribution is to create a space-in-between *from where* to think rather than a hybrid space *to talk about*, a hybrid thinking-space of Spanish/Latin American and Amerindian legacies as the condition of possibility for Spanish/Latin American and Amerindian postcolonial theories.

The Arché of the Invisible Cities

The third and most pervasive trend which religious studies will have to confront is the emergence of the Ecumenopolis, the global city prophesied by Paul Wheatley in 1967. For it is within the total environment of the invisible city of the future that aesthetic dialogues, religious change, and the various millenniums will be acted out. Writing in “City as Symbol,” Wheatley noted that we are living at a culminating period in the history of the city when two cycles of urbanization—the Urban Revolution begun over 5,000 years ago and the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century—are coming to an end and will merge into a universal city. He wrote:

Now, when the rate of urbanization in industrial communities is tending to decline at the same time as it is accelerating in most underdeveloped countries, we are approaching a time when not only will all men live in terms of the city, but urban dwellers will again be distributed more or less in accordance with regional population densities. It seems inevitable that by the end of the twenty-first century, a universal city, Ecumenopolis, will come to comprise a worldwide network of hierarchically ordered urban forms enclosing only such tracts of rural landscape as necessary for man’s survival. (Wheatley, pp. 1-2)

Referring to the Ecumenopolis, I use the term “invisible city” because in my view, scholars of religion, whether concerned with morphology, history, postmod-

ernism, or symbolism, too often ignore the pervasive and unceasing influences of the urban ways of life, with its characteristics of monumentality (in ideas, personality cults, and buildings), social stratifications (in social order, pantheons, and philosophies), and capacities for control (of information, transportation, communication, and symbolism). While the city is not the context of everything we study, it is the most pervasive social and symbolic context of what we study. As one scholar noted about the power of cities to provide religious and political orientation,

Those who focus their regional studies on peasant society to the exclusion of urban forms are—as I have stated elsewhere—as deluded as Plato’s prisoners (or in another sense, Beckett’s), who mistake the flickering shadows on a wall for reality. They, too, are turning their backs on the generative force of ecological transformation and seeking the causes of the great tides of social change in ripples on the beach of history. (Wheatley, p. 8)

But this fact of the city, in fact a *human arché* if humans have ever made one, has been largely ignored by scholars of religion, leading no less a writer than Italo Calvino to entitle his book *Invisible Cities*. It is in his imagined tour by Marco Polo of Kublai Khan’s empire of cities that Calvino states succinctly what the *arché* of the city is and does. Cities, more than any other place, artifact or “nature,” provide humans with their most profound sense of *orientation* on this earth, *orientation* meaning the fundamental process of situating human life in the world. Cities fix the human place in existence in ways that have religious dimensions and orient human beings toward existence in general and the sacred in particular. Calvino argues that the cities of any empire are as much a metaphysical force as material ones. For on the one hand the city has the power of redundancy, reiteration, and re-creation for it inhabits our minds, or in Calvino’s words, “the city says everything you must think.” The city becomes, especially in those great capitals, the sum of all wonders which “makes you repeat her discourse” while thinking you are imagining your own. But these repetitions do not exhaust the power of cities to recreate meaning or open ways to incorporate new meanings, stories, and power, for as with any primordium, archetype, or ideal type, the discourse falls short of the parts that make up the whole. But however you repeat or read a city’s symbols, peoples, shrines, or processions, you leave that city without having really discovered it. Some aspects of “the city” remain invisible and unconscious to us.

And the cities which will be the most influential in America’s Americas will be the cities of the Brown Millennium—the cities where the aesthetic discourse and the rates of religious change will be charged by the imagination, music, cuisine, gods, and rites of Latinos and Asians. Latinos and Asians have too often been relegated, in spatial terms, to the borderlands, the frontiers, the *rims*, the in-between spaces of cultural analysis.

Now the borderlands are moving again in the form of Spanish, Portuguese, Creole languages, Asian languages, food, literature, art, family patterns, religious faiths and imaginations, sexual fire, musical heat, myths, athletes, ideas—all moving north, east, and west. The real borderlands that I am speaking about are cities: Los Angeles—the great linguistic, social, and racial borderlands; New York—someone said recently, “the good thing about New York is that it is so close to the United States.” The Puerto Rican cultural critic, Arcadio Diaz Quiñones, in his new book *La Memoria Rota* (The Broken Memory) shows that New York has been a Caribbean city for over a 100 years—a city blessed with such Caribeños as José Martí, Celia Cruz, Eugenio María de Hostos, Machito, Tito Rodríguez—and we now hear the bomba, plena, and salsa sounds in all Puerto Rican immigrant neighborhoods from Lorraine, Ohio to Hartford, Connecticut, from Perth Amboy to Hawaii. Latino Cities like Miami—the city on the edge; Denver—the city in the air; San Juan—the city in the painful sea; San Francisco, barrio Mission and the city of Dr. Loco and the Rockin’ Jalapeño Band

What I am arguing about the new trends of religious studies and the city is that the claims which Eliade made for the cosmic *arché* and Long has made for the colonial *arché* should be extended and tested against the history and power of cities to shape society and the human imagination. We can imagine that the city, as humankind’s most powerful artifact, has worked to orient and reorient human thought and culture, and that the Ecumenopolis of the Brown Millennium will have an even greater influence on our work. To play with the scheme of this paper, the patterns of nature that Eliade perceived and Sullivan argued with, constitute the *arché of the beginning*. Long’s insight suggests the *arché of the end of the West* but the city, with its visible and invisible entities, constitutes the *arché of the center* of human thought and religious practice.

In Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, the traveler Marco Polo attempts through words, exaggerated gestures, complex signs, and wonders to show to the ruler, his host Kublai Khan, the nature of his kingdom. Calvino writes, “Kublai Khan did not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows to any other messenger or explorer of his.” I realize that I am playing something like Marco Polo to you, the JAR as Kublai Khan and do not expect you to believe all that I explore and say about the nature of the new trends in religious studies. But I hope that like the emperor of that narrative, you will give great attention to these three *archés* and the innovations of the aesthetic dialogue, the critique of religious change, and the invisible city of the Ecumenopolis of the Brown Millennium.

Bibliography

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1972).

Inga Clendinnen, "Ways to the Sacred: Reconstructing 'Religion' in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," *History and Anthropology*, 5(1990): 105–41.

Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 1999).

Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priest and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Paul Wheatley, *City as Symbol* (London, 1967).