

MEHNAZ AFRIDI

Manhattan College

ORIENTALISM, ONTOLOGY, AND ORIENTATION: A MUSLIM
PERSPECTIVE ON CHARLES H. LONG

“America never EVER happened... we just believe in the idea that America has happened”

– Charles H. Long 1994, Syracuse University

“Afridi, you want to control the world! You are an AFRIDI, a mountain warrior...you are a warrior woman!” Dr. Long would exclaim as I sat at dinner with him at Pascale’s in downtown Syracuse or at times at the darkly lit Sheraton Bar at the bottom of the Syracuse University campus. I listened to his very complex and intricate understanding of the world, asking myself: What did he mean? *I* wanted to control the world? How could *I* as a young Muslim woman struggling to keep everything together want to control the world? Several years later, I asked Dr. Long what he meant and he smiled and just repeated: “Afridi, Afridi, Afridi...you don’t understand anything about your *peoples!*” My tribe, the Afridis, are one of the fiercest and oldest families from the North West Frontier of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is what he meant. He was pushing me to take a deep look into my own roots, heritage, and in this case, my historical implication as an Afridi.

In the many years I spent listening to Dr. Long and trying to decipher his intricate language, whether in his well-known book *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, or in class, lectures, and cocktail parties, I finally learned one thing about Dr. Long very early on: that he was never talking about anything directly, but everything he said was about what you should or might be thinking about. Another lesson was that if you could get it, good, and if not, you were not fit for the challenge of critical thinking. I remember Dr. Long fondly and was fortunate to host him at Manhattan College for a lecture a few years before he passed on. Most importantly, I was able to learn from a mentor that changed the way I approach my own work on Islam and the Holocaust.

When I was still an undergraduate, I was permitted to take a few graduate classes in the Department of Religious Studies at

Syracuse University. One of my first classes as a 19-year-old was with Dr. Charles H. Long in a class entitled “Early Islam.” I was excited to begin a new adventure with one of the most celebrated historians of religion and study with an African American scholar. I was about to learn about the historical and social underpinnings of my own background as a Muslim. I recall that we read Ferdinand Braudel, Marshall Hodgson, Mohammed Baymeh, and Richard Bulliet. As a Muslim woman, Dr. Long inspired within me a different conceptualization of Islam and more importantly, how to see my own ontological bearing in reading my own history. I was to discover my own orientation of religion.

The Lens that native religionists tend to ignore in the midst of our timeless absorption of being religious or identifying ourselves with a specific religion. Long argued that we had already defined the self and institutionalized our identities in such a way that “the effort to understand the self through the mediation of the other” was a way to understand the opacity of how one understood one’s identity, history, and especially religion.¹

There are two deeply important aspects that Dr. Long’s teaching and writing taught me that have influenced me up until today; one was how to address our own religious complexity and two that religion had been institutionalized by Christianity primarily in every point of American history as a locus. He asked us to problematize this locus, which was a colonial one, and how the “discovery” of the “new” world was reifying old symbolic orders rather than creating new ones. This thinking and more led me to think about my own place or space within Islamic history. In the United States, I was no longer an outsider but on the brink of being inside/outside of American history, as Long taught me one’s consciousness was never one but multiple in the sense of W.E.B Du Bois’s double-consciousness. My perspective changed about how to read the history of Islam with Dr. Charles H. Long; he transformed within me the idea of insider and outsider and offered me the gift of a complex identity or a manner of how to be a Muslim-American without trying to fit into the locus of the colonized, but rather to orient oneself in one’s own reality – to create within me an orientation that was not always dictated by my identity as a Muslim and a woman. In other words, I was to be, just be, and not become something that I was not.

¹ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (New York: Fortress Press, 1986), 107.

The exploration of the non-Western world was what led the history of religions to develop, and this is where Long developed a hermeneutical project that developed the lens of the colonizer and colonized: seeking the nuances and gaps between what was the case and what was seen or perceived, as was the case in Ludwig Wittgenstein's approach. Long's approach in his work, but primarily in his teaching, which is what I valued the most, was his oral narration and exemplary manner of showing that objects of study were and are undermined by how we study them. In other words, institutional structures like Christianity in the New World and "Western" traditions were imbued with an internal colonial narrative that was hard to shake.

Recently, Americans have witnessed a rise in religious violence globally. We have also seen open religious racism in the United States. The Muslim ban ordered by President Donald Trump in 2017 and resurgent antisemitism testify to that as we continue to divide American life, distorting the truth and disrespecting religious freedom. "America First" nationalism is especially unwelcoming to Muslims, the strangers outside our borders but also within them. For Long, these sentiments would have signaled the beginning of a "necessary lie" that framed Europeans as superior in relation to the "other" (primitive) Muslim.² Similarly, Orientalism was termed by Edward Said as a distortion or misrepresentation of people of Asia or the Middle East through a colonial lens.

Take one meaning of Orientalism as a linguistic index: Arabia is a possible world, but it takes on reality as soon as Arabic is spoken or Arabia is spoken about within a given field of experience, say, perfume or belly dance or terrorism. Said tells us, from the situation in which Arabia is realized by becoming the field of experience of domination and/or misrepresentation itself. Here, then, is a concept of the *Other* that is distorted and deliberately deformed by the West so that it may appear inferior. It is in this sense that Said thought anew the discipline of Orientalism.³

The outside/inside concept within Muslim-Americans has not only seeped into those inside American borders; the Muslim ban has polarized and divided life in the United States, deepened by religious divisions, distorted truth, and disregard for religious freedom. Muslims have felt rejected in how they have been

² Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 97.

³ Marrouchi Mustapha, *Edward Said at The Limits* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 82.

treated differently in terms of politics and economics, refugees and immigration, race and religion, ethnicity, and gender. American nationalism has been seen as unwelcoming to the Muslim, the strangers outside our borders but also within them.

Muslim-Americans and Islam have had a complicated relationship with the United States where Muslim-Americans have been perceived as “other” and yet simultaneously been offered rare religious freedom as their first constitutional amendment. Religious freedom to all in visual and spiritual expression, this amendment is unlike any other country in the world, including Muslim countries.⁴ However, the recent pattern of this fracturing has been challenging and painful. Long would see this as a problem. He would say: “When you are an oppressed people, your group is never looked upon as possessing diversity or variety; it is always looked upon as possessing a much more homogeneous character.”⁵ As one Muslim-American wrote:

I went on the local NPR station and someone called into the show with a comment about our #AskAMuslim project. She said she was an elderly black woman and went on to describe how she’s only ever seen the kind of discrimination that Muslims are facing right now in the discrimination and racism that black people experienced and continue to experience in America. She rocked me and all I could do was tear up for all the injustice in the world. I could only express to her that #BlackLivesMatter and #antiIslamophobia work are combating the very same problematic ideology. Not only because one-third of American Muslims are black, but even more so because ultimately all of these symptoms rise from the disease that is fear of the unknown which leads to fighting that which we do not know.⁶

Dr. Long would lecture late into the night. At times, he was intimidating to some, but if you could withstand the intensity, you were being educated and deconstructed of the many social constructions that you may have grown up with. He was truly challenging the lens with which we were used to in the U.S. and especially from a white European perspective. He, although

⁴ Examples of many countries that do not allow freedom of religion include communist, secular, and religious ones around the world such as France, Germany, Pakistan, Iran, and China.

⁵ Manhattan College, 2014.

⁶ Mona Haydar, qtd. In Imran Kahn, “5 Quotes on the Ugliness of Islamophobia,” *The Bearded One* (blog), April 30, 2016, <https://blogofthebeardedone.wordpress.com/2016/04/30/5-quotes-on-the-ugliness-of-islamophobia/>.

himself a successful academic, reminded me of my own status quo of being privileged even if I was different. He reminded me, "You are still caught within the frames of the ivory tower of academia." Dr. Long had launched my thinking into a heuristic balance that invited me to live in the cognizance of being "other," both historically and philosophically. Let me explain. For me, I was dealing with the "Fear of the unknown" in both my life as a Muslim woman pursuing a degree in Religious Studies and simultaneously my own identity as a Muslim. My ontology was Muslim but also something else which has been expressed on many levels in America, especially through a historical political lens that has recently taken on more of a religious meaning and political identity of Islam. For example, Muslims were historically depicted as oriental, exotic, and dangerous through paintings, postcards, and later in film.⁷

I wrote my doctoral thesis on Islam but specifically on Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel Laureate in 1988. Naguib Mahfouz's literature taught me so much about his own cognizance of how Arabs and Egyptians had been described by literature and politics of the binaries of east and west. However, it was through the lens of European literature of the 20th century that I truly analyzed how the western view has shaped the narrative of the nameless and faceless Arabs and Muslims. For example, literature in the 1940s was, *per se*, the parallel of present-day social media. For example, the novel *The Stranger* by Albert Camus was set at a time when World War II was in place. It was to show how absurd the world was. It became a poignant example of the stranger in the colonial context in the 1943 novel, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. This novel ruminates on Long's explicit description of what he meant by the primitive/civilized. Camus, however, takes a nihilist approach to life, whether or not it is a masking of how he perceives the "other." His descriptions of existence and the protagonist (Meursault) who compels the reader to look for the "stranger" and the "other" in Algiers through the precise censorship of the stranger (the Arab) makes a glaring commentary on the reverberations of the colonial or as Long would put it, the locus of control. Algeria, a distant place from America and France, perhaps, but a reminder that Europeans were already constructing the "other" in a country far away. France as the colonial power in Algiers forces us to contemplate the nameless Arab (Muslim) as witnessed in America today: "Citizens in the West are more likely to associate

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). Edward Said was the first to coin this term "Orientalism" and describe how Muslims were depicted in Arab/Muslim places.

Muslims with terrorism if they feel threatened by their physical and cultural existence.”⁸

This novel brings me to Long’s work about descriptive and prescriptive narratives of the colonial and the New World. For example, he used to use a common phrase or idiom: “Who shot John?” At first, as an immigrant and new to the United States, I had no idea if I was missing something in this phrase. Was it cultural from a movie, an event, or just American phraseology? As I spent more hours sitting in living rooms, restaurants, and classrooms, I began to unfold the phrase; “Who Shot John?” Dr. Long used this phrase to demonstrate that the knowledge and facts that most people were seeking were irrelevant, and that most of our questions were meaningless. For example, Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* is an example of how orientalist perspectives fell into the category of “Who Shot John?” where there is the real killing of an Arab or “shooting” towards the end of the novel. This incident is overlooked by Camus and opens up the reader to contemplate that in this Francophile novel, the French existed alongside the natives who were seen as the “Arabs,” “the other,” and “the stranger.” As France colonized Algeria, it also imprinted in the minds of many that so many nameless and inconsequential native Arabs made up the population in colonized Algeria. The novel produces no narrative about the Arab or why this killing occurred. In addition, the protagonist, Meursault’s friend Raymond has an altercation with a woman he was dating and who remains nameless, except that we know that she is referred to as a “Moor.” Then we are presented with the following about these nameless natives “Arabs”:

After some talk on the doorstep, we decided to take the bus. The beach was within easy walking distance, but the sooner we got there the better. Just as we were starting for the bus stop, Raymond plucked my sleeve and told me to look across the street. I saw some Arabs lounging against the tobacconist’s window. They were staring at us silently; in the special way, these people have—as if we were blocks of stone or dead trees. Raymond whispered that the second Arab from the left was “his man,” and I thought he looked rather worried. However, he assured me that all that was ancient history. Marie, who hadn’t followed his remarks, asked, “What is it?”

⁸ Sabri Ciftci, “Islamophobia and Threat Perceptions: Explaining Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the West” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2012): 293-309.
DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2012.727291

I explained that those Arabs across the way had a grudge against Raymond. She insisted on our going at once. Then Raymond laughed, and squared his shoulders. The young lady was quite right, he said. There was no point in hanging about here. Halfway to the bus stop he glanced back over his shoulder and said the Arabs weren't following. I, too, looked back. They were exactly as before, gazing in the same vague way at the spot where we had been.⁹

This scene is important because literature has been the way that I can understand the writings of colonial encounters, and Long would argue that " 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."¹⁰ Camus's shape of thought was mired by the master narrative or perspective of the one who watches or observes the other as nameless and dehumanized. So, in a sense, "Who Shot John?" Is it as important as "Who was John, and why was he shot?" This would require too much of an explanation.

The description above is one that is encountered in America every day. The man has a beard so he must not be named, the woman in hijab (head covering) is oppressed and must not be spoken to or her covering must be yanked off. For example, in 2019, in San Diego a man was arrested in connection with racial attacks on three women wearing hijabs and allegedly yelling at them to "go back to your country." Kyle Allen, 50, reportedly started berating the women at about 12:55 p.m. on Columbia Street in the city's Little Italy district on Sunday, taunting them with a variety of racial slurs. He was also accused of slapping the women and removing one of their hijabs – the headdress worn by some Muslim women as a symbol of their faith.¹¹

Today, the vague Arab (Muslim) is now the nameless *rag head*, *camel jockey*, and most frequently, *terrorist*. Camus wrote this novel in 1943, and then it was published in English in 1946. Seventy-three years have passed in between this novel and how Americans view this "other" or this Muslim; not much has transformed. This historical image in literary depictions is

⁹ Albert Camus, *The Stranger* trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), 32.

¹⁰ Manhattan College, Lecture, 2014.

¹¹ Tareq Haddad, "San Diego Man Charged with Racial Attack on 3 Women in Hijabs, Yells 'Go Back to Your Country,'" *Newsweek* (Newsweek, October 9, 2019), <https://www.newsweek.com/san-diego-man-charged-racial-attack-3-women-hijabs-1464165>.

important because the perception of Muslims has not changed from positive to negative but to a different range of negative images, and then the permissibility of this stereotyping came with a thunder post-9/11. In other words, the nameless Arab in Camus's novel written in the 1940s takes on a similar image and attitude in the United States not just post-9/11, or in the last few years, but in many ways. This is how Muslims have been seen and portrayed – consistently as “other,” “stranger,” and today even more as the “feared,” especially in Europe and the United States.

Dr. Long taught me to reflect on these issues and look at the very fine lines of the intersections of Islam in America through Muslim eyes that look at how perhaps Muslims as “others” have been fractured as a group, as a negative religion, and an ulterior race in America. Muslim novelists have taken a path that shows through narrative and testimony, whether fiction or non-fiction, a lens into the identity of Muslims living in North America as a different and nuanced manner of seeing themselves as “other” and at the same time as American. These modern, mainly Muslim-American writers have had a post-colonialist response to the idea of “The Stranger” which counters Camus' version. They present the challenges of Muslim loss and displacement. Long would argue that the “post” in colonialism shattered the possibility of fighting the colonial and leaving behind the opportunity of a new orientation and reality for those who wanted to create a new and challenging identity. The “post” in the modern was, as he would decree: “The post is like we have moved on and now have recovered but we have been left behind in a place that needs urgent attention in the present.” An alternate “otherness” needs to be addressed within many immigrants, especially Muslims, because it demonstrates that Muslim-Americans are different from each other, unique in America, and estranged by their own sense of belonging. Muslim-Americans have lost their diversity and historical context and difference through these perceptions, even though Muslim-Americans have sought out different corners of the United States to build their communities.

Long had an authentic approach to his own identity as a black man in America. There were certain expectations of him that he challenged. He would explain that his interest in certain issues were because of who and what he was. In an interview, he says:

Part of what freedom means is that no one else can set my agenda for me; I think that black persons in various situations often feel that because they're black, they have an agenda set for them. My feeling is that, if that's the

way you feel, then you do. But if you don't feel that you have an agenda already set, you make your own agenda, and I happen to be one of those kinds of people. I'm not talking about any kind of rampant individualism. I feel that being a black person in the United States of America at this time is a fact-a formidable fact, and it is not only a formidable fact for me, it is a formidable fact for the world. To the extent that other people understand that, that's very good. But I also have to understand that for myself-that it is not just my personal business, my being black; my being black is a part of the objectivity of the modern world. That objectivity is a very important mode of objectivity in this world, and I think that I need to give expression to the kind of meaning that I think it expresses in this world, both as a part of my scholarship and as a part of my personal life.¹²

To be who you are and orient oneself to a reality that one chooses is the lesson that I heard from my mentor again and again. Why did I want to control the world? I would ask myself over and over again. I was always organized, a social manager, and someone who always wanted to create lecture series, events, and a meaning of community even as a young student. Perhaps this type of control or these initiatives that I have made all my life was something I wanted and not how I was *supposed* to be as a Muslim woman? Women were not to be in charge or create community; it was supposed to be men, and especially older men. This was what baffled Dr. Long about my ontology and then my own orientation of reality.

The Muslim-American immigrants and their children, like the African American Muslims of the 1920s and 1930s, were fashioning an American Islamic faith that reflected their own needs, interests, and identities...But they also crafted an Islam that celebrated American patriotism and cultural integration.¹³

Many Muslims relate to the concept of difference, but not being formidable or different, just human, and even through the Qur'anic notions of the other (non-Muslim) as welcoming, neighborly, as a sisterhood and brotherhood. However, today we find the juxtaposition of this with the American perception of Muslims as the "other" and outside the American fabric. The relationship of Muslims to the United States is long and complex.

¹² Carolyn M. Jones and Julia M. Hardy. "From Colonialism to Community: Religion and Culture in Charles H. Long's Significations" *Callaloo* 36 (1988): 582-96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931543>.

¹³ Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57.

Islam acknowledges that the “other” exists and has the right to live in peace in an Islamic community. Contrary to the negative conceptions of the “other” in some contemporary communities, Islam views this “other” from a positive perspective. Islam offers the view to Muslims that the “other” is different in many ways visually and spiritually. G-d’s own plan was to challenge Muslims with the tremendous diversity and difference in the global context.

If your Lord had pleased, He would have made all people a single community, but they continue to have their differences – except those on whom your Lord has mercy – for He created them to be this way.¹⁴

This verse indicates that diversity and difference are inherent characteristics of human beings. G-d has not created a human mold into which each human being is cast. It is part of G-d’s design that people should entertain and accept their differences from each other because difference can play a greater part in spreading life on earth, as different groups can provide different views that can help strengthen human relations and make life easier for all. Is this what Dr. Long meant? As he stated:

That is, people should because God made them male or female or black or white or whatever because God made them that, and one should not oppress that which God made them. That to me is a very clear meaning which I affirm and I participate in. However, I feel that given the history of colonialism and imperialism and so forth in the modern world, we might do ourselves, as part of groups of folks who have been oppressed in the world to thinking that this is a meaning only important to us. I think colonialism has been detrimental to all of the peoples in histories and cultures that had it, including the colonizers. That often gets hidden when oppressed people of oppressed conditions argue against oppression, but only claim the same rights as only those who oppressed them.¹⁵

The idea of difference within me and the recognition of it was instilled by him, and to accept within oneself that difference was the most important way to orient oneself in this world.

A few examples from literature illustrate the main point of Long’s insistence on being who one is and keeping away from

¹⁴ *Al-Qur'an*, Trans. Muhammad Asad, (Dubai: Oriental Press, 2012), 11:118-119.

¹⁵ Jones and Hardy, “From Colonialism to Community: Religion and Culture in Charles H. Long’s Significations,” 258-271.

the templates that society has created. For example, Sumbul Ali-Karamali's *The Muslim Next Door: The Qur'an, the Media and that Veil Thing* is a book that was published in 2008, a time when Muslims were being analyzed, and mistrust had grown about Muslim-Americans over 9/11, Iraq, and Afghanistan. She writes:

The words of ill-informed fear-mongers, designed to convince us that Muslims are essentially different from the rest of humanity, are accepted by too many people as the truth...A recent conversation I had with a friend guided the writing of this book. "Why do you live inside your religion?" she asked. "Why is an educated, thoughtful woman like you as committed to your religion as you are?"¹⁶

Swimming in an ocean of myths about Muslims that had no leader to decipher what was "real" about Muslims and what was "fiction" or propaganda. One of the problems that is pointed out about Islam is that there is no central authority of power, therefore no Muslim is in the pulpit directing the Muslim world. People became even more suspicious that Muslims were not speaking up. Watching Muslims deliver sermons at religious institutions and colleges was met with one question: "Where are the moderates in Islam?"¹⁷

Muslims, especially in the United States, created their own interpretations of Islam, and it was ignored through the images of Muslims post-cold war and the relationship of America with Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Muslims that rooted themselves as Americans in the United States for many generations were beginning to find a new American Islam or new and novel resources for Islamic education.

The problem of othering Muslims in America is that there is an assumption that something is the same or nativist about America. The idea of the "other" in America is to indicate that Muslims cannot assimilate, they cannot be American, and lastly, they cannot be democratic. In Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, he states clearly that "In a subway car, my skin would typically fall in the middle of the color spectrum. On street corners, tourists would ask me for directions. I was, in four

¹⁶ Sumbul Ali-Karamali, *The Muslim Next Door: The Qur'an, the Media and that Veil Thing* (Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2008), 2-3.

¹⁷ Erik Wemple, "Opinion | Fox News Host Asks: 'Where Are the Moderate Muslims in America?'," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, December 1, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2017/05/23/fox-news-host-asks-where-are-the-moderate-muslims-in-america/>.

and a half years, never an American; I was *immediately* a New Yorker.”¹⁸

Long had long proclaimed that “America never Happened!” and these conversations echo in my mind as I think of the immigrant problems, Black Lives Matter, and White Nationalism seeping through again in glaring ways in society. Charles H. Long was warning us of what we thought was *America* and what it really is—is the major issue. It is an idea or concept of what we keep reimagining is *America*, and he would recall and constantly allude to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *The World is All That is the Case*. His illustration would remind us of the nonsensical but determinate thinking of human beings.

Muslim-Americans too are caught in between being American and being othered, like many other minorities, but this to Long harkens back to colonialism. As he states:

I think that colonialism was a distinct sin or awfulness to the people who were colonists and that it has affected them in severe ways. They need to come to not simply by offering the rights of freedom and legitimacy to the colonized but it has to go much deeper than that. I feel that one has to find those and modes of discourse that can raise that level of the conversation of a political meaning of liberation. I just happen to be a historian of religions in my way. I'm not saying that this is the only way this can or should be the way it was given to me.¹⁹

Dr. Long has been indelible to my work, research, teaching, and orientation in my life. I hear his voice at times, his sparkle in his eyes as he spoke about what it is that matters about you, and that to me was always: Be Yourself, Afridi, and know who your people are! I will miss his mentorship and friendship as I do now for two years. Thank you, Dr. Long.

¹⁸ Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (New York: Harcourt Press, 2007), 33.

¹⁹ Jones and Hardy, “From Colonialism to Community: Religion and Culture in Charles H. Long’s Significations,” 258-271.