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FROM COLONIALISM TO AN-OTHER COMMUNITY:
REFLECTIONS ON THE RADICAL THOUGHT OF CHARLES H. LONG

The Veil is the possibility of a permeability of historical experience that holds open the possibility that the colonized and colonizer might engage in mutual critiques and undergo the constitution of double consciousness. It is the only hope that oppression might lead to a language of community gleaned from the recognition that we are all formed and have been affected by the same colonial formations. It is the place of critique, confession, and hope.¹ – Charles H. Long

Charles H. Long's groundbreaking scholarship on the relationship between the history of the academic study of religion and the Western conquest and colonization of other peoples, his critical interpretation of the complex nature of the discourse of civilization, rationality, religion, and the human, and his creative interventions in the fields of American religious history, black theology, and theologies of the oppressed warrant serious and sustained consideration. Long offers a thorough and provocative analysis and commentary on the methodological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and cultural theories and practices of the scholars who founded and have contributed substantially to the modern study of religion and the discipline of Religious Studies: from Max Müller to Jonathan Z. Smith. Long raises compelling questions about the nature of religion and the discipline of Religious Studies that remain as relevant to the study of religion today as when he first articulated them in his presentations and publications, in some cases more than 50 years ago.

Long's critical analysis of the complex relationship between Religious Studies, as an offspring of the Enlightenment, and the Western economic, political, and military subjugation of non-Western peoples, cultures, and nature bears on us with equal force as we consider the relationship between our work as scholars and the continuing brutal oppression and exploitation of human beings, other species, and the nature in the name of freedom, democracy, development, and progress. Long contends

¹ Charles H. Long. *Ellipsis: The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 410.

our time is one in which the world wrought by colonialism has not died, and a truly new world has yet to be born. It is a revolutionary time not unlike the time Karl Jaspers described as an Axial Age. Long is a thinker for this time. He provides critical concepts, methodological sensibilities, a style of thinking, and a vision of the value of the discipline of Religious Studies to orient and empower our work as teachers and scholars to explore the diversity and depths of religion and the sacred and contribute to the articulation of a new understanding of the meaning of the human and new modes of living as a planetary species.²

In what follows, I review Long's account of how his own history contributed to his thinking about religion, Religious Studies, and the possibilities of developing a new meaning of the sacred, the human, and freedom. I examine his theorization of conquest and colonization as a world transforming force that structured and continues to structure the production of knowledge and his deconstruction of the the West, civilization, rationality, and the human sciences and their role in the subjugation, reconstruction, and racialization of the colonized. I discuss Long's reflections on cargo cults and theologies of liberation or theologies opaque, as Long refers to them, as sites of resistance and creation, and his proposal that the phenomena of cargo cults suggest the possibility of instituting "a structure of intimacy and reciprocity"³ to our methodological orientations that would facilitate a more serious and generative engagement with the diversity of religion and "the opportunity to participate creatively in an-other world of human beings."⁴ Finally, I consider his arguments about the communal dimensions of religion and the materiality of the sacred as loci of power and liberation. In all, Long's work provides a compelling conceptual framework, methodological orientation, and inspiring vision of the invaluable project of the academic study of religion as "the only area within the humanities and/or the human sciences that could hold together authentically all of the varied orientations" of humanity and thereby create a basis for advancing needed critiques of the oppressive dimensions of the postcolonial world

² In the Introduction to *Significations*, Long writes that his "concern for the meaning of the religious reality of black Americans is obviously part and parcel of my scholarly discipline, the history of religions. This academic choice itself was probably rooted in a deeper unconscious desire to make sense of my life as a black person in the United States. I was attracted to this scholarly orientation, for it was the only discipline that responded to the religious experience and expression of my origins in the black community of this country." *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. (Aurora, CO: Fortress Press, 1995), 8.

³ Long, *Ellipsis*, 328.

⁴ Ibid.

and imagining alternatives that liberate all human beings to live well in relationships with each other and the greater-than-human natural world.⁵

I. Being in Two Places at Once

Long's dedication of *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, "TO MY TEACHERS in the Public Schools of Little Rock, Arkansas, and at the University of Chicago" expresses his profound debt to educators and education as liberating forces and symbolizes the creative possibilities for new modes of thought that emerge from the disjunctive unity of learning in a world of segregation and integration: a world that says what matters is how you are identified, that is, how you are signified; and a world that says who you are is how you identify yourself, that is, a world in which you are free to signify yourself and to make of yourself and your world what you can. In an interview with Carolyn M. Jones and Julia M. Hardy, published in 1988, Long relays that he considers Little Rock and the University of Chicago his "two 'homes,'" adding that both "were existential and intellectual homes. I got the sense of the intellectual life from my home of origin in Little Rock—the whole community, not just the school. When I look back, I would say that the sense of living was an imaginative, exciting, intellectual meaning for me."⁶ For this reason, he adds, attending the University of Chicago felt natural. Though from a certain "sociological/historical point of view, one sees these two places as juxtaposed or disjunctive," Long experienced a meaningful existential and intellectual continuity between Little Rock and the University of Chicago. The University of Chicago was "seriously concerned about the relationship of the intellectual life to the ordinary life, and therefore intellectual matters took prominence overall the conventions of ordinary existence," which, says Long, meant that "no one was trying to make you fit into a certain kind of class structure... To the extent that you were interested in intellectual matters, you found a home in that university, and I was so interested, and therefore I found a home."⁷

When asked to elaborate on how the convergence of these homes is represented by the epigraphs at the beginning of *Significations*,

⁵ Long, *Significations*, 86. I borrow the concept of the "greater-than-human world" from Robin Will Kimmerer. See *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Canada: Milkweed Editions, 2015).

⁶ Long, *Ellipsis*, 293.

⁷ Ibid.

the African-American saying that “signifying is worse than lying” and linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s note that “the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary,” Long describes how the roots of his intellectual life did not derive solely from his formal schooling but more broadly from the common life of his community and their responses to “the whole conundrum of ‘everybody’s equal, except they’re not,’ and all of this kind of business.”⁸ To survive and thrive “one had to find an imaginative way of living with all that,” and this meant accepting the “sheer facticity of our situation as true,” that we were subjected to segregation, while creatively resisting the dominant culture’s “definition of who we were.”⁹ It meant not only contesting segregation but also inventing and claiming spaces to live fully in the world as it is. “The problem,” says Long, “was that you couldn’t live simply in terms of the goal you were trying to reach, you also had to live in terms of what you were doing while getting to that goal—the process itself.”¹⁰ To live in terms of what one is doing while working for liberation is at the same time a strategy for diminishing the power of those who seek to maintain total control over others.

You cannot spend your whole life as if “The Man” is God. “The Man” is not God. And it seems to me that if you spend all of your life simply fighting “The Man,” you turn “The Man” into a god. And if you turn “The Man” into a god, by definition in any theological equation, you cannot ever overcome God.¹¹

To recognize the bond between signifier and signified is not absolute but humanly constructed and historically contingent means that structures like segregation and white supremacy are not founded on natural law or a mandate from God, but rather are humanly made and can therefore be unmade.¹² To unmake oppressive structures involves challenging the dominant social order *and* liberating oneself and one’s community to live as freely as possible in the present—a position that speaks to Long’s experience of his own religious community and his thinking about the liberatory dimensions of the sacred. “On the one hand, I’ve always been interested in the goals of liberation of all oppressed people,” Long remarks,

⁸ 294.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 295. One is reminded of Frederick Douglass’s discussion in his biography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), of the liberatory impact of his recognition that “it was not color, but *crime*, not *God*, but *man*” or more precisely some men who constructed and maintained the institution of slavery.

¹² 294.

but on the other hand, [I] have never substituted that kind of goal for the be and end all of life. The be all and end all of life is to live every day, and therefore one has to find a way of making sense of this life lived every day as opposed to life lived in terms of something that's going to happen in the future. I find this way of talking about liberation to be a much more appropriate way for me to make creative sense of the situation.¹³

This way of talking and thinking about liberation informs and is richly expressed in Long's theorization of religion. It is a way of talking and thinking that opens onto an understanding of religion as radical embodiment and the sacred as manifest in the materiality of the everyday.

For Long, the life and thought of W.E.B. Du Bois prove paradigmatic for his own thinking about colonization, American religious history and the symbol of America, theologies of liberation, and the meaning of freedom, humanity, materiality, and our relationship to the sacred. In a presentation he gave in 1993 at the University of Cape Town, he explored the complex and contradictory history of the United States and the relationship between slavery and the claim to being, in the words of Jefferson, an "Empire of Liberty."¹⁴ Long explained that the modern period presided over a slave trade that defined the human as chattel while at the same time evoking the language of democratic freedoms; the modern period speaks of inalienable rights while practicing colonialism; the modern period evokes the notion of reason while creating the repressive category of race.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Long highlights the problematic of the meaning of liberty throughout this work: "The primary fact of slavery is the enslavement of African persons in the United States; this enslavement was an institution made legal by a democratic constitution. *Ellipsis*, op. cit. 232. In "Shadow and Symbol of American Religion," Long elaborates: "the compromise over slavery at the beginning, in the formation and regulation of the Constitution, is the archetype of that long series of compromises concerning the freedom of black American within the American national community. This first compromise sets the tone for what is almost a ritual language concerning the nature of black freedom and, consequently, the meaning of freedom in the American Republic. Indeed, we are able to discern almost precisely the one-hundred-year periods in which Jeffersonian cultural and linguistic compromises rise to an intense and violent level; where the antinomies of its inner structure are exposed. These are cycles of American history. From 1776 to the 1860s is almost a hundred years, and from the Civil War to the 1960s and 1970s is another hundred-year period. These cycles represent dramatic rituals of the archetypes of American history and ritual." *Significations*, op. cit., 164-165.

¹⁵ 405.

He draws from Du Bois's concepts of the veil and double-consciousness to explicate the nature of the disjunction between claims made and the practices of those who make them. He begins with the first sentence in "Of Our Spiritual Striving," the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*: "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it."¹⁶ The unasked question which "points to an intimacy of relationship that is hidden within the interstices of the power of domination" is "How does it feel to be a problem?"¹⁷ Long then quotes one of the most considered and influential passages from DuBois' classic work:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹⁸

The "peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" and feeling a "two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body" was an experience Long intimately understood. But Long takes DuBois's ideas further by arguing they apply as well to those who maintain oppressive systems. "The burden of doubleness is an authenticity for all to bear; it is the avoidance of this doubleness in the constitution of consciousness that creates the ambiguities of the innocent who speak freedom while enslaving and who preach Christian love in the midst of oppression."¹⁹ Long's critical insight echoes those articulated by David Walker in his *Appeal*, Frederick Douglass in his discourse on slaveholding religion and the Christianity of Christ, James Baldwin in his analysis of the dehumanizing impact of antiblack racism on

¹⁶ 408.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ 408.

whites, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in his prophetic demand that America live up to the principles it affirms. Long recognizes that everyone—both colonized and colonizer, enslaved and enslaver, oppressed and oppressor, black and white—has been profoundly shaped and misshapen by the establishment and maintenance of the world system resulting from conquest, colonialism, and capitalism.²⁰

Referring to the transatlantic slave trade, Long emphasizes that the formation of the European self as self-constituting, as sovereign rational subject, was and “is dependent on things, forms, modes, matter—stuff—that it does not create” and that in “the case of the Atlantic world, one of those forms upon which a European American self depended was the bodies of Africans transported as chattel slaves into the New World as the basis for the accumulation of wealth and resources of the mercantile and capitalist form of production.²¹

The self-proclaimed independence of the European self, exemplified in the ideology of the self-made man, was and remains, like that of the West, inescapably dependent on the labor and lives of non-European, non-Western human beings. The accumulation and concentration of wealth by the colonial powers, which formed the material basis for the formation of the ideology of the sovereign self, was and is predicated on the relentless extraction of wealth from nature and the labor of the (neo)colonized.

²⁰ In a sermon delivered in 1961 to Detroit Council of Churches’ Noon Lenten Services, titled, “The Man Who Was a Fool,” King described what today goes by the name globalization: “Something should remind us before we can finish eating breakfast in the morning we are dependent on more than half of the world. We get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for a sponge, and that’s handed to us by a Pacific Islander. Then we reach over for a bar of soap, and that’s given to us at the hands of a Frenchman. And then we reach up for our towel, and that’s given to us by a Turk. And then we go to the kitchen for breakfast, getting ready to go to work. Maybe this morning we want to follow the good old American tradition, and we drink coffee. That’s poured in our cups by a South American. Or maybe we are desirous of having tea. Then we discover that it’s poured in our cup by a Chinese. Or maybe we want cocoa this morning, and then we discover that that’s poured in our cup by a West African. Then we reach over for a piece of toast, only to discover that that’s given to us at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And so before we finish eating breakfast in the morning we are dependent on more than half of the world. But this man didn’t realize that. And any man who fails to see the interdependent structure of reality is really a fool.” Martin Luther King, Jr. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Stanford University. Accessed September 2, 2021 from <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/man-who-was-fool-sermon-delivered-detroit-council-churches-noon-lenten>

²¹ Long, *Ellipsis*, 208.

This situation is manifest in the fact that European enslavers and enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic together, even as they each viewed the meaning of the voyage and the meaning of the human from radically different positions and perspectives, with the view of the former, the enslavers, being the one that generated the ideology of modernity, with its claims to being rational, moral, Christian, civilized, and authentically human. What has yet to be considered fully is the view of modernity from the perspective of the enslaved within the holds of these ships, and one might add, the colonized, enslaved, and exploited from every region of the world. The experience of enslavement and resistance constitutes a profound "*site of memory* for the modern world. It is from this site that another perspective on the worlds of the Americas, Europe, and Africa may be gained."²² It is this space from which new understandings of what it means to be human, new understandings of economy, exchange, value, materiality, and the sacred may emerge and provide bases for new ways of organizing our relations with each other. DuBois's double consciousness, writes Long, "carries with it the vestiges of this site as a space of terror within the heart of the modern world of democratic values and ideologies of freedom."²³ At the same time, this site, as symbol of the self-world structure created by colonization, represents

the possibility of a permeability of historical experience that holds open the possibility that the colonized and colonizer might engage in mutual critiques and undergo the constitution of double consciousness. It is the only hope that oppression might lead to a language of community gleaned from the recognition that we are all formed and have been affected by the same colonial formations. It is the place of critique, confession, and hope.²⁴

In Long's view, the discipline of Religious Studies is among the human sciences best positioned to facilitate this critique and in so doing create space for the emergence of a language of community that might help us to imagine and take steps to liberate ourselves and nature from the colonized world of commodification.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 410.

II. Deconstruction and the Dialectic of Sacred Power

In "Charles H. Long and the Re-Orientation of American Religious History," Louis Benjamin Rolsky writes: "Long's hermeneutical focus relocates the field of investigation from another community to the scholarly community, thereby initiating a process of 'reading the ones doing the reading'."²⁵ Long undertakes a deconstructive analysis of the self-assured and self-centering academic profession by noting how the comparative study of religion emerged during the period of the West's colonization of the world. Long writes:

There is a complex relationship between the meaning and nature of religion as a subject of academic study and the reality of the peoples and cultures who were conquered and colonized during this same period. Both meanings – religion as an authentic mode of the human and the situation of those cultures that were overcome by the West, the enslaved, colonized, and conquered – constituted something of a scandal.²⁶

At the heart of this scandal is the fact that while Enlightenment thinkers advanced a critique of "the divisive meaning of religion in Western culture and set forth alternate meanings for the understanding of the human" as rational, sovereign, and free: "the same ideological structures through various intellectual strategies paved the ground for historical evolutionary thinking, racial theories, and forms of color symbolism that made the economic and military conquest of various cultures and peoples justifiable and defensible," that is, it paved the ground for the denial of the rationality, sovereignty, and freedom of others.²⁷ In this process, Long adds, "both religion and cultures and peoples throughout the world were created anew through academic disciplinary orientations--*they were signified*."²⁸ The West's self-proclamation as the most advanced, beneficent, and humane culture, a light until the rest of the world, "must be seen simultaneously in its relationship to the discovery of a new world which must necessarily be perceived as inhabited by savages and primitives who constitute the lowest rung on the ladder of cultural reality," and therefore in need of the West to

²⁵ Louis Benjamin Rolsky, "Charles H. Long and the Re-Orientation of American Religious History." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80, no. 3 (2012): 750-74. Accessed September 2, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23250723>.

²⁶ Long, *Significations*, 4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

rescue them from their backwardness.²⁹ The West's conquest and colonization of others lead to the religious concept of pilgrimage being reconceptualized as the secular but no less metaphysical mythology of progress, while the consolidation of colonial rule coincided with the racialization of humanity and the assertion of a global racial hierarchy. In other words, the "economic and military conquest was accomplished, but another conquest more subtle and with even longer-lasting effects had taken place. This was the linguistic conquest."³⁰

The linguistic conquest involved not only the "imposition of European languages" but also the formation of a "metaphysical world which imposes through archetypes its meaning upon the empirical and physical realities encountered," most notably the colonized, and which "has the power of myth in that it becomes the normal manner in which realities are observed and understood," the sociocultural structures through which the meaning of ourselves and the other are interpreted. In turn, this mythological structure of interpretation, the imperial lens, buttresses and is buttressed by the colonial-commercial exercise of economic and military power.³¹ It is a mythological structure maintained by the stories, symbols, and rituals that comprise what is called civil religion, and whose effect is to enlist obedience from citizen-subjects to the continuing exercise of imperial power, power for which they also pay a dear price.

As Long highlights, the project of conquest and colonization was and remains a racializing project, in which the colonized who were at greater geographical distance from the centers of colonial power were signified as lesser beings in the European imposed structures of racial hierarchy. In "Shadow and Symbols of American Religion," he emphasizes the centrality of racism to the formation of colonial self-world structures:

During the period of Western modernity the conquest and exploitation of the World by the West created a geographical and historical context in which the white races formed the centers from which the exploitation and exercise of hegemonic power took place. These centers defined the structures of authentic human existence. The distances from these centers were adjudicated by varying degrees of humanity, so that at

²⁹ 94. The concept of humanitarian intervention is among the most recent expressions of this colonial dynamic.

³⁰ 116.

³¹ Ibid.

the outermost periphery, where color or blackness coincided with distance, the centrist position held that these were lesser human beings.³²

The racialization of human beings also took place within the geographical territories of the colonizing nations, where Africans, indigenous peoples, poor whites, Asians, and others were marked as inferior to the white-identified property-owning class.³³

At the same time, Long does not jettison all that is symbolized by the West, including the affirmation of universal rights, reason, morality, and freedom, or the disciplines that developed in the context of conquest and colonization. Long does not argue that Religious Studies, along with anthropology and ethnology, only served as justifications for and defenses of conquest and colonization. He does not contend "the human sciences were simply and merely the ideological counterpart of this subjugation."³⁴ Rather he aims "to show how our rational Western intellectual tradition, rooted in a citied tradition, has blinded us to an adequate appreciation of the diversity of the human."³⁵ The etiology of this blindness derives in part from the effort to resolve the convergence of the practice of colonialism and slavery and the proclamations of democratic values and ideologies of freedom through the formation of a temporal construct which posits persons designated as primitive exist outside of history and practice archaic religions that never change. They represent the childhood of humanity from which the West developed into the adulthood of civilization. The West advanced because, unlike those marked as primitive, it was rational, logical, and civilized.³⁶ In fact, the

³² 200.

³³ The racialization of human beings is a dynamic process characterized by a continuous reformation of the classificatory systems by which human beings are ascribed "racial" identities. The history of the US census makes apparent the entirely arbitrary, bizarre, and fundamentally political nature of this process, where the purportedly biological category of race is mixed with the sociocultural category of ethnicity. The racialization of human beings is frequently linked to religious identity, so that race and religion comprise essential components of who one is, with religious identity often being ascribed a quasi-racial status. The racialization of religion provides justification for the maintenance of exploitative social relations and the exercise of state violence. See Iqbal (2020); Love (2017); Kumar (2012); Fields (2012); Allen (1975).

³⁴ 86.

³⁵ 75.

³⁶ This colonial logic is operative in virtually all discussions of foreign and domestic policies, especially when addressing matters of race. In writing about the US "failure" in Afghanistan (failure, that is, if one does not count the profits made by the military manufacturers, private contractors, and bankers), liberal editorialists argue the West

language of savagism, Christianity, and civilization became the normative modes of denying the cultural-historical meaning of cultural contact, the mutual borrowing, the dependence of Europeans on the aboriginal populations and African slaves—in short the recognition that the contact situation itself as a normality of reality in the Americas [and beyond] since the time of Columbus.³⁷

From the Doctrine of Discovery to evangelical calls to wage a crusade against the Muslim world, religious ideologies have played a fundamental role in not merely justifying but compelling the subjugation of others.³⁸

It is critical to understand that the “economic, political, and military domination did not succeed in the total destruction of native cultures” or total subordination of colonized peoples to the hegemony of the West’s myriad apparatuses of power. The colonized fought and persevered, and continue to do so, resisting the imposition of the West’s hegemonic concepts of value, beauty, freedom, humanity, and the sacred and reinterpreting these concepts in alignment with their own aspirations. What is called “Western culture” was reshaped and has been continuously shaped by the colonized. The same has always been true of what is called American culture and American religious history. The modern world system, to cite Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept, cannot be said to be solely Western in a geographical sense, nor purely Western in a sociological, cultural, or religious sense. In his masterful essay, “Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem,” republished in *Significations*, Long proposes that

the issue is whether symbol of civilization is simply the context for a necessary lie (the appearance of crude and debased cultures and the demonstration of the superior power of Europe) or a new sacred power in the world (the bringing of all cultures into communication with

should have realized that democracy is just not part of “their” culture, and in so doing, erase the history of potent democratic movements in the region, like the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan. Some variation of “the primitives operat[ing] as a negative structure of concreteness that allows civilization to define itself a structure superior of this ill-defined and inferior ‘other’” is evoked to provide ideological legitimacy for the violence inflicted by the civilized against the primitive others, and almost always in the name of rescuing the others from themselves (1995: 101).

³⁷ *Ellipsis*, 178.

³⁸ See

one another and the beginnings of the possibility for a new meaning of human freedom in the world).³⁹

For Long it is both *and* more. It is both the assertion of European (and later American) power *and* establishment of what Martin Luther King described as a “world house” in which the cultures and peoples of the world are bound together in relationships of uneven and unequal dependence and yet who may through a process of engagement find a way to a new mode of being human and new definition of freedom.⁴⁰ This is the ambiguity of the postcolonial situation.

Long’s dialectical engagement with the problematic of conquest and colonization does not reduce to an either/or but always a both/and, and an excess that cannot be categorically contained. The postcolonial world is one of both subjugation and resistance, a new science of the universality of humanity and the white supremacist theories and practices, both an extension of the Western concept of civilization by which the West defined itself as the absolute other of the colonized, and the formation of a global situation in which all persons are enveloped, related, and dependent, opening possibilities for the reformation of the concepts of civilization, the sacred, and the human. Says Long: we must come to terms with the fact that “every culture in the world has been affected by the West; the West is everywhere” and that “this ‘West that is everywhere’ is no longer under control of the ‘original’ Western culture; it no longer belongs to the West.”⁴¹ The collision and combining of peoples and cultures resulting from colonialism constitutes nothing less than “a dialectic of sacred power,” opening onto the possibility of developing new understandings of what it means to be human and new conceptions of what constitutes the sacred and the meaning of freedom in this world.⁴²

Long concurs with Dipesh Chakrabarty that “European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody’s heritage and which affects all of us—may be renewed from and for the

³⁹ 95.

⁴⁰ King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 177-201.

⁴¹ Long, *Ellipsis*, 193.

⁴² 129.

margins,”⁴³ that is, from those who have been subordinated to the dominant modes of economic, political, cultural and spiritual organization and orientation. Long does not throw out the Enlightenment’s affirmations of the universality of reason, equality, and freedom with the reactionary thought that provided ideological support for conquest, colonization, racism, and the establishment of capitalist relations of commodity production and wealth accumulation.⁴⁴ He at once recognizes the revolutionary nature of these principles and the need to dismantle the structures of colonial, racial, and imperial thought and practice which impede their realization. To accomplish this task requires us to undertake a critique of the categories, methodologies, and presuppositions that lead to the production of knowledge that reinforce these modes of thinking and practice.⁴⁵

Along these lines, Long cites Jonathan Z. Smith’s critique of the concepts of cyclical-mythical and historical-linear time and the “archaic” and “modern” deployed in the comparative study of religions. Citing Smith:

If one accepts the basic dualism just described between those cultures which affirm the structures of the cosmos and seek to repeat them; which affirm the necessity of dwelling within a limited world in which each being has its given place and role to fulfill, a centrifugal view of the world which emphasizes the importance of the “Center” as opposed to those cultures which express a more “open” view in which the categories of rebellion

⁴³ 186.

⁴⁴ In his monumental analysis of the post-Enlightenment counterrevolutionary development of philosophical irrationalism, *The Destruction of Reason* (1952), Georg Lukács wrote: “the obfuscating and disordering of the social sciences in the imperialist age proceeded largely along the lines of racial theory (race replacing class).” Downloaded from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/destruction-reason/ch03.htm> on September 14, 2021, 356. The racial obfuscation of class has been a perpetual feature of capitalist political-economy. Also see, Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 2012) and Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London: Verso, 2012).

⁴⁵ Writes Long: “For my purposes, religion will mean orientation – orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world” (*Significations*, 7). In the “Religious Interpretation of America,” Long elaborates: “Orientation refers to the manner in which a culture, society, or person becomes aware of its place in the temporal spatial order of things. Implied in the term is a recognition of the powers that accrue to the specificities of the modes of being that are coincidental to this situation. Orientation expresses creativity and critique in the face of the given orders of creation.” *Ellipsis*, op. cit., 14.

and freedom are to the fore; in which beings are called upon to challenge their limits, break them, or create new possibilities, a centripetal world emphasizes the importance of periphery and transcendence; in which, in Eliade's terms, one "has chosen not installation in the world but absolute freedom... the annihilation of every conditioned world" – ought one to suggest the periodization implied by the terms "archaic" and "modern"?⁴⁶

Use of the binary categories of cyclical-mythical/historical-linear and archaic/modern and their essentializing ascription to the peoples and religions marked as primitive/civilized and backward/advanced, effectively forecloses consideration of their coexistence as expressions of the diversity of human cultures.

The use of these categories forecloses recognition of the fulness of the human experience and the value of taking modes of orientation seriously which may prove vital to consider to address the global challenges we face. The "necessity of dwelling" or learning how to dwell "within a limited world in which each being has its given place and role to fulfill, a centrifugal view of the world which emphasizes the importance of the 'Center,'" not as an archaic view but a contemporary view embodied in the modes of orientation of indigenous peoples, hardly needs emphasizing given the dominance of a culture that does not recognize any limits to its own self-augmentation and as a result is rapidly depleting the nature's capacities to support a livable future, and for many, if not a majority, of the world's populations that future has arrived.⁴⁷

The self-proclaimed civilized culture is rapidly resulting in the "annihilation of every conditioned world," as Long cites Eliade, even while the conditioned world or conditioning world of nature has the last word. Religious Studies can play a crucial role in challenging the still all too common tendency to impose "even an implicit evolutionary scheme of development"⁴⁸ that reproduces the myth of the West as civilized, the *axis mundi* from which all other forms of existence are organized, must emulate, and pay tribute, since it is, by its own definition, the most

⁴⁶ 83.

⁴⁷ Center for Biological Diversity, "Extinction Crisis," Accessed from https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/ on September 1, 2021. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying." Accessed from <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/> on September 1, 2021.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 101.

“advanced” (or in political terms, the “free world,” that is, free from recognizing, let alone caring for, the materiality of nature upon which all civilizations depend). The entire metaphysical apparatus which imposes a mythological structure of teleological temporality where some cultures are viewed as more developed and therefore more advanced than others on a continuum invites deconstruction. In fact, as Smith emphasizes, centrifugal and centripetal views “have been and remain coeval existential possibilities.”

Like the categories cyclical-mythical and linear-historical they should be deconstructed and decoupled from the categories primitive and civilized,⁴⁹ which institute misleading dichotomies that segregate coexisting human beings. Moreover, given the destructive impact of the centripetal orientation, with associated concepts of endless programs through scientific and technological development, on the earth’s interdependent ecosystems, the need to explore the possibilities for adopting a centrifugal way of life, one that at least complements the centripetal way of life, could not be more urgent.

III. Cargo Cults, Theologies Opaque, Materiality, and the Everyday

In his 1973 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, Long spoke about how cargo cults in New Guinea reveal not only resistance to colonization and the creative ways communities subjected to colonization interpret the meaning of this experience in light of their own traditions but also “the possibility of creating new human beings, neither New Guineans nor Westerners,” from “out of the chaos of a cultural disequilibrium.”⁵⁰ Cargo cults clarify that the dominant culture does not have the last word on the meaning of the human and civilization, that the dominant “socioeconomic system is neither natural nor good. Instead, it is both unnatural and evil.”⁵¹ Cargo cults invite us to consider a modality of exchange that does not presuppose abstract monetary equivalences that repress recognition of the sensual particularity of the material world but rather an economy structured by “notions of gift and reciprocity.”⁵² Living in two worlds at the same time, the colonized

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Long, *Significations*, 135.

⁵¹ 120.

⁵² Long, *Ellipsis*: 189.

have been forced to come to terms with a world that is not insured to them through tradition. They have assessed the impact of and meaning of the relationship among humans as defined by a money economy; they have worried about work, its value, and its structure. And through all of this, they have attempted through their thought and behavior to create new human beings—new in the sense that these persons will be neither mimics of the West nor persons who wish to go back to their old traditions. Such newness should be the case for Westerners also.⁵³

In this respect, the cargo cult invites the humanities to imagine and institute “a structure of intimacy and reciprocity into its methodological orientations” that “affords both the Westerner and the extra-Western culture the opportunity to participate creatively in an-other world of human beings.”⁵⁴ Such a structure of intimacy would facilitate a critical and creative exchange about questions of essentiality, wholeness, and value, as Long proposes, and constitutes the basis “to embrace a new and fuller meaning of a humanities that, in fact, humanizes,” and does so precisely by recognizing the humanity of all persons.⁵⁵ Instituting a structure of intimacy and reciprocity may prove vital to the work of discovering and creating a mode of being human that lives replenishing relationship with the “integrity of nature,” to cite Long’s provocative phrase, a mode which points toward a “deeper, less mundane, more primordial, ahistorical meaning of life” that represents a genuine alternative to the commercial world in which everything is commodified.⁵⁶

Like cargo cults, black and indigenous theologies of liberation or, as Long refers to them, theologies opaque, expose the others whose being has been repressed and left out of the official story and conversation about the history of religion. They point toward what Long describes as the “arche” of the history of the US by making visible the darker dimensions of the history of conquest and colonialism, the human costs paid by others in the white settler occupation of the Americas. In the preface to his discussion of theologies opaque, Long critiques “Death of God” theology for its failure to speak sufficiently to the depths of the

⁵³ 328. One can imagine this description applies equally to communities of the oppressed, including the community by which Long was raised in Little Rock, a community living “in two worlds at the same time,” the world made by segregationists and the world his community created on their own.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Long, *Significations*: 160; Long, *Ellipsis*: 81.

demonic in America. Theologians who promote “Death of God” theology are too eschatological in their orientation to grasp the “arche” of America. James Baldwin’s “sobering sense of death and renewal,” writes Long in 1969, “is a far cry from the futuristic pronouncements of [Thomas] Altizer” which leap over the suppressed reality of the colonized.⁵⁷ The problem, and I would add it remains a problem to this day, is that the American has for one reason or another never taken the time to contemplate the ambiguity of act and value, the horror and the evil which is synonymous with the conquest of this new land. But this innocence for the American is not a natural innocence, that innocence which is prior to experience; rather, this innocence is gained only through an intense suppression of the deeper and more subtle dimension of the American *experience*. Americans have never taken the time to contemplate the depths of their deeds.⁵⁸

By taking time to contemplate these depths Americans might also acquire a more critical stance toward claims made about the goodness of who we are and what we do. We might learn, in other words, to practice a hermeneutic of suspicion.

In contrast, theologies of liberation articulate an opacity – the flesh-and-blood existence, the humanity of the human being signified as other by the signifying culture – and in so doing “deny the authority of the white world to define their reality, and deny the methodological and philosophical meaning of transparency as a metaphor for a theory of knowledge.”⁵⁹ They seek not only to “win a theological debate” but to create a space for the creation of a society that affirms everyone’s humanity. Here Long is concerned, as he is in other writings, with the oppressed adopting elements of the structures of oppression in their efforts to liberate themselves from oppression. Says Long in his discussion with Carolyn M. Jones and Julia M. Hardy, this often gets hidden when oppressed people or people of oppressed conditions argue against oppression, but claim only the same rights as those who oppressed them. They give justification for a certain modality of the human that is capable of oppression, and therefore they don’t undercut the meaning of the oppression at the deepest levels.

Long adds:

⁵⁷ Long, *Significations*, 150.

⁵⁸ 156.

⁵⁹ 207.

[t]his is why I have never wanted to devote myself simply to the political meaning of this form of oppression. I think it must be revealed that colonialism was a distinct sin and awfulness to the people who were the colonizers, and that it has affected them in severe ways.... I feel that one has to find those modes of expression and modes of discourse that can raise that level of conversation along with the political meaning of liberation.⁶⁰

This is also why Long cautions that theologies of liberation “should not move forward to possess the theological battlefield wrested from their foes” but rather they “must become deconstructive theologies — that is to say, theologies that undertake the destruction of theology as a powerful mode of discourse.”⁶¹ Long points to the problem of reproducing a mode of discourse that has been deployed time and again to sanction the oppression of one group or another as necessitated by the will and design of a supernatural power. The appearance of theologies of the opaque might promise another alternative of a structural sort, but only if these theologies move beyond the structural power of theology as the normative mode of discourse and contemplate a narrative of meaning that is commensurate with the quality of beauty that was fired in the crucible of oppression.⁶² It is by way of a disjunctive dialectic that liberation can be imagined and possibly realized, one that grasps and is rooted in the sacred dimension of materiality and our creatureliness.

For Long, religion is “a practical social concern,” whose objective reality “must in some sense be validated by communal consensus” and at the same time, religion provides “a mode of release from the entanglements of the social.”⁶³ Religion may open onto “an awareness of an objectivity that lies beyond the social and the existential [which]” immanently transcends the human and provides the possibility for the emergence of an alternate modality for our common life. An awareness of the world and cosmos that is almost entirely not us invites us to understand the value of living in good relationship with the world.⁶⁴ In the conclusion to his essay, “Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter,” Long comments on how technology has

⁶⁰ Long, *Ellipsis*, 299.

⁶¹ Long, *Significations*, 209-210.

⁶² 210.

⁶³ 39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 178.

altered not only our practical but also our imaginative and symbolic relationship to the material world. In the postcolonial era, with the consolidation of the modern world system of commercial relations, the “integrity of matter became obscured, infantilized, trivialized, and disenchanted. There is,” however, “the possibility for the rediscovery of the life of matter as a religious phenomenon—an equal and sometimes alternate structure in the face of the dehumanizing and terroristic meaning of history.”⁶⁵

We may rediscover the life of matter as a religious phenomenon by engaging theoretically and practically cultures that affirm the sacrality of nature. In his critique of Eliade’s understanding of this affirmation, Long cautions that we must not simply consider the abstraction of matter as symbol but recognize the sheer facticity of the material world, that, for example, as Long explains in his conversation with Hardy and Jones, communities first perceive and relate to a stone as stone, as that which sets limits to our being. Matter is that which says no, no to the centripetal orientation which seeks to transcend the material world. It is that which says the human is but one species among many in a world that is greater-than-the-human. The environmental movement, says Long, too often fails to appreciate the meaning of this understanding of materiality. They “say they are doing this because they are helping nature,” often adding theological justifications for this view.⁶⁶

They say, “Don’t do this because you are killing the little fish” or “Don’t do this because you are polluting the water.” That’s fine until they start talking about this little fish and the little this and the little that as if nature *needs us*. Water will purify itself if it takes two billion years, because water doesn’t live in our time-frame. So, in that sense I say, don’t do anything *for* the water. If you are going to regard the water, regard it because it is water. You don’t need to help it, see? You have to understand the regard for water, so that you undergo water instead of thinking you are helping water out, because that still makes *you* the determiner of reality. Even though I like all this ecology business, given all the alternatives, I still think it is missing the regard for that mode of matter;

⁶⁵ Long, *Ellipsis*, 126.

⁶⁶ 305.

because it misses that regard, it does not seek a deeper meaning at the level of human consciousness.⁶⁷

Long's thinking about materiality and community is informed by and resonates deeply with indigenous thinking. In *Our History is the Future* (2019), Nick Estes, member of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, writes that "*Mni Wiconi* [water is life], as much as it reaches into the past, is a future-oriented project. It forces some to confront their own unbelonging to the land and the river. How can settler society, which possesses no fundamental ethical relationship to the land or its original people, imagine a future premised on justice?"⁶⁸ As Long emphasizes the need to attend to the voices of the colonized, to those who have suffered and who continue to suffer the violence of resource extraction and the commodification of the Earth, so too does Estes emphasize that "whatever the answer may be, Indigenous peoples must lead the way. Our history and long traditions of Indigenous resistance provide possibilities for futures premised on justice."⁶⁹ Estes points toward a concept of community which includes the non-humans and the materiality of reality, a concept which points us toward the "rediscovery of the life of matter as a religious phenomenon." There is, writes Estes, "a capaciousness to Indigenous kinship that goes beyond the human and that fundamentally differs from the heteronuclear family or biological family."⁷⁰ When the Sioux nation made treaties with the United States government, they did so on behalf of the buffalo nation. This relationship is symbolized by "Pte Ska Win (the White Calf Buffalo Woman), who made the first treaty with the human and nonhuman worlds. To be a good relative is to honor that original instruction."⁷¹

It is for this reason "Lakotas often viewed treaties with the United States and other nations as commitments not just to human relations, but also to nonhuman ones. And such agreements were not the sole domain of men, as was the tradition of white society."⁷² To imagine and live in a way that considers the entire biotic community one's extended family moves us radically in the direction of a mode of relating to nature that is based fundamentally on our material relationships and respect for all our relations. We can begin to imagine, as Long

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ 256.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ 109.

⁷² Ibid.

cites DuBois, another “country of the soul,” one that is rooted in the matrix of material relations. As with Indigenous thinking, “Long’s thinking of the extraordinary within the ordinary,” as Charles Winquist writes in his Forward to *Significations*, “is a coming to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.”⁷³ It is a coming to terms with one’s creatureliness, one’s embeddedness in the matrix of life. The rediscovery of the life of matter as a religious phenomenon involves the materialization of the transcendent. It means undertaking a practice of undergoing water as water and stone as stone. The need to rediscover the life of matter as a religious phenomenon and to orient our way of being accordingly has never been of greater urgency than it is today given the climate emergence and general degradation of the biosphere. In Long’s words, “the very pursuit of authentic selfhood, the Western world has come face to face with silence, with the exhaustion of the forms of the world,” evident in mass species die-offs due to human alterations of the environment, alterations presupposing and reinforcing that we are the “determiners.”⁷⁴ And with this dying so too is dying the symphony of the sounds of life on earth. We are rapidly arriving at not only a silent spring, to cite Rachel Carson’s work, but a year-round world devoid of the voices of the other beings who comprise the biodiversity of material existence.

Long proposes a materialization of the sacred and, relatedly, brings to bear, as noted in the opening of this essay, a concept of religion informed by the work of Otto, Muller, and Eliade, and his experience growing up in a religious community in Little Rock, Arkansas. His community was daily confronted by the oppugnancy of reality, “the hardness of life,” the butt of a policeman’s baton, the toil of work in fields and factories for scarcely enough to live, the pain of poverty and the daily indignities of living under segregation and daily triumphs of living against it. As Long records, his community found ways to celebrate the materiality of the sacred and their humanity. Like other communities subjected to economic, political, and psychological forms of oppression, Long’s community knew “something about freedom that the oppressors will never know.”⁷⁵ They embodied a mode of orientation centered around and centered by their intimate bonds of solidarity. They found ways to liberate themselves from lordship-bondage structures, if only momentarily, and to practice a mode of being that celebrates

⁷³ Long, *Significations*, vii.

⁷⁴ 66.

⁷⁵ 210.

the beauty of life and pleasure of living. At the conclusion of the final chapter of *Significations*, "Freedom, Otherness, and Religion: Theologies Opaque," Long cites in its entirety James Weldon Johnson's poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing," as "one of the best expressions" of a god reality which is "commensurate with both the agony of oppression and the freedom of all persons."⁷⁶ Johnson's call is to the community, "Let our rejoicing rise," "Let us march on till victory is won," "May we forever stand/True to our God/True to our native land," expresses the power of community as the locus in and by which the sacred manifests itself as living force.

IV. Where Do We Go from Here?

In the conclusion to the previously referred to 1973 presidential address, following comments about the protean nature of the organization of the American Academy of Religion, in comments that seem to echo Malcolm X's "chickens coming home to roost" comment on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Long declares we "may in fact be experiencing the impact of the accretions of the West upon the West and of Americans from America, and this experience defines a situation of alienation."⁷⁷

It is an alienation of Westerns from the West and of Americans from America. The center does not hold. There is no longer that privileged position which is the West or America. There is only the bricolage of America and the West, the flotsam and jetsam of bits and pieces of a reality that once was thought to be an order and a unity, possibly dreamed of in an illusory age when these things were thought to be real. Just as the explorations of Westerners from the fifteenth century to the present violently forced millions of human beings and hundreds of cultures into the dangerous and terrifying reality called history, we are experiencing the descent of America into the reality of the myth; for the Westerners, history-making reality has lost its effectiveness.⁷⁸

The success of anticolonial struggles, the Civil Rights Movement, nationwide demonstrations protesting the US war against the Vietnamese, the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Hampton, and Bobby Kennedy, among others, all pointed toward the West and America no longer holding their privileged position in the world, no longer able to determine on a global scale the terms of international engagement without

⁷⁶ 212.

⁷⁷ 137.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

effective opposition. Nevertheless, in the post-Vietnam period every effort was and has been made to maintain and expand Western and American dominance over world affairs. Every effort has been made to proceed *as if* the "horror and the evil which is synonymous with the conquest of this new land,"⁷⁹ a horror and evil which is not past but present, never happened or is not worthy of consideration as something in the past or in the present. But, said Long, "America cannot affirm the future until it affirms its past," until it comes to terms with the meaning of the demonic shadows cast by its shining city on a hill. If there is a path forward to the creation of a more generous America, or, perhaps more to the point, the end of America as it has been and the birth of a more fully human mode of life, the first step, Long emphasized in a paper published one year after the assassination of King, must involve "taking the integrity of nature seriously. The exploitation of our natural resources and of blacks and other racial minorities stems from this fact. Until we come to terms with these dimensions of our experiences and the meanings resulting from them," Long warned, "any future will be an escapism sustained only by the physical and psychological repression."⁸⁰ A half a century later, physical and psychological repression, combined with economic precarity and poverty, are the order of the day, giving rise to paranoid fantasies, conspiracy theories, and murderous expressions of nationalism, racism, and religion, abetting planet-threatening militarism, imperialism, and climate catastrophe.

Current efforts to legislate how American history is taught, symbolized by intense controversies over the 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory and the passage of legislation in state after state restricting the teaching the history of conquest, colonization, slavery, segregation, and imperialism, as well as resistance to these forces, are indicative of the continuing socio-cultural and, following Long's discussion of the mythology of America, religious struggle to come to terms with the depths of the deeds that made possible made possible the achievements associated with what is called civilization. It is a past, moreover, which is not in any meaningful way past, as the mythology of American exceptionalism leads the way. Coming to terms with the past requires deconstructing the mythological structures that prevent us from seeing how "the conquest of the aborigine began in the seventeenth century ... [and] continues into the present"⁸¹ and how the "linking of aboriginal cultures with the wilderness

⁷⁹ 156.

⁸⁰ 160.

⁸¹ See Global Witness, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/>

and the subsequent conquest of both raises issues of race and ecology.”⁸²

Among these mythological structures is a story of America which “centers around the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors. This story,” wrote Long, “hides the true experience of Americans from their very eyes. The invisibility of Indians and blacks is matched by a void or a deeper invisibility within the consciousness of white Americans.”⁸³ And as if channeling Baldwin, Long adds: “The inordinate fear they have of minorities is an expression of the fear they have when they contemplate the possibility of seeing themselves as they really are.”⁸⁴ One thinks of current anxieties fueled by rightwing media about the “loss of our culture,” meaning white evangelical Christian culture. But if, as Long wrote in 1981, “blacks are to become free in American society, this society will indeed have to become a radically different one, *an-other* place.”⁸⁵ Today one can go further to say that for all oppressed persons to be free, at home and abroad, including persons of lighter hue, American society will have to become a radically different one, *an-other* place, a place which privileges, to paraphrase King, people over property. This is true in no small part because American economic, political, cultural, and military power holds together the world wrought by conquest and colonialism, a world that denies, violates, and crushes the humanity of many while threatening all of life with nuclear war and ecological apocalypse.

We have yet to emerge from what Eliade described as the danger and terror of history or what Long describes as an innocence born of a refusal to consider the inner story of the history of America and the West.⁸⁶ We have yet to come to terms with the wars undertaken to eliminate aboriginal people, the enslavement of Africans, the privatization of the land for commercial purposes, and the expansion of empire. The repression of this inner story of the past and present of America and the West is manifest in slogans like “Make America Great Again” and “Build Back Better,” suggesting nostalgia to restore a mythological time that was better than the present, and in the invocation of 19th century imperial language of civilizing the backwards peoples of

⁸² Long, *Significations*, 164. Long words resound with the lyrics of Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On?”

⁸³ 163.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ 166.

⁸⁶ 156.

the world. In an editorial published in the July 16, 2021 issue of the *Washington Post* titled "Civilized nations' efforts to deter Russia and China are starting to add up," after noting that "Henry Kissinger has said, not unreasonably, that we are in 'the foothills' of a cold war with China," George F. Will wrote: "It is, therefore, well to notice how, day by day, in all of the globe's time zones, civilized nations are, in word and deed, taking small but cumulatively consequential measures that serve deterrence."⁸⁷ Will's use of "civilized" is far from exceptional within the discourse of American exceptionalism, as it perpetuates the mythological idea that the United States and its (always shifting) allies are categorically unlike Russia and China, and all others outside of the mythological "community of nations." We forget imperial crimes as quickly as they are committed. "They hate us," the "others," not because of the bombing, invasion, and theft, but because of their religion and culture. As always has been the case, the discourse of civilization enlists allegiance among those identified as civilized to the agenda of the powerful while sanctioning violence to maintain what is named civilization. It goes without saying the myth of the West as sole possessor of what it calls civilization has yet to be fully dismantled and with it the destructive impact of colonial-imperial relations. If we are to succeed in creating space for another modality of the human to emerge, one that liberates the oppressed and the oppressor, it will be by applying the kind of hermeneutic of suspicion Long advocates and engaging seriously with the people who have been marginalized in the story of the history of humanity and the history of religions.

Though much work has been done over the past fifty years by scholars of religion following Long's call to deconstruct the dominant story of Western and American religious history, to include indigenous and black traditions and their varied critiques of the dominant narratives and concepts that have structured the religious meaning and social organization of America, and to "demythologize the symbolic myth of civilization" such that "the internal distinction and contrast between the primitive and civilization are no longer valid," the question remains, as Long posed it in 1980, "in what manner and [by what means] do the others appear?"⁸⁸ The answers to these questions remain only partially answered, though part the

⁸⁷ George Will, "Civilized nations' efforts to deter Russia and China are starting to add up." *Washington Post*, July 16, 2021. Downloaded on August 10, 2021 from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/16/some-welcome-pushback-russian-chinese-assaults-international-order>

⁸⁸ Long, *Significations*, 104.

answer has been in the form of individuals whose communities were and still are shaped by the social, political, economic, and cultural forces of marginalization and subordination entering the field of Religious Studies and in so doing challenging the discipline and ideas about the nature of religion. The inclusion of individuals whose communities were and still are shaped by colonial and neocolonial relations has opened the field to areas of investigation, methodological orientations, and perspectives that were previously marginalized or cast only in negative terms (one thinks of feminist scholarship's impact on the academic study of religion. But the impact of the demythologization of the symbols of the West, America, and civilization, and the recognition of the diversity of religious traditions, has not translated into the practical formation of a new modality of the human and structure of organization and orientation that recognize our shared humanity in ways that respect the "integrity of nature" and the greater-than-human world we share. There is, in other words, much work to be done by scholars of religion and the humanities more broadly to support the development of a culture that understands the need to liberate all for a different way of life.

VI. From Colonialism to Community

It is impossible to summarize Long's prodigious contributions to the study of religion. The importance of his hermeneutics of suspicion, deconstruction of the dynamics of concealment, his critical examination of the discipline of Religious Studies and its relationship to conquest and colonialism, his jeremiad that we consider shadows and silences, that we must create a space to allow the other to speak, remain, as previously stated, as relevant, if not more so, today than ever as we confront a world that appears as committed as ever to living in denial about the reality of the destruction of planetary ecology. He invites us to consider our own twoness, the veils that inhibit us from understanding who we are. His work provides a powerful conceptual framework for thinking through the meaning of our moment, a moment that bears all the marks of the history of conquest and colonialism, while also opening onto not merely the possibility but the absolute necessity to imagine an-other way of being.

Long's work highlights the necessity to think critically about the categories and methods employed in the study of religion and to think critically about ideological constructs that function mythologically in their structuration of our understanding of who we are, what the world is, and our place in it. His

deconstruction of the categories “Civilization” and “the West” exposes their emergence from and complicity in the establishment of colonial relations and the commercialization of nature. It is not “the West” or “Civilization” that is responsible for the subordination of humans and the earth to the dictates of the globally dominant mode of organization and orientation but those who derive their power from it and who are comprised of persons from every region of the commercialized world. As Long rightly contends, all of us live in a post-colonial world, though one marked by disjunctions, alternative forms of social, cultural, and religious organization and possibilities for the emergence of a way of being that exceeds, to cite Long’s gesture to Hegel, all forms of a master-slave dialectic, including those which involve the subordination of nature to a mode of organization that assumes our species is the master of the earth, the determiner of water, stone, and the greater-than-human communities to which we belong.

Long teaches us much about the importance of practicing a hermeneutic of suspicion. His work helps us to think through the academic study of religions’ enduring questions: Did all peoples possess religion or were there cultures that were devoid of the religious sentiment? If religion was a form of human meaning that might be dispensed with, what status should one allow the religions of these other cultures? Is there a continuity of some sort between the religions of other cultures and the religions that are part of the Western meaning of religion? Is it possible that there can be a general category of religion, given the many varieties of this phenomenon?⁸⁹ Moreover, Long’s work keeps us focused on the issue of the “complex relationship between the meaning and nature of religion as a subject of academic study and the reality of the peoples and cultures who were conquered and colonized during this same period”⁹⁰—a period from which we have yet to emerge as we enter the third decade of the 21st century.

Long resists reductionistic concepts and explanations of religion. He seeks complexity and disjunctive possibilities in the discontinuities and interstices emerging from the dynamic relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, and the diversity of human cultures and religions. Long’s articulation of the complex, disjunctive, disruptive, and creative point of contact between different ways of being speaks to this generative space

⁸⁹ 3-4.

⁹⁰ 4.

in which the oppressed, the signified, are never simply passive victims but also active transformers of the culture that seeks to signify who they are and what they may become.

What one has to come to terms with is the disjunctive nature of reality. You may have a wonderful history of ideas, but a history of ideas often overlooks the disjunctive nature of life. It is at the level of the disjunctive nature of life that new ideas come into being, or the range of possibilities for new ways of thinking comes into being. People in “new” parts of the world must feel that they are capable of thinking new thoughts. This does not mean that they must dismiss thought from any other area, but it means that they must also undertake the necessity of the creation of new thought—not only new thought for themselves, but new thought for everybody.⁹¹

In Long’s view, writes Winquist, “the task of the historian of religion is to reveal a structure, a language of the *sacred*,” quoting Long, “‘that describes human immersion in life.’ This language is a supplement that is also a medium for insertion into the historical being of others. The study of religion is never simple description,” never only phenomenological. It is also a thinking that is productive of new understandings.⁹² Long does not develop a theology of liberation, even as his work goes some distance to advance the aspiration for liberation by emphasizing the necessity to grasp the deeper dimensions, ultimately the religious dimensions of what it means to be human, and thereby avoid a repetition of the world order as it has been. As Winquist suggests, and as we have intimated in our discussion of Long’s materialization of the sacred, Long’s “thinking is that there is a *primordium* and it is secular. It is implicated in the everydayness of life.... His work is a discernment of meaning, and to advance his vision he makes common cause with the many voices of artists, folklorists, poets, anthropologists as well as philosophers and theologians,” a practice we do well to consider and practice as we go about our work.⁹³ We may find the extraordinary in the ordinary and in the everyday lives of everyday people, and in so doing that we may more fully comprehend the materiality of the sacred and affirm a cosmos of kinship.⁹⁴

A fearless and fiercely humanistic thinker, Long’s ideas are troubling. They trouble settled ideas and approaches to the study of religion, culture, others, and our own identities. He asks us to

⁹¹ Long, *Ellipsis*, 302-303.

⁹² Long, *Significations*, vi.

⁹³ vii.

⁹⁴ 86.

consider who are we who study and write about others? How are we related to the objects, who are subjects, of our research? In her Forward to *Ellipsis*, Jennifer Reid notes that Long said: religion is about “the matters of the world and the things that matter in your world.” From a hermeneutical perspective, the hold his corpus of work and his life of teaching has on our imagination is not the result of this articulation of a specific and systematic approach to the study of religion. Rather, it revolves around this basic meaning of religion, as well as Professor Long’s placement of usually discrete aspects of modern culture—contact, exchange, indigeneity, or geographies, for example—within the range of religious meaning.⁹⁵

Long’s work exposes “the disjunctive nature of reality” and the disjunctive nature of our own projects as scholars. Reid is right to describe Long as an “axial age” figure, who understood the momentous time of change in which we exist and in relationship to which we can find a path to something radically other than what has been.

We do well to read Long to discern a path forward for the academic study of religion, one that, given the emphasis on ultimate orientation and a hermeneutics of suspicion, provides a powerful basis for advancing critiques of the commercial world and its commodification of every dimension of materiality.

Religious Studies can aid in the work of helping Americans experience the “otherness” of America; only then will the scholars in religion be able to understand that human intercourse with the world of sacred realities is, hermeneutically speaking, one way, and probably the most profound way, of meeting and greeting our brothers and sisters who form and have formed our species over these several millennia.⁹⁶

The aim is not, as Long explains, the creation of a “new science, but a serious human discourse.”⁹⁷ Long writes: “There is a moment in revolutionary temporality when the old order is *no longer* but the new order is *not yet*; this is a moment that allows for new forms of thought, new interpretations of the past, and heretofore unknown meanings and imaginations to enter into the new formulations of the new order.”⁹⁸ Religious Studies can make a vital contribution to the work of finding a path to a new order that is no longer a repetition of the old, that does not, in

⁹⁵ Long, *Ellipsis*, x.

⁹⁶ Long, *Significations*, 28.

⁹⁷ 28; *Ellipsis*, 86.

⁹⁸ *Ellipsis*, 21.

Long's words, repeat the master-slave dialectic, a path from the world and modes of being wrought by the colonial order to a world of genuine community. If we prove successful in this task it will be due in no small measure to the radical thinking of Charles H. Long.