Obituary

John Casida, 1929-2018

One of the world’s leading experts on pesticides has been remembered as an “incredible mentor”.

John Casida was born in Phoenix, Arizona, on 22 December 1929. His father, Lester, was initially a teacher in the local one-room school but, after securing a PhD, became a professor of animal science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The younger Professor Casida followed him into the same institution, gaining a bachelor’s degree in entomology (1951), then a master’s in biochemistry (1952) and a PhD in entomology, biochemistry and plant physiology (1954), although his progress was interrupted by service as a medical entomologist with the US Air Force during the Korean War (1953).

Once qualified, Professor Casida joined the department of entomology at Wisconsin-Madison, where he directed the Pesticide Chemistry and Toxicology Laboratory, and was promoted to full professor in 1961. Three years later, he moved on to the University of California, Berkeley, where he eventually became the William Monroe Hopkins chair in chemical and molecular entomology (1976 to 2000). Although he gave up teaching in 2014, he remained active as a researcher and a mentor to the next generation.

A keen insect collector in his youth, Professor Casida devoted much of his research efforts to elucidating how DDT and other synthetic pesticides affected insects, how they are metabolised by mammals, including humans, and their impact on the environment. Through the insights they make that happen. If something is totally unexplained and totally unanticipated, if it approaches the paradigm of the 1970s completely unprepared – it was like I was in a Hieronymus Bosch painting of the Middle Ages, a combination of magic and rituals. I lived with a Brahman family who at first put me in a shed, outside the house, because I was a polluting foreigner. But by the end of the year, I was sitting next to the patriarch, who had become a very good friend and a research assistant – we did quite a few interviews together. Until his death, we were very close and we corresponded a lot.

What is most misunderstood about contemporary religion? The Western academy has become very secular and does not see religion as an object for study. They still think this is a phenomenon that will pass, is irrational and should not be there. That has always surprised me because I don’t see a very sharp distinction between a secular mindset and a religious mindset. If people think society and democracy are founded on rational deliberation and rational choice, then they should look around a little bit more, that’s simply not the case.

When did your PhD. What was that like? Groningen, the Netherlands, 1953.

What was Dutch society like then? The area that I was born in was deeply religious. Social life and civil society were arranged entirely according to the utilitarian paradigm – so I was born into a form of Dutch Reformed Protestantism, and that means that your schooling is in that community; the Dutch and bachelors are members of your church and so on. I have never been a believer. As soon as I started to have thoughts about these things, about the age of 10, I decided I was going to be an entomologist, so I went to study entomology – so I was born into a world that was already there.

What has this religious upbringing shaped your work? It made me into the utilitarian paradigm of the 1970s completely implausible to me, because in a very secular and utilitarian society such as the Netherlands, industrialisation was supposed to leapfrog us [but] it hadn’t happened at all.

How did your interest in Indian languages and culture begin? When I was about 12, I was a gap year after high school and went to India instead, like many people of my generation, to explore the world. I hitch-hiked through India, there was a “magic bus” – basically for hippies – that went to Delhi. I encountered a world for which I was totally unprepared – it was an entirely different way of looking at things and arranging things. There are so many temples and rituals; even when you sit on a train, people perform rituals. I had never heard anything about it – it was an enormously experience for me, so when I came back, I decided to study Sanskrit.

You spent a total of two years at Auroville, a Hindu pilgrimage centre in India, during your PhD. What was that like? The first time I went, it was a festival day and it was just overwhelming – it was like I was in a Hieronymus Bosch painting of the Middle Ages, a combination of magic and rituals. I lived with a Brahman family who at first put me in a shed, outside the house, because I was a polluting foreigner. But by the end of the year, I was sitting next to the patriarch, who had become a very good friend and a research assistant – we did quite a few interviews together. Until his death, we were very close and we corresponded a lot.

What is most misunderstood about contemporary religion? The Western academy has become very secular and does not see religion as an object for study. They still think this is a phenomenon that will pass, is irrational and should not be there. That has always surprised me because I don’t see a very sharp distinction between a secular mindset and a religious mindset. If people think society and democracy are founded on rational deliberation and rational choice, then they should look around a little bit more, that’s simply not the case.

Do you think you have a future? The whole immigrant situation in western Europe is very much more identical to that of the 1970s. Because of popular, anti-immigration campaigns, people start to interpret their worlds around what they themselves want, and then they become more threatening. We are now in a period that is clearly less tolerant than when I grew up. When you go a little bit into the countryside of Poland, Ukraine and Russia, you will find headscarves everywhere – and that was also the case in the Netherlands until the Second World War. But we seem to have forgotten this history and secular society has become less tolerant of women wearing headscarves.

Does religious tolerance have a future? The whole immigrant situation in western Europe is very much more identical to that of the 1970s. Because of popular, anti-immigration campaigns, people want to interpret their worlds around what they themselves want, and that becomes more threatening than the direct interaction between people. Because of popular, anti-immigration campaigns, people start to interpret their worlds around what they themselves want, and that becomes more threatening.

Can you divide your life into a ‘before’ and ‘after’? In the early 2000s, I went to China, lived there and started to learn Chinese. It has been an eye-opener to see a society – one in size to India – operating on very different principles, which makes you reflect on what you have seen in India. That has become my work now – it’s all comparative work between India and China.

I don’t see a very sharp division between a secular mindset and a religious mindset.

David Matthews

Appointments

The foundation dean of Kent’s first medical school – a partnership between the University of Kent and the University of Bradford – has taken up his role. Chris Holland joined Kent and Medway Medical School from the University of Surrey, where he was a professor of teaching, learning and teaching for medicine. He is also an anthropologist, and Professor Holland said that the medical school, which will offer its first undergraduates next year, will “help address some systemic workforce issues in the UK, bring new graduate learning and teaching opportunities which will help attract and retain medical professionals, as well as ensure that our talented local students have access to medical training through our commitment to widening participation and opening up access to medical education”.

David Plumb will take up the new role of director of innovation at the University of Warwick. Mr Plumb, who will start in September, has served as chief digital officer at O2.

A world-leading oncologist will join the University of Sheffield to work on translational cancer research. Thomas Hedley will leave the Karolinska Institute to return to Sheffield as a chair of translational medicine, after coming to its medical school to conduct groundbreaking research in the late 1990s.